PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

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Enhancing Security through Collaborative Research

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Welcome from the Editors

This Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* is devoted to al-Qaida (AQ). It contains 15 articles on various aspects of al-Qaida and its affiliates, as well as an extensive bibliography on AQ. The articles are products of a conference held in Oslo on 4-5 September 2017. The conference was organised by the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), in cooperation with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It brought together leading specialists on al-Qaida and the Middle East, along with senior policymakers and government analysts from Norway and other countries.

The rationale behind organising this conference – and for reproducing the proceedings in this Special Issue – was the feeling that there is a certain lack of knowledge of how al-Qaida has evolved, especially since Osama bin Laden's death in 2011, the 'Arab Spring', and the rise of the Islamic State (IS). In recent years, most of the world's attention has been on IS, while al-Qaida has seemingly disappeared from the radar. However, since IS experienced serious setbacks on the battlefield in 2017, the question asked by many today is whether al-Qaida will take its place on the world stage in one form or another.

An additional motivation for having an al-Qaida conference in 2017 was to mark the fact that it is now thirty years since al-Qaida was established – counting from the year 1987, when Osama bin Laden set up a training camp for Arabs in Afghanistan which later became known as *al-Qa'ida* ("the Base"). FFI thought it was appropriate to gather al-Qaida experts from around the world, 'old hands' as well as promising newcomers to the field, to assess the current status of our knowledge on al-Qaida.

This Special Issue is divided into two parts. Articles in the first part covers general questions related to al-Qaida's history and its recent status, while the second part covers case studies of countries and regions where al-Qaida or its affiliates have been active.

Anne Stenersen – the Guest Editor of this Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* – opens the series of articles by summarising what we know about al-Qaida today, but also suggests a framework for a better understanding of al-Qaida's role in international jihadist terrorism. Leah Farrall revisits al-Qaida's foundation and early history, arguing convincingly that al-Qaida was founded in 1987 and not in 1988 as commonly believed. Then, Don Rassler examines al-Qaida's historical relationship to the Harakat movement in Pakistan, suggesting that we are only now beginning to understand the extent of these links.

Jerome Drevon identifies al-Qaida's place in the larger Jihadi Social Movement and analyses the recent competition between al-Qaida and Islamic State. Tore Hamming continues in the same track by providing a detailed analysis of how the intra-movement competition between AQ and IS has influenced their respective targeting preferences. Donald Holbrook explores the extent to which al-Qaida's propaganda materials have featured in UK terrorism investigations.

The next two articles address the topic of technology. Truls Tønnessen looks at how terrorist groups have used – but also, failed to use – new technologies in recent years while Geoffrey Chapman analyses why some jihadi groups in Syria, but not others, have used chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war.

The remaining articles focus on country and regional issues. The first three texts in this section are dedicated to Syria, which continues to be the most important arena for jihad today. Charles Lister, Aymenn al-Tamimi and Sam Heller analyse al-Qaida's main affiliate in Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham - formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra - discussing its shifting allegiances and its relationship to al-Qaida's core. These three articles are followed by a case study on Jordan, where Kirk Sowell examines the government's recent attempt to "de-jihadise" the country's school curricula.

The last three articles explore the conglomerate of jihadi groups in North and West Africa. Jean-Pierre Filiu's focus is on al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, while Jacob Zenn examines the historical influence of al-Qaida in the north of Nigeria. Finally, Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack explain the complexities of the Libyan case.

The final, AQ-related item in this journal issue is a bibliography on al-Qaida and its affiliates, compiled by

Thirty Years after its Foundation – Where is al-Qaida Going?

by Anne Stenersen

Abstract

This article presents a framework for understanding al-Qaida, based on a new reading of its thirty-year history. Al-Qaida today is commonly labelled a 'global insurgency' or 'global franchise.' However, these labels are not sufficient if we want to understand what kind of threat al-Qaida poses to the West. Al-Qaida is better described as a revolutionary vanguard, engaged in a perpetual struggle to further its Salafi-jihadi ideology. Its strategy is flexible and opportunistic, and the organization uses a range of tools associated with both state and non-state actors. In the future al-Qaida is likely to treat international terrorist planning, and support to local insurgencies in the Muslim world, as two separate activities. International terrorism is currently not a prioritised strategy of al-Qaida, but it is likely to be so in the future, given that it manages to re-build its external operations capability.

Keywords: Al-Qaida, terrorism, insurgency, strategy, external operations

Introduction

The status and strength of al-Qaida (AQ) are the subject of an ongoing debate. [1] There are two opposite and irreconcilable views in this debate: The first is that al-Qaida is strong and cannot be discounted. The other is that al-Qaida is in decline. [2] Those who suggest al-Qaida is strong, tend to emphasise the size and number of al-Qaida's affiliates, especially in Syria, Yemen and Somalia; they also point to the rise of new leaders, in particular bin Laden's son Hamza. [3] Those who suggest that al-Qaida is in decline emphasise that al-Qaida has not carried out a successful terrorist attack in the West since the London bombings in 2005, except for the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015. Both sides in the debate compare al-Qaida to its rival, the Islamic State (IS), to gauge the extent of the former's success or failure. Those who suggest al-Qaida is strong, emphasise that al-Qaida never lost core affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, North Africa or Afghanistan to IS, and now that IS is declining, might even absorb former IS recruits. Those who suggest al-Qaida is weak, emphasise that IS since 2014 has carried out and inspired far more terrorist attacks in the West, and has recruited far more foreign fighters than al-Qaida.

However, this controversy is not very enlightening. Rather than providing new knowledge about al-Qaida, the debate turns around different conceptions of "strength" and "threat". Should al-Qaida's strength be measured by the number and size of affiliates or the popularity and reach of its message? Or should the ability to stage international terrorist attacks be taken as yardstick? And when it comes to the threat – are we talking about the immediate threat from al-Qaida's "external operations" capability, or the long-term threat from the development of al-Qaida-friendly sanctuaries abroad? The debate illustrates that we still do not agree on what al-Qaida is, what it wants and how it "works." These are serious issues – especially since al-Qaida is still regarded a major security threat to the West. How we define and view al-Qaida is central to how we interpret and evaluate its actions, and by extension, what resources we deploy against AQ.

The purpose of this article is to propose a framework for understanding al-Qaida, based on a new reading of its thirty-year history. The aim is to sum up and expand on what we know about two basic issues: First, what is al-Qaida, and what is al-Qaida's struggle about? Second, what is al-Qaida's strategy, and how does international terrorism fit into that strategy? The questions appear simple, but as we shall see, there are no universally agreed upon answers.

The dominant understanding of al-Qaida today is that of a layered organisation – comprised of a core, a number of regional affiliates and a broader ideological movement. [4] Others view al-Qaida as a globalised insurgency, with a "core" providing ideological and strategic guidance and "regional affiliates" fighting for territory on behalf of the core. None of these understandings are wrong. However, they have limitations when it comes to explaining what kind of threat al-Qaida poses to the West. To answer this question we must understand how

al-Qaida uses international terrorism as part of its strategy.

In the following, I make the case that al-Qaida should be seen as a revolutionary vanguard [5], engaged in a perpetual struggle to further its Salafi-jihadi ideology. Al-Qaida's strategy is not static, but flexible and opportunistic, and al-Qaida uses a range of tools associated with both state and non-state actors. [6] International terrorism is currently not a prioritised strategy of al-Qaida, but it is likely to be so in the future, given that it manages to re-build its external operations capability.

Historical Overview

Before discussing what al-Qaida is, a short recap of its thirty-year history is warranted. Al-Qaida was founded in Afghanistan around 1987. [7] The word "al-Qaida" means "the base", this name referring to a military base for Arab fighters inside Afghanistan. Between 1987 and 1989 bin Laden's group took part in battles against Soviet and Afghan Communist forces in Afghanistan. In the early 1990s bin Laden moved to Sudan, where he was welcomed by the Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi. Due to international pressure on the Sudanese regime, bin Laden was expelled in 1996 and subsequently moved back to Afghanistan.

From 1996-2001, bin Laden lived in Afghanistan under the Taliban's protection and al-Qaida was allowed to grow and expand. [8] In this period, bin Laden declared war on the United States and al-Qaida started carrying out international terrorist attacks against U.S. targets – in East Africa in 1988, off the coast of Yemen in 2000 and finally, on New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001. In response to these 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush declared the now infamous "War on Terror". A U.S.-led international coalition invaded Afghanistan in late 2001 and ousted the Taliban regime, but bin Laden and several al-Qaida members managed to escape. Al-Qaida continued to thrive in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, supporting the nascent guerrilla war in Afghanistan and spreading its influence across the Muslim world.

In 2003 the United States invaded Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein. This gave al-Qaida a golden opportunity to mobilise the Muslim world in a call for "jihad" against American forces in Iraq. At this point al-Qaida had started to establish local branches across the Middle East and North Africa – a phenomenon later referred to as al-Qaida's "franchise strategy."[9] Al-Qaida's most important, and for a time, most successful branch, was established in Iraq in 2004, when the Jordanian guerrilla leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi declared his allegiance to bin Laden. Al-Qaida in Iraq suffered severe setbacks from 2007, partly because of a U.S. troop surge and partly because local Sunni Muslim tribes turned against the local al-Qaida affiliate.

After al-Qaida's failure in Iraq, bin Laden pushed for the group to change strategy into a more locally oriented and "population-centric" approach in Muslim countries, while at the same time continuing to target the West through international terrorism. [10] In 2011 al-Qaida continued and strengthened the population-centric approach to take advantage of opportunities arising from the Arab Spring. By 2015 al-Qaida's international terrorist attack capability had been weakened, partly due to the U.S. drone war targeting key al-Qaida leaders, and partly because Western recruits – who had previously made up al-Qaida's networks in Europe – changed their allegiance to the so-called Islamic State. [11] However, the Islamic State has now suffered severe setbacks and according to some observers, time is ripe for an al-Qaida "comeback" of sorts. [12] As noted above, there is no agreement on what this comeback may look like, and in particular, whether, and to what extent, it will include international terrorism.

The rest of this article provides a framework for discussing how international terrorism fits into al-Qaida's strategy. But first, what is the current status of research on al-Qaida?

What is al-Qaida?

The question of how to describe al-Qaida is not new. Early books on al-Qaida, published in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, spent considerable time discussing what al-Qaida actually is. Already back then it was suggested that al-Qaida was not a classical terrorist organisation, but something broader – and above all, something *global*.

[13] Jason Burke described al-Qaida as comprised of three layers – the "al-Qaida hardcore," the "network of networks" and a third layer described as the "idea, worldview, ideology of al-Qaida". [14] The layered description of al-Qaida became dominant in subsequent years – alongside the related idea of al-Qaida as a global insurgent group. [15] Al-Qaida's declaration of local "franchises", in the Middle East and North Africa from 2003 onwards, only served to strengthening the acceptance of the global insurgency-model. [16] Since then, it appears to have become commonly accepted that al-Qaida consists of a "core" providing ideological and strategic direction, and "franchises" fighting on behalf of al-Qaida to conquer territory in the Muslim world.

Limitations of the 'Franchise Model'

There are, however, limitations to characterising al-Qaida as a "global franchise" of terrorist organisations. First, it is only valid for parts of al-Qaida's history – namely, from 2001 onwards, and so it does not account for al-Qaida pre-2001. [17] Second, it gives the somewhat misleading impression that al-Qaida's strategy is dependent on conquering and ruling territory. While this has undoubtedly been an important part of al-Qaida's strategy after 2001, it was not always the case.

Historically, Osama bin Laden himself did not seek direct, territorial control. Instead he preferred his al-Qaida-organisation playing the role as "guests" of local populations – first in Afghanistan in the 1980s, then in the Sudan in the 1990s and ,again, in Afghanistan under the Taliban after 1996. In the Taliban period, bin Laden swore an oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) to Mullah Omar, partially to underline his intention not to interfere in the local governance of the Taliban. [18] In Afghanistan under the Taliban, al-Qaida had the perfect sanctuary: Al-Qaida could devote all its time to training and organization-building, while the Taliban took care of the petty day-to-day affairs of running a state. As a result, al-Qaida core experienced a peak in its recruitment and strength in the years leading up to 9/11. [19]

One could argue that al-Qaida before and after 2001 were two fundamentally different organisations; and that the post-2001 franchise model is more relevant for understanding al-Qaida today. However, we do not know the full extent of al-Qaida's strategies after 2001 – in particular when it comes to al-Qaida's relationship to, and possible support from, states and state-like entities. For example, if recently discovered information about al-Qaida's relationship to Iran post-2001 is true, there is probably a need to revise our current knowledge and assumptions of how al-Qaida operated after 2001. [20]

Moreover, the franchise model has analytical shortcomings in that it depicts "al-Qaida core" and "the franchises" as two homogenous entities. In reality there is great variation in how core al-Qaida was able to control the affiliates – both across regions, and across time. Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was operating much like the al-Qaida core at one point – especially in 2009-2010 when they attempted ambitious terrorist attacks against U.S. interests, while operating under the protection of Yemenite tribal allies. [21] This resembled how al-Qaida operated under the Taliban in 1997-2001, when AQ staged ambitious terrorist attacks on the U.S. while being under the protection of the Taliban regime. At the other end of the spectrum is al-Qaida in Iraq, which declared an "Islamic State" in Iraq in 2006 without the permission of al-Qaida's leaders, and which in 2014 broke off from al-Qaida altogether. But even in al-Qaida's relationship with seemingly close affiliates such as AQAP, there was constant tension: Among other things, bin Laden criticised AQAP for killing local Muslims, for wanting to escalate the conflict with Yemenite security forces, and for wanting to declare an Islamic State in Yemen – a step bin Laden at the time thought was both premature and counter-productive – but which AQAP nevertheless carried out in 2011. [22] The ambivalent relationship between al-Qaida core and its affiliates has most clearly manifested itself in the Syrian conflict – not only with the split between Islamic State and al-Qaida in 2014, but also with the prevailing disagreement between current al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the local affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (later known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham). [23] This is not to say that the franchise model is invalid, but that it should be applied with caution – especially when it comes to assessing the future threat from al-Qaida. [24]

The limitations of the franchise model are especially clear when it comes to discussing how strong al-Qaida is today, and how much of a threat it poses to the West. By counting members of AQ's affiliates in Syria, Yemen and Somalia, one could make the argument that al-Qaida today has more than 30,000 members. [25] But this

number says little, if anything, about al-Qaida's international terrorist attack capability: Most of these 30,000 members are involved in local insurgencies in the Middle East and Africa. They hardly reflect the number of people that in practice are under the direct command of Ayman al-Zawahiri; nor does the number say anything about the strength and status of al-Qaida's external operations branch.

In sum, the idea of al-Qaida as many things at once – a layered organization, a global insurgent group or a global franchise, has limitations. First, the franchise model applies to a limited time period in al-Qaida's history. Second, al-Qaida affiliation does not necessarily mean subordination. The franchise model therefore has limitations when it comes to analysing al-Qaida's strategic decision-making. While existing al-Qaida models certainly have their strengths, they are not so suitable for the purpose of this article, which is to explain how al-Qaida uses international terrorism as part of its strategy.

Al-Qaida as a 'Revolutionary Vanguard'

Instead of labelling al-Qaida a global insurgency, I suggest labelling it as a revolutionary vanguard. This idea is of course neither new, nor original. [26] In his 2003 book, Jason Burke likened al-Qaida's relationship to other Islamist guerrillas, to the relationship "of the USSR or America with their various proxies during the Cold War."[27] With that, he presented an idea that will enter my argument later, namely, that al-Qaida in some ways acted more like a state aiming to spread its ideology than a none-state actor seeking to obtain a limited political goal. [28] However, back in 2003 the observations of Burke and others that al-Qaida viewed itself as a vanguard, did not seem to have any practical policy implications. Western counter-terrorism strategies were formed based on conceptions on how to fight more familiar enemy categories, such as 'insurgents' or 'terrorists'. I am aware that re-labelling al-Qaida as a 'vanguard' does not answer the question of how it should be fought. But at least it may serve as a reminder that al-Qaida is a complex phenomenon, and that there are no ready-made recipes for how to fight it. The 'vanguard' label also says something important about the nature of al-Qaida, that would be lost if we defined it as an insurgent group or a terrorist organization.

Al-Qaida was initially established as an Arab guerrilla group, fighting alongside Afghan mujahidin in Afghanistan. The purpose was not only to enable battlefield participation for ideologically committed Arabs, but also, because bin Laden saw it as a religious duty to serve as a role model and inspiration for the Afghan mujahideen. [29] Part of bin Laden's rationale for creating a training camp on Afghan soil in 1987 was because there were few other options at the time for Arabs to participate in battle in Afghanistan. With some exceptions, Afghan mujahideen parties did not want to use Arabs in battle, instead treating them as guests, and preferring them to donate money and weapons. And the only Arab organisation at the time, the Services Office run by Abdullah Azzam, did not prioritize participation in fighting. [30] When bin Laden stepped up and established the camp dubbed "The Lion's Den" close to enemy frontlines in Khost, he believed he was following the example of the Prophet Muhammed. [31]

From here came the idea that al-Qaida should be a revolutionary vanguard who would lead by example and support Muslim insurgencies elsewhere. After the Afghan-Soviet war was over, al-Qaida continued to run training camps in Afghanistan, from where it graduated the first batch of new al-Qaida cadre. They would constitute the core of al-Qaida's organisation in years to come. [32] One of al-Qaida's first "foreign missions" was to train and assist an Islamist guerrilla fighting in Somalia. [33] Bin Laden then settled in the Sudan, probably with a desire to assist and help a nascent Islamic state on its feet. History repeated itself when al-Qaida gave support to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1997 onwards. [34]

While based in Afghanistan in 1996-2001, al-Qaida did not have to send foreign missions to assist guerrillas elsewhere, like they had done in the early 1990s in Somalia. Instead, the foreign guerrillas came to al-Qaida's training camps in Afghanistan. There is primary source evidence that al-Qaida camps in Afghanistan also trained recruits from other groups, without requiring them to join al-Qaida. [35] It is hard to explain this phenomenon by looking at al-Qaida as a classical insurgent group, let alone a clandestine terrorist organisation. Al-Qaida's mission is best understood if we look at it as vanguard organisation whose goal is inherently ideological – that is, to spread a Salafi-jihadi ideology that will eventually bring about Islamist revolutions across the Muslim world.

In light of this, one could offer an alternative interpretation of al-Qaida's "franchise strategy" after 2001: As a temporary adjustment to new geopolitical realities after al-Qaida lost its sanctuary in Afghanistan; rather than a core characteristic of al-Qaida as such. There might have been good reasons to label al-Qaida a global insurgency after 2003, because al-Qaida in this period actively sought to align itself – and to some extent co-opt – local insurgencies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Still the organisation's history shows that its core characteristic is that of a vanguard, engaged in a perpetual struggle to further its ideological agenda. In furthering this agenda, al-Qaida may use a range of tools and strategies, which is the topic of the next section.

What is al-Qaida's Strategy?

One common misconception about al-Qaida's strategy is that it is fixed, or follows some kind of master plan. As I will argue in the following, al-Qaida's strategy is more reactive than proactive. And it is more often steered by accident and chance than many tend to believe.

Flexibility and Opportunism

The history of al-Qaida is filled with coincidences, which turned out to have a profound impact on the trajectory of the organisation. In September 1996, bin Laden happened to be in Afghanistan when the Taliban came to power. This was hardly planned beforehand. When bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan in May that year he did not know who the Taliban were, or that they were about to take over the country. [36] And yet, al-Qaida's relationship with the Taliban would define the next five years of al-Qaida's history. The combination of an open, international border and a group who claimed to have established a pure Islamic state, enabled al-Qaida to receive an unprecedented number of recruits to its training camps.

Another, game-changing event for al-Qaida was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Despite speculation that al-Qaida already prior to 2001 had planned to provoke the U.S. into invading Iraq [37], there is no firm historical evidence to support this. The U.S. decision to invade Iraq was a stroke of luck for al-Qaida, and an opportunity that was skilfully exploited once it arose. In 2003-2007, al-Qaida's main focus was to try and carve out a base on Iraqi territory through its local affiliate, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). After some initial success, AQI ultimately failed when the local population in Anbar province turned against the group – largely due to AQI's own, brutal behaviour on the ground. [38]

One strength of al-Qaida is the ability to learn from past mistakes. In correspondence between bin Laden and al-Qaida affiliates in Yemen in 2009-10, bin Laden made clear that AQAP should not repeat the mistakes of al-Qaida in Iraq when dealing with local tribes. [39] Similar "lessons learned" were transmitted from AQAP to AQIM in 2012. [40]

After the invasion of Iraq, the next, major event to influence al-Qaida's strategy was the Arab Spring. The uprisings provided new opportunities for al-Qaida to establish a presence in the Arab world. To understand al-Qaida's strategic priorities after 2011 it is necessary to see the Arab uprisings from al-Qaida's point of view. While observers commented in 2011 that al-Qaida had been marginalised by the popular uprisings [41], the organisation's own leaders did not necessarily see it that way. On the contrary, there are indications that bin Laden saw the Arab uprisings as a sign of al-Qaida's success. [42]

Consider the context from al-Qaida's point of view: their strategy up until 2011 had been to carry out economically damaging terrorist attacks on the United States and subsequently, AQ sought to "bleed" the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 and 2003 onwards, respectively. In 2008, the U.S. was hit by a major economic crisis and the same year, U.S. forces announced their withdrawal from Iraq. Then, beginning in December 2010, the U.S. seemingly started to lose its grip on the Arab world. Whether or not this was reality is not so important – the point being that bin Laden probably interpreted the Arab Spring as another sign that al-Qaida had succeeded in its strategy of weakening the U.S. economically, and that it could soon move to the next step – trigger revolutions in the Middle East. [43]

The most recent event to impact al-Qaida's strategic behaviour was the rise of a powerful al-Qaida rival, the Islamic State, in 2014. [44] There is little doubt that al-Qaida's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, took the challenge from IS seriously: In 2015 he made a number of speeches criticising IS and his rhetoric became increasingly hostile over time. [45] As argued by Tore Hamming in this Special Issue, the AQ-IS rivalry led to a process of outbidding between the two jihadist groups which affected the groups' strategies, but did so in slightly different ways: While IS in 2014 launched a campaign of international terrorism, al-Qaida continued and strengthened its previously adapted strategy of winning people's hearts and minds in the Muslim world. Arguably, the rise of IS made it easier for al-Qaida to pursue its population-centric strategy: In the face of IS' barbarism and exclusivist behaviour, al-Qaida was suddenly able to pose as the more "moderate" of the two. [46]

This historical overview of al-Qaida has illustrated how al-Qaida's history has taken unexpected turns, based on world events. Time and again, al-Qaida pursues a reactive strategy, in response to, and seeking to take the best advantage of, events outside its control. To pursue these various strategies al-Qaida has a range of tools at its disposal.

State- and Non-state Actor Methods

Al-Qaida differs from most other non-state actors in that it uses methods and tactics of both state- and non-state actors. It could be expected that al-Qaida would use a range of terrorist and guerrilla warfare tactics – its terrorist tactics being especially innovative. However, al-Qaida also uses methods that resemble military assistance and covert operations – methods traditionally associated with states and governmental intelligence agencies.

Military assistance was something that was conducted by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA, during and after the Second World War. The OSS would organize and train anti-Nazi resistance groups in Europe and anti-Japanese groups in Asia. Similarly, during the Cold War, the CIA would train anti-Communist guerrillas in Central and South America. In a similar manner al-Qaida would, beginning in the early 1990s, train and equip third-world guerrillas to further a global Islamist agenda. [47] The point here is not to lionise al-Qaida by comparing it to the CIA or suggesting it had state-like military capabilities. The point is to explain that al-Qaida did not always behave according to what is expected of a classical terrorist group, and that is why it can be misleading to classify it as such.

Al-Qaida's repertoire also includes what may be termed *covert operations* – that is, terrorist attacks designed to inflict strategic losses on the enemy but without al-Qaida taking responsibility. Three pertinent examples are the US Embassy bombings in 1998, the *USS Cole* attack in October 2000, and the murder of Ahmed Shah Massoud in Afghanistan on September 9, 2001. None of these attacks were publicly claimed by al-Qaida. In case of the *USS Cole*, al-Qaida even explicitly denied responsibility. The reason was likely to protect their hosts, the Taliban, who were already under strong international pressure to expel Osama bin Laden. [48] The 11 September attack was likely intended as a "covert attack" as well, as indicated in correspondence between bin Laden and Mullah Omar post-9/11. [49] After the Taliban regime was destroyed and al-Qaida was routed from Afghanistan, al-Qaida no longer had anything to gain from hiding their culpability. After 2001, al-Qaida abandoned the covert strategy in favour of the franchise strategy mentioned earlier. The franchise strategy was anything but covert – it relied on spreading al-Qaida's name as far and wide as possible.

By acknowledging that al-Qaida's strategy is flexible, using tools of state- and non-state actors alike, its actions since 2011 may be interpreted in a slightly different light. Realising that the franchise strategy failed, al-Qaida may have retracted to a "covert" strategy where it keeps regional affiliates, but does not require them to adapt "al-Qaida" as part of their name. [50] Thus, instead of building influence in the MENA through official al-Qaida branches, al-Qaida now seeks to build influence through local Salafi-jihadi groups with more "neutral-sounding" names such as Ansar al-Sharia or the Mujahidin Shura Council. Yet the picture is not clear-cut – there are still examples of groups who publicly swear allegiance to al-Qaida, such as al-Shabaab in 2012 and a new coalition group in the Sahel, Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin, in 2017. [51]

But the real question for Western security services is whether these local affiliates will constitute a future

international terrorist threat. What is the current role of international terrorism in al-Qaida's strategy?

International Terrorism in al-Qaida's Strategy

Throughout this article I have emphasised that we must separate al-Qaida's *defining features* from the various tactics and strategies it has at its disposal. This is especially true for international terrorism. Arguably, international terrorism is not a defining feature of al-Qaida, it is rather one of several strategies that al-Qaida may or may not pursue, depending on circumstances.

Al-Qaida did not carry out an international terrorist attack until 1998, at least ten years after the organisation was founded. What was al-Qaida, then, the first ten years of its existence? The standard argument is that bin Laden spent the first ten years after al-Qaida's foundation to "mature" ideologically and that while AQ started out as a guerrilla group, it eventually developed into an anti-American, international terrorist network. However, in the book *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan,* I demonstrate that al-Qaida only spent a small part of its resources after 1998 on staging international terrorist attacks. Al-Qaida spent much more of its resources on building a strong organisation and on providing assistance to the Taliban and other Islamist groups in Afghanistan. [52]

There is little doubt that international terrorism has played a key role in al-Qaida's strategy from 1997 until today. But the targets and methods have changed over time, and in response to external events. In 1997–2001, al-Qaida had a stable sanctuary in Afghanistan under the Taliban and access to a steady flow of recruits. In this period al-Qaida planned strategically important and spectacular terrorist attacks on the United States. After al-Qaida lost the sanctuary in Afghanistan, al-Qaida's external operations branch moved to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). From here, and especially after the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003, al-Qaida started targeting Europe. This was partly due to strategic choice, and partly due to opportunity: Al-Qaida thought it strategically sound to target U.S. allies in order to make the U.S.-led alliance in Iraq fall apart. [53] In addition, the Iraq war provided an opportunity to mobilise European militant Islamists on a larger scale than before, as AQ functioned as a "catalyst for a new generation of jihadis in Europe."[54] After the Iraq war started to wane in importance in 2007, al-Qaida seems to have re-focused on targeting the United States in addition to keeping up a certain pressure on Europe.

One of the last major terrorist plots to be planned by al-Qaida's external operations branch in FATA was Najibullah Zazi's attempt to bomb the New York subway in 2009. The plot coincided with at least two similar plots being planned in the United Kingdom and Norway, respectively. [55] At this point, al-Qaida in FATA was under heavy pressure from the U.S. drone campaign that had been intensified by President Obama in 2008. Saleh al-Somali, the mastermind behind the 2009 series of terrorist plots in the U.S. and Europe, was killed in a drone strike in December 2009. Not long afterwards, Osama bin Laden started encouraging al-Qaida members to leave Waziristan due to the threat from drones. [56]

From 2009, al-Qaida seemed to alter its international terrorist strategy. From now on the international terrorist activity followed two separate tracks. First, al-Qaida leaders started issuing propaganda to encourage acts of "individual terrorism" in Western countries. [57] The propaganda campaign was driven by members of the al-Qaida core and by AQAP. For example, in March 2010 the American-born al-Qaida member Adam Gadahn issued a speech entitled "A call to arms", encouraging Muslims in the West to follow in the footsteps of the Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hassan. In the beginning of June 2011, only a month after the death of bin Laden, two very explicit video messages were issued: In "You are only responsible for yourself," Ayman al-Zawahiri provided religious justification for single actor terrorism [58], while in "Do not rely on others, take the task upon yourself" Adam Gadahn gave explicit advice for how Muslims in the United States should obtain weapons for individual terrorist attacks. [59]

Parallel to these efforts by the al-Qaida core, AQAP ran its own propaganda campaign to encourage Muslims in the west to carry out attacks on their own. Most famously, this was done through the English-language magazine *Inspire*. The first issue was published online in the summer of 2010, and contained the infamous article "Make a bomb in the kitchen of your Mom." The bomb recipe was said to have inspired the Tsarnajev brothers, who carried out the bombing of the Boston Marathon in April 2013. [60]

In addition to inspiring a campaign of "individual terrorism" in the West, al-Qaida continued to plot ambitious international terrorist attacks through its external operations branch. Al-Qaida seemed to move this activity from FATA to the Middle East in 2010–2011. [61] AQAP in Yemen carried out two near-successful attacks on U.S. aviation in the same period – first in December 2009 with the so-called "underwear bomber" and again, in mid-2010 with the attempted bombing of two U.S. cargo planes. [62] Like al-Qaida in Waziristan, AQAP suffered from drone strikes on its leadership. The American-born ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki was killed by a U.S. drone in January 2010 and the Yemenite AQAP leader, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, was killed in April 2015. There were indications of an al-Qaida external operations cell in Syria – the so-called "Khorasan group" but key members were killed by drones in July 2015 and it is unknown if the group is still operational.

The question, then, is what al-Qaida's international terrorist efforts are likely to look like in the future. Judging from official statements, including those of Hamza bin Laden and Zawahiri, al-Qaida is likely to continue the two-track strategy it has pursued from 2009. They will continue to incite Muslims living in the West to carry out acts of "individual terrorism" by highlighting highly symbolic issues, like insults against the Prophet Muhammad. These operations are low-cost, and with potentially high benefit, for al-Qaida.

In addition, al-Qaida may attempt to re-build their external operations capability. This is potentially the biggest security threat to the West but also the biggest unknown. Al-Qaida's external operations branch does not have to be big. With access to Internet-based encrypted communications channels, it can practically operate from anywhere in the world. It doesn't have to be based in one of the regions controlled by al-Qaida affiliates. Al-Qaida has already invested much in "de-branding" groups in the Middle East and to get embedded in local insurgencies. Staging international terrorist attacks from these territories would jeopardize al-Qaida's effort to stay invisible – that is, unless al-Qaida decides to use the same strategy as in 1997–2001, when it sought to keep its international terrorist activities in Afghanistan covert so as not to endanger its hosts. But perhaps more likely, al-Qaida would prefer to hide its external operations branch in a place that cannot be hit by drones – for example, a populated urban area, or even a state-sponsored sanctuary. [63]

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented a framework explaining how to understand al-Qaida, based on a re-reading of its thirty-year history. The bottom line is that we must distinguish between al-Qaida's nature and the tactics and tools at its disposal. International terrorism is a tool, covert operations is another. In future, we may see several of these tactics merging into new forms of terrorism. Al-Qaida in the late 1990s moved beyond international terrorism, starting to use a form of "covert terrorism" as a strategy. In the late 2000s, al-Qaida arguably moved beyond its franchise strategy and introduced a "covert" version of the same strategy. The good news is that al-Qaida's strategy is reactive, rather than proactive. But anticipating its next step still requires thinking outside the box.

For now, al-Qaida may decide to rely on one track of its international terrorist strategy – that of encouraging "individual terrorism," coupled with supporting insurgencies in the Muslim world. This does not mean that it will abandon top-down planning of external operations – but in the future, al-Qaida's external operations branch will not necessarily be located in territory controlled by al-Qaida affiliates. It would be too obvious a hiding place – and a rather easy target for drones. Al-Qaida has adopted in the past, so there is no reason it will adapt its strategy again in the future.

Ultimately, al-Qaida's support to Islamist insurgencies, and al-Qaida's international terrorist planning, should be seen as two different problem sets which require different countermeasures. It may be difficult for Western governments to deal with both at the same time and thus, we may have to pick our battles.

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Notes

[1] The author would like to thank Thomas Hegghammer, Petter Nesser, Henrik Gråtrud and Truls Hallberg Tønnessen for their useful comments and input to earlier versions of this article.

[2] See, for example, Bruce Hoffman, "A Growing Terrorist Threat on Another 9/11," *Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2017; URL: https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-growing-terrorist-threat-on-another-9-11-1504888986; Daniel Byman, "Judging Al Qaeda's Record, Part I: Is the Organization in Decline?" *Lawfare*, June 27, 2017; URL: https://www.lawfareblog.com/judging-al-qaedas-record-part-i-organization-decline. For a middle view on the debate, see Seth G. Jones, "Will al Qaeda Make a Comeback?" *Foreign Affairs,* August 7, 2017; URL: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-08-07/will-al-qaeda-make-comeback.

[3] Ali Soufan, "Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to al-Qa'ida's Leader in Waiting," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 8 (September 2017): 1–7.

[4] Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin, 2003): 13; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 285–288.

[5] Refers here to jihadists' own use of the term. For example, Abdullah Azzam spoke of the necessity of establishing a vanguard (*tali'a*) back in 1987. But the term was also used much earlier, for example, by Sayyid Qutb in his 1964 manifesto *Milestones*. Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, 2; Sayyid Qutb, *ma'alim fi al-tariq* (no publisher, 1964): 5–6. Accessed via *Jihadi Document Repository* at University of Oslo: URL: https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/jihadi-document-repository.

[6] While al-Qaida's strategy is described here as 'flexible', this does not mean: 'anything goes'. Al-Qaida is restricted in its actions by its adherence to salafi-jihadi ideology. While this ideology is certainly open to interpretation, there are a number of 'red lines' that normally cannot be crossed. Participation in democratic elections, for example, would be very hard to justify from a salafi-jihadi point of view.

[7] For a more thorough review of al-Qaida's foundation and early years, see Leah Farrall, "Revisiting al-Qaida's foundation and early history," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017).

[8] For more details about al-Qaida's Afghanistan period, see Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[9] See, for example, Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[10] This new strategy was discussed in a number of letters found in bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad. See, for example, "Letter from UBL to Atiyatullah Al-Libi," undated, *CTC West Point,* document no. SOCOM-2012-0000019-HT, https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-UBL-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-4-Translation.pdf.

[11] As argued by Hamming in this Special Issue, the internal competition between al-Qaida and IS further accentuated al-Qaida's strategy change – possibly leading al-Qaida to halt its international terrorist planning, while at the same time continuing its *verbal* attacks on the U.S. and its allies through propaganda. Tore Refslund Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017).

[12] "Terror expert warns of al-Qaeda's comeback*," PRI,* September 11, 2017; URL: https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-09-11/terror-expert-warns-al-qaedas-comeback.

[13] See, for example, Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (London: Phoenix, 2002): 199; Michael Scheuer, *Through our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's 2002): 273; Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002): 72–74; Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin, 2003): 1–21.

[14] Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, 13.

[15] For example, in 2002, Stein Tønnesson used the term 'global civil war' to describe the nature of the conflict between the U.S. and al-Qaida. Stein Tønnesson, "A 'Global Civil War'?" in *The Consequences of September 11*, (Ed.) Bengt Sundelius (Stockholm: SIIA, 2002): 103–111. For more general works on terrorism as global insurgency, see, for example, John Mackinlay, *The Insurgent Archipelago: From Mao to bin Laden* (London: Hurst, 2009); David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[16] The global insurgency model was also argued for in 2011. Michael Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 2011): 73.

[17] Al-Qaida pre-2001 also had ties to other jihadist groups, of course, but the ties were informal, and the groups at the time were not bound by any oath of allegiance to bin Laden. The first group to swear an actual oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) to al-Qaida's leader was probably the Afghanistan-based branch of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), in the spring of 2001. EIJ's merger to al-Qaida in 2001 was mostly symbolic, because the individuals involved were already cooperating closely with bin Laden. Moreover, the 'merger' was rejected by the Egypt-based branch of EIJ (whose leaders were imprisoned in Egypt at the time). Al-Qaida's first "regional affiliate," with a capability to carry out operations in their home country, was Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula established in 2003, followed by al-Qaida in Iraq in 2004.

[18] Anne Stenersen and Phillipp Holtmann, "The Three Functions of UBL's "Greater Pledge" to Mullah Omar (2001–2006–2014)," *Jihadology,* January 8, 2015; URL: http://jihadology.net/2015/01/08/guest-post-the-three-functions-of-ubls-greater-pledge-to-mullah-omar-2001-2006-2014.

[19] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 100–109.

[20] See, for instance, Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, "Al-Qaeda Has Rebuilt Itself—With Iran's Help," *The Atlantic,* 11 November 2017; see also Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The stunning inside story of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in flight* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[21] The most well-known example is the so-called "underwear bomber," Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted, but failed, to down a U.S. passenger plane over Detroit on December 25, 2009.

[22] Contrary to bin Laden's advise, in 2011 AQAP declared an Islamic Emirate in the Abyan provinve of Yemen. AQAP subsequently lost this territory to Yemenite security forces. In 2015 the group had apparently learnt from its mistakes. AQAP did not declare an emirate when it took territorial control in Mukalla in 2015. Brynjar Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015); Thomas Joscelyn, Arab coalition enters AQAP stronghold in port city of Mukalla, Yemen," *Long War Journal*, April 25, 2016; URL: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/arab-coalition-enters-aqap-stronghold-in-port-city-of-mukalla-yemen.php.

[23] See, for example, Tore Hamming, "What we learned from Sami al-Uraydi's testimony concerning Abu Abdullah al-Shami," *Jihadica*, October 24, 2017; URL: http://www.jihadica.com/what-we-learned-from-sami-al-uraydis-testimony-concerning-abu-abdullah-al-shami/; see also Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Success for AQ in Syria?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017).

[24] It is unclear whether al-Qaida still follows the "franchise strategy" today. On the one hand, al-Qaida declared a new affiliate, Al-Qaida on the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in 2013 and it continues to exist, along with AQIM and AQAP. On the other hand, it seems that several al-Qaida-aligned groups after 2011 stopped calling themselves al-Qaida. The first group to abandon the al-Qaida label was in fact al-Qaida in Iraq, which changed its name Mujahideen Shura Council in 2006, before changing to Islamic State in Iraq later the same year. Al-Qaida-connected groups in, for instance, Yemen, Libya and Tunisia started calling themselves Ansar al-Sharia after the Arab uprisings in 2011. Another sign of change in al-Qaida's naming policies came in 2012 when al-Shabaab in Somalia kept its old name, despite publically swearing allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Another group that swore allegiance to Zawahiri, but without adopting the al-Qaida label, was Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin, an umbrella group formed in the Sahel region 2017. Documents found in bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad indicate that it was bin Laden himself who introduced these new "naming policies" as part of a new al-Qaida strategy to win popular support in the MENA region. On the formation of AQIS, see Anne Stenersen, "Al-Qa`ida's Comeback in Afghanistan and its Implications," *CTC Sentinel*, September 7, 2016; URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-comeback-in-afghanistan-and-its-implications; on the Ansar al-Sharia phenomenon, see Michael Horton "Capitalizing on Chaos: AQAP Advances in Yemen," *Terrorism Monitor* 14, no. 4 (February 2016) ; URL: https://jamestown.org/program/capitalizing-on-chaos-aqap-advances-in-yemen; Henrik Gråtrud and Vidar Benjamin Skretting, "Ansar al-Sharia in Libya: An Enduring Threat," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017); and Aron Zelin, "Tunisia: Uncovering Ansar al-Sharia," *Think Africa Press,* October 25, 2013 URL: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisia-uncovering-ansar-al-sharia; on Al-Shabaab declaring allegiance to Zawahiri, see "Somalia's al-Shabab join al-Qaeda," *BBC*, February 10, 2012' URL: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16979440; on Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin, see Héni Nsaibia, "Jihadist Groups In The Sahel Region Formalize Merger," *Jihadology*, March 27, 2017; URL: http://jihadology.net/2017/03/27/guest-post-jihadist-groups-in-the-sahel-region-formalize-merger; on bin Laden's ; URL: namining policies, see, for example, "Bin Laden wanted to change al-Qaida's bloodied name," *Guardian*, 24 June 2011; URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/24/bin-laden-documents-alqaida-struggle.

[25] The number is based on a recent estimate that al-Qaida has 20,000 fighters in Syria, 4,000 in Yemen and 7,000 in Somalia. Hoffman, "A Growing Terrorist Threat on Another 9/11."

[26] See, for example, Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*, 5, 9; Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, 2, 19, 37.

[27] Burke, Al-Qaeda, 12–13.

[28] I also had great benefit from discussing the Cold War-analogy with Frank 'Scott' Douglas in Oslo in September, 2017.

[29] A. Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 21.

[30] L. Farrall, "Revisiting al-Qaida's foundation and early history."

[31] A. Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 17.

[32] Ibid., 35–39.

[33] For details on al-Qaida's Somalia mission, see *Al-Qaida's(Mis) adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010), https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Al-Qaidas-MisAdventures-in-the-Horn-of-Africa.pdf.

[34] For details on al-Qaida's strategy for Afghanistan in 1996-97, see Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan,* 66–68.

[35] Ibid., 108.

[36] Ibid., 53.

[37] "Bin Laden wanted US to invade Iraq, author says," *ABC News*, August 24, 2007; URL: http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-08-24/bin-laden-wanted-us-to-invade-iraq-author-says/648888

[38] Truls Hallberg Tønnessen, URL: *Al-Qaida in Iraq: The Rise, The Fall and the Comeback* (PhD Dissertation, University of Oslo, 2015).

[39] See, for example, "Letter to Abu Basir," CIA-ODNI, released March 1, 2016, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf.

[40] Horton, "Capitalizing on Chaos."

[41] See, for example, Rania Abouzeid, "How the Arab Spring Made Bin Laden an Afterthought," *TIME*, May 2, 2011, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2068931,00.html.

[42] See, for example, "Afghani Opportunity," CIA-ODNI, released May 20, 2015, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Afghani%20Opportunity.pdf.

[43] For example, in one Abbottabad document, the writer (who is presumably bin Laden) notes that "in 2001, America's horn was broken … [and] in 2011, their necklace around the Arab world was broken." It seems bin Laden viewed the 9/11 attacks as the first, major blow to the U.S. and that the Arab uprisings demonstrated that the U.S. was no longer in a position to give life-saving support to suppressive Arab rulers. More research into this topic is needed, however, especially with the recent release of a collection of 470,000 additional files from the Abbottabad compound on November 1, 2017. "Afghani Opportunity," CIA-ODNI, released May 20, 2015; URL: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Afghani%20Opportunity.pdf; "CIA Releases Nearly 470,000 Additional Files Recovered in May 2011 Raid on Usama Bin Ladin's Compound," CIA, November 1, 2017; URL: https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2017-press-releases-statements/cia-releases-additional-files-recovered-in-ubl-compound-raid.html.

[44] For a thorough analysis of how IS came to rival al-Qaida, see Jerome Drevon, "The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017).

[45] Henrik Gråtrud, "A Snapshot of Al-Qaida's Attempt to Reassert its Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," Master Thesis, University of Oslo, 2016.

[46] Colin P. Clarke, "The Moderate Face of Al Qaeda: How the group has rebranded itself," *Foreign Affairs*, October 24, 2017;URL: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-24/moderate-face-al-qaeda; Donald Holbrook, "Al-Qaeda and the Rise of ISIS," *Survival*, Vol. 57, Issue 2 (2015): 93–104.

[47] Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden,* 74–75.

[48] Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan,* 160.

[49] Anne Stenersen, *Brothers in Jihad: Explaining the Relationship between al-Qaida and the Taliban, 1996–2001* (PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, 2012): 221.

[50] See discussion in footnote 24.

[51] Héni Nsaibia, "Jihadist Groups In The Sahel Region Formalize Merger," *Jihadology*, March 27, 2017; URL: http://jihadology.net/2017/03/27/guest-post-jihadist-groups-in-the-sahel-region-formalize-merger.

[52] Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 2.

[53] Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid

Bombings," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (2004): 355–375.

[54] Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History* (London: Hurst, 2015): 130

[55] Raffaello Pantucci, *"We Love Death as You Love Life": Britain's Suburban Terrorists* (London: Hurst, 2015): 274.

[56] "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 27/12/1431H [December 3, 2010], CIA-ODNI, released March 1, 2016; URL: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Dear%20Brother%20Shaykh%20Mahmud.pdf.

[57] The strategy of "individual terrorism" was not unknown in jihadi circles – it was described in detail by the jihadi theoretican Abu Musab al-Suri back in 2005. SEE: Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (London: Hurst, 2009).

[58] "As-Saḥāb Media presents a new video message from al-Qāʾidah: "For Incitement and Publishing: You Are Held Responsible Only for Yourself, Parts 1 and 2," *Jihadology*, June 3, 2011; URL: http://jihadology.net/2011/06/03/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qa%E2%80%99idah-thou-are-held-responsible-only-for-yourself-parts-1-2/.

[59] "'What are you waiting for': U.S. born Al-Qaeda spokesman calls on Americans to 'buy guns and start shooting people'," *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2011;URL: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1394113/Al-Qaeda-spokesman-Adam-Gadahn-calls-Americans-buy-guns-shoot-people.html.

[60] "The Magazine that "Inspired" the Boston Bombers," *Frontline*, April 30, 2013;URL: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-magazine-that-inspired-the-boston-bombers/.

[61] According to the *Long War Journal*, three of al-Qaida's external operations chiefs were killed in Waziristan between May 2008 and December 2009 (the last of them being Saleh al-Somali). Afterwards, al-Qaida-linked plots in the West were traced back to planners in Yemen, not Waziristan – indicating that al-Qaida had moved its external operations activities away from Waziristan. The attempted bombing of Times Square on May 1, 2010, was traced back to Waziristan, but linked to the Pakistani Taliban, not to al-Qaida. Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda's external operations chief thought killed in US strike in Pakistan," *Long War Journal*, December 11, 2009; URL: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/12/al_qaedas_external_o.php; "Taliban behind Times Square plot, says US," *The Guardian*, May 9, 2010; URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/09/times-square-bomb-pakistani-taliban.

[62] Thomas Joscelyn, "AQAP claims responsibility for cargo planes plot," *Long War Journal*, November 6, 2010: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/11/aqap_claims_responsi.php.

[63] In light of recently revealed information about the al-Qaida-Iran connection, and with a continued high level of conflict in the Middle East, it cannot be excluded that al-Qaida would have access to a form of state sanctuary in the future. Levy and Scott-Clark, "Al-Qaeda Has Rebuilt Itself—With Iran's Help."

Revisiting al-Qaida's Foundation and Early History

by Leah Farrall

Abstract

This article examines the early rise and fall of al-Qaida from its emergence in early 1987 as a splinter group of Maktab al-Khadamat through to its organisational decline following the defeat of the Arab-Afghans at the 1989 Battle of Jalalabad. Drawing from first-hand accounts and primary materials, it contributes a history of al-Qaida's first stage of development and identifies the factors that drove the organisation's early growth and decline. The article finds that two factors were crucial to al-Qaida's early growth: battlefield success and access to combat opportunities for volunteer youths. It determines that al-Qaida's defeat at Jalalabad and bin Laden's ordered withdrawal from combat were the cause of its near terminal decline. The article concludes by outlining that the bitter lesson al-Qaida took from its early history was that to attract and retain a significant number of youths, it must appear victorious in battle, and be able to provide access to combat opportunities.

Keywords: Al-Qaida, bin Laden, Azzam, Maktab al-Khadamat, Afghanistan, jihad

Introduction

The Afghan jihad began in earnest in December 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to prop up the struggling Communist regime.[1] The invasion transformed what was primarily a local conflict into an internationalised jihad. The jihad not only birthed 'Arab-Afghans' and the contemporary foreign fighter phenomenon, but also a range of militant organisations - some of which continue to affect international security nearly 40 years on.[2] Chief among these was al-Qaida, an organisation widely believed to have been founded by Osama bin Laden in 1988. Bin Laden was an early supporter of the Afghan jihad and began providing financial assistance almost immediately after the Soviet invasion.[3] It was his money that another leading Arab-Afghan, Abdullah Azzam, used in late 1984 to establish an Arab-led organisation called the Services Office, Maktab al-Khadamat (MAK).[4]

So many years on from these events, it is tempting to think we know all we can about al-Qaida's Afghan jihad origins. It is, for example, established wisdom that al-Qaida was founded in August of 1988, as reflected in 'minutes' obtained by American investigators in 2002.[5] However, al-Qaida had formed as a MAK splinter group well over a year before these minutes were authored.[6] Drawing from primary source materials, this article contributes an early history of al-Qaida that shows it emerged in early 1987 and explores this first phase of its development.[7] To do so, the article revisits the history of the Afghan jihad to explore when, why, and under what circumstances al-Qaida emerged as a MAK splinter group.

Like al-Qaida, MAK's formation and evolution is understood through a number of established wisdoms. It is, for example, accepted knowledge that MAK grew from a meeting at the 1984 Hajj between the Afghan leader Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Azzam, and bin Laden, who was influenced to support MAK's establishment because of his visit to an Afghan frontline.[8] However, by the time of bin Laden's first real travel to an Afghan front in late 1986, MAK had already been operating for close to two years. Moreover, rather than being the driver of his decision to fund MAK, the winter 1986 visit was the catalyst for bin Laden's decision to withdraw his funding and fully separate from MAK.[9] In order to explore al-Qaida's evolution as a MAK splinter group, we must first therefore revisit MAK's origins.

The Emergence of MAK

Agreement to establish what became MAK was reached during meetings at the 1984 Hajj. However, this agreement was the culmination of a number of earlier meetings, proposals, and initiatives that had taken place over many months in Peshawar and Jaji, and earlier at the Qais training camp.[10] Unpacking the circumstances

and conflicts that led up to this final agreement are important to correctly contextualising MAK's founding raison d'etre and showing how diverging views on the organisation's purpose proved to be an unresolvable point of difference between Azzam and bin Laden, much earlier than is commonly thought.

While MAK ultimately became famous for its recruitment, housing and training of foreign volunteers, and its media and *dawah* work, these were not the main reasons it was founded.[11] Nor were they the reasons why the group's establishment was supported by key Afghan figures and funded by bin Laden. When MAK was established in 1984, it was widely known there were problems with corruption and the logistics of aid and supply distribution to the various Afghan groups leading resistance efforts against the Soviets. Several early generation Arab-Afghan figures had already sought to introduce initiatives to rectify these problems.[12] The most significant of these was a meeting held in Jaji on the first night of Ramadan 1984, and attended by a number of senior Afghan leaders and their deputies, as well as Arab-Afghans.[13] Afghan leaders in attendance included Jalaluddin Haqqani, Yunis Khalis, Sayyaf, Mawlawi Nasrullah Mansur, Ahmad Gul, Gulzarak Zadran, and Arsala Rahmani, while Arab-Afghans in attendance included Abdul Aziz Ali, Mustafa Hamid and several other Arab attendees.[14]

At this meeting a number of the initiatives that would subsequently form the rationale for MAK's creation were discussed. Most focused on meeting immediate needs, including securing additional funding for and delivering more supplies to the Afghan mujahidin.[15] It was suggested that an independent Arab committee be established to provide a centralised mechanism via which funding and support could be coordinated and measures put in place to ensure aid and battlefield supplies reached where they were most needed.[16] This would involve Arabs working inside Afghanistan as well as in Peshawar, so they could identify what was required and coordinate and oversee its delivery.[17]

Attendees at the meeting positively received these ideas, so much so that discussions quickly moved to making the committee initiative a more formal program, which would have its first project in Paktia, where a coordinated offensive would be undertaken.[18] Afghan leaders would contribute forces and the Arab-Afghans would secure funding.[19] An Arab-Afghan committee headed by Azzam would supervise the direct distribution of funding to the various Afghan groups, while another Arab-Afghan, Abdul Aziz Ali, would oversee logistics to ensure that supplies reached the mujahidin where they were needed.[20] The Paktia project was initially planned for three months, with the first month's funding coming from an Arab present at the meeting.[21] All Afghan leaders at the meeting agreed, with Khalis asking the committee to come to Jalalabad and coordinate a campaign there once the Paktia offensive was over.[22]

However, the Paktia project ultimately languished. At a follow up meeting of Afghan leaders, Sayyaf rejected the initiative because he saw it as Arab interference.[23] Nonetheless, the ideas put forward for Arab-Afghan involvement survived, and were supported by Haqqani and Khalis. Haqqani subsequently asked Mustafa Hamid, a Jaji meeting attendee and one of the main Arab-Afghans pushing this initiative, to write a report for him detailing what was required and why. Haqqani wanted to take the report with him to the Hajj, where there were to be a number of meetings held to try to secure additional Arab support for the Afghan jihad.[24]

Hamid's report emphasised establishing a body that would not only secure and provide supplies but also supervise and coordinate their delivery to ensure they reached where they were needed, and were not unevenly distributed between the various Afghan groups.[25] It was thought independent oversight and coordination of logistics and delivery could help prevent corruption, which was hampering supply and capacity and thus negatively affecting the unity and effectiveness of the Afghan mujahidin. Hamid's report contained other suggestions such as establishing a media capability and building a capacity for ammunition production.[26] However, improving the performance of the mujahidin through reform and development in areas of education and military training, and a strong anti-corruption effort in relation to aid and supplies, were the driving reasons behind his and other Arab-Afghans' support for an Arab oversight body.[27] Support for the proposal from Afghan leaders stemmed more from a desire to secure improved access to donations, supplies, and aid than reform and anti-corruption.[28] Sayyaf's reversal of his position to support the establishment of an Arab-Afghan grouping also resulted in large part from his desire to be a beneficiary of additional funding and aid

streams such a group would deliver.[29]

It was at one of the Hajj meetings that Hamid's proposal to establish an Arab body to lead matters in this area was agreed upon. As decided at the earlier Jaji gathering, Azzam would head the group.[30] Bin Laden was the initial benefactor who would provide funding. He agreed to do so on the understanding that "money would go directly to the mujahidin on the fronts."[31] However, the organization that evolved under Azzam's leadership following the Hajj agreement took a fundamentally different direction to that discussed prior to its establishment. This changed focus would ultimately cause bin Laden to separate from MAK.

MAK's Evolution

MAK was established in October 1984 and was initially a very small grouping. At formation, the organisation had approximately 13 members, at least half of who held leadership positions.[32] Organisationally, MAK had an amir (Azzam) and was administered via consultation councils. Its executive leadership comprised of an amir, deputy amir, and a leadership and development council.[33] Bin Laden reportedly held no stronger authority than a position on the development council.[34] As Wael Julaidan, an early member of MAK, recounted, "during that time Abu Abdullah [bin Laden] would come and go. He was only responsible for funding."[35]

Although media, technical, education, and transport councils were also nominally established when MAK was created, its organisational structure did not become fully functional until at least mid-1985.[36] MAK's media council was the first to become operational, with the release of its inaugural edition of *Al-Jihad* magazine in December 1984.[37] Other areas such as training would not be fully functional until mid-1986.

Neither bin Laden nor Azzam were based permanently in Peshawar, where MAK was headquartered, until mid-1986.[38] While Azzam retained overall authority as amir, day-to-day management of MAK was delegated to his deputy.[39] As had been initially envisaged at meetings leading up to and during the Hajj, MAK was involved in the delivery and oversight of aid and supplies to the Afghan groups. A significant number of convoys were delivered, which led some Afghans to label the Arabs "just donkeys carrying money," and with poor organisation and initially small numbers, MAK had a limited ability to provide oversight and ensure money and supplies got where they were needed.[40]

Most of MAK's early activities focused on media, *dawah,* and *tarbiyyah*.[41] Azzam was trying to bring attention to the Afghan conflict, raising awareness and understanding, and educating people as to the necessity of supporting the jihad. MAK's focus on these areas was in part because of a limited capacity to do much else at that time, but also because these were the areas Azzam wanted prioritised.[42] Through its education, media, and religious councils, MAK provided *tarbiyyah* for the Arab-Afghans, and the Afghans more generally. This involved conducting religious education in Afghan training camps, and later, establishing community Islamic study centres.[43] MAK also began supporting health and education initiatives in partnership with various charities, and would go on to help establish hospitals and clinics.[44]

Azzam favoured broadening the scope of MAK's activities because he believed this would help foster unity among Afghan groups. In turn, this unity would assist in his goal to expel the Soviets and establish an Islamic state in Afghanistan. Through MAK, Azzam was trying to support the cultivation of such a state.[45] Bin Laden may have shared Azzam's wish to see an Islamic state ultimately established in Afghanistan, but he did not believe it was MAK's (primary) role to bring this about. Rather he saw this focus and broader activities as distracting from the group's key function - which was to fund and support the Afghan mujahidin.[46] This is clear in his statement about MAK's purpose at the time.[47]

Bin Laden also thought that MAK's broad focus was responsible for causing disorganisation and ineffectiveness in its activities.[48] By mid-1986, MAK was suffering extensive administration problems that, in his eyes, further diminished the level of support MAK could provide to the Afghan mujahidin.[49] In response, bin Laden moved to base himself in Peshawar in order to exert more control over the administration and direction of MAK. He did so around the same time Azzam relocated from Islamabad for the same purpose.[50] This set

the stage for disagreement between the two men over what were seemingly administrative issues, but which revealed conflicting views about MAK's purpose and function, and indeed the Afghan jihad more generally. The emerging issue of Arab-Afghan military training also further complicated relations between the two and led to bin Laden's first efforts to undertake activity independent of MAK.

Although there had been some Arab-Afghan attempts to carry out military training in 1984, with varying degrees of success, no organisationally supported Arab-Afghan training program existed until 1986.[51] Volunteer numbers were still low, and the idea of Arab-Afghan training was not yet widely supported.[52] It would not be until after the 1987 Battle of Jaji, and the international publicity it received that both trainee numbers and receptivity to training increased.[53]

In early 1986 MAK moved the bulk of its operations to Sadda, and it was here that its first efforts at a training program were undertaken.[54] By then, Azzam was based at Sadda and had become more involved in *tarbiyyah* efforts for both MAK's trainees and the Afghans.[55] The first training was, however, a failure. Although MAK 'graduated' a number of trainees they were so poorly prepared that when a 'brigade' of the trainees and senior Arab-Afghan figures, including bin Laden, was formed and attempted to join the Battle of Zhawar in April 1986, the Afghans turned them away.[56]

Mustafa Hamid is scathing of this early training program, noting that Azzam set up a "mosque not a training camp."[57] Bin Laden, too, was unhappy with MAK's poor standard of training, and believed its diversification of activities was responsible.[58] In this respect, MAK's early problems in military training brought to the surface underlying differences between bin Laden and Azzam about MAK's function, the direction and form its support to the Afghan jihad should take, and how this should manifest in MAK's activities.[59] Indeed, it was not long after the Zhawar debacle that Bin Laden, who by then was also based in Peshawar, decided to independently establish his own training camp and began scouting for locations.

Bin Laden's Withdrawal and Separation from MAK

Jalalabad and Sadda were among the first two locations scouted for bin Laden's training project in the summer of 1986.[60] After Jalalabad was deemed unsuitable, a 'secret' location at Sadda was decided upon, but word soon spread and bin Laden found himself coming under pressure to scrap his project.[61] Senior Arab-Afghans pressed him to stop his plans to establish a separate training camp, arguing efforts needed to remain centralised and that MAK should be the body through which all volunteer training was conducted.[62]

By this time Abu Burhan al-Suri had arrived at MAK's newly established camp in Sadda and had taken over its training program, rapidly raising it to a much higher standard.[63] There was, therefore, no longer scope for Bin Laden to argue the need for another camp on the basis of MAK's poor training. While he scrapped the idea of a camp at Sadda, bin Laden did not stop his plans. By September 1986 another site had been scouted, this time at Jaji inside Afghanistan.[64] Bin Laden quickly became enamoured with the location, parts of which included a mountain that overlooked a garrison of enemy forces.[65]

Construction at the site started in October of 1986, a month after the location was scouted; bin Laden, along with a small group of mostly Saudi nationals, carried out this initial work.[66] He secured Sayyaf's permission to stay in the area, offering to construct a series of fortifications along the border area.[67] This was in addition to the work he was carrying out at his own site.

By early 1987, the Jaji site, later known as al-Masada, had become the birthplace of al-Qaida, and not long after, the location of what has become one of the Afghan jihad's most famous battles.[68] But in September and October 1986, bin Laden had not yet fully separated from MAK. It was not until a visit to a nearby Afghan front in late 1986 that he decided to do so. The trip not only proved to be the final trigger for bin Laden's separation from MAK, but also his establishment of a separate Arab group at his new base.

Early in the winter of 1986 bin Laden made an unannounced and unaccompanied trip to an Afghan front in the Jaji area under Sayyaf's control.[69] Afghan leaders typically accompanied Arab financiers and senior

Arab-Afghan figures on their visits.[70] As valued 'guests' they were often restricted in what they were able to see, and did not get the opportunity to visit Afghan frontlines where conditions were extremely poor.[71]

Bin Laden did not announce his intention to go to the front and so was able to gain access to areas usually off limits to Arab-Afghan leaders. By this time, he was also based inside Afghanistan and working for Sayyaf in the Jaji region, as well as at his own encampment. Bin Laden's near constant presence in the area likely meant that it was impossible for him to be accompanied at all times. He was therefore able to see what most other Arab-Afghans leaders could not - the real conditions at the front. Doing so had a profound impact.

Seeing the conditions in which Afghan mujahidin were living and fighting, without adequate protection or supplies, angered bin Laden. He had thought that the money he was putting through MAK would have reached the area. It was, after all, the founding rationale of the group. As Hamid recounts:

Abu Abdullah just gave the money to Azzam to spend for the mujahidin. In fact, this was the idea Abu Abdullah initially liked and the reason he supported Maktab al-Khadamat because he thought the money would go directly to the mujahidin on the fronts. It did not, which he saw when he visited the front in 1986 and saw the extremely poor conditions of the mujahidin. He wondered where his money was going and thought it was a crime they were operating in such poor conditions.[72]

Although there were increased supplies going into Afghanistan as a result of MAK's activities, corruption remained rife. Even with additional personnel MAK was unable to effectively supervise shipments going across the border. According to Hamid, many Afghans knew of MAK's lack of capacity and ability, and because it was paying for each transport of shipments, MAK was routinely defrauded.[73] The same shipments would be taken back and forth across the border multiple times, with monies being claimed for each separate trip with the same goods, which may or may not have reached their intended destination.[74]

Bin Laden's realisation of how little aid was actually reaching the front was the tipping point for his relationship with MAK. It was not only a matter of his dissatisfaction with MAK's mismanagement and inability to effectively supervise shipments. Bin Laden had agreed to fund a group whose primarily focus, he thought, would be supporting the Afghan mujahidin, like the men he met on his visit to the front. But by this time MAK's activities and focus were much broader, stretching across education, medical assistance, refugee aid, and religious education, in addition to supporting the mujahidin with supply and logistics. In this respect, bin Laden's visit to the front proved to be the catalyst for his withdrawal of funding to MAK and he instead used the money to directly support military activities inside Afghanistan.[75] In addition to this, bin Laden continued working on his construction of a base at Jaji, which by this time had been underway for several months. Bin Laden did so despite increasing pressure for him to stop his activities and return to Peshawar.

Going it Alone: Bin Laden at Jaji

Although bin Laden had secured Sayyaf's permission to remain in the Jaji area, his establishment of the al-Masada base was not widely supported. Many Afghans and figures from the growing Arab-Afghan community in Peshawar tried to convince him to stop his efforts and withdraw from al-Masada.[76] They had several reasons for concern. The first was that bin Laden was building a military training base exclusively for foreign volunteers, in Afghan territory. This had the potential to alienate Afghans. According to Abu Hajr al-Iraqi "the people around him did not agree, and told him that: you came here to make tunnels to protect the Afghans… so you do not have anything to do with the military operations."[77] Their efforts were unsuccessful. Bin Laden continued, as al-Iraqi noted "without making clear for them [the Afghans] that he hoped that Al-Masada would be a base or centre for training in the future."[78] The reason it was not made clear was that the training base was not built for, nor was it to include Afghans.[79] It was to be a base for a new Arab training group. With volunteer numbers lacking at that time, bin Laden did not invite the Afghans; rather he direct-recruited from Saudi Arabia - a practice he continued for close to six months after establishing the base.[80]

While there was Arab-Afghan concern over how the Afghans would respond to a base on their territory that

excluded them, the most immediate worry was the safety and practicability of bin Laden's undertaking. He was spending significant amounts of money building a base in an area many thought was not only unsafe, but could not be effectively defended over the long term.

Bin Laden thought his site could become strategically important because of its location.[81] While the area offered excellent visibility over enemy positions, it was also highly exposed and not suitable for the establishment of a permanent base and to effectively defend it would take a huge amount of resources for little practical gain. [82] Although parts of the area were suitable for guerrilla warfare this was not what bin Laden was intending. [83] He was building a training base, to be filled with foreign youths whose military experience, like his own, was extremely limited, if not non-existent, which was a matter of concern to senior Arab-Afghans who worried for the safety of base inhabitants. Azzam was among those who feared bin Laden's efforts would unnecessarily expose al-Masada's inexperienced, untrained and under-armed occupants to capture by Soviet forces. He and other senior Arab-Afghan leaders repeatedly asked bin Laden to withdraw and return to Peshawar.[84]

When bin Laden would not abandon his project, he was lobbied to send his still small but growing band of volunteers at al-Masada to Sadda for basic military training, which most lacked.[85] It was thought that this would at least allow for the camp's occupants to have some ability to defend themselves should they come under attack.[86] MAK was also facing the problem that word about bin Laden's base had reached its trainees - some of whom wanted to go there in the belief it might offer better opportunities to see combat.[87]

Azzam reluctantly agreed to allow Sadda trainees to go to Jaji only after they finished their training course. [88] Azzam also sought an agreement from bin Laden that any newly arrived trainees he direct-recruited must also first go through Sadda for training.[89] Bin Laden nominally agreed but continued to allow untrained volunteers to remain at the base.[90] It was a situation that continued to concern Arab-Afghan leaders. The volunteers were restless for combat, impetuous, inexperienced, and unable to defend themselves if they came under attack - an event the leaders assessed was made likely by increasing activity at the base, which would have been visible to enemy forces.[91]

Bin Laden, meanwhile, remained undeterred in his plans to expand the base and the numbers of youths present there. He was particularly persistent with his efforts to enlist support from a small group of seasoned Arab-Afghan mujahidin, mostly Egyptians, who were fighting on Haqqani's Khost front.[92] They had not previously been involved with MAK's activities, having kept away from the Peshawar 'scene'.[93] However, they too had reservations about bin Laden's project.[94] Indeed, concerns were so widespread that a meeting of Arab-Afghans with military experience, including the Khost group was held in Islamabad to discuss al-Masada's safety and viability.[95] Among them were several future leaders of al-Qaida, including Abu Ubaydah al-Banshiri and Abu Hafs al-Masri.[96]

All of the attendees at the Islamabad meeting expressed reservations about the wisdom of occupying such an exposed base with a largely untrained and ill-disciplined group of volunteers.[97] Group representatives were then dispatched to convince bin Laden to withdraw from the area.[98] The plan was to try to convince him to withdraw by arguing there were more pressing priorities and that the base was dangerously vulnerable to enemy attack and held little strategic value beyond being an early warning position.[99] It was indeed ironic that bin Laden had withdrawn his money from MAK because it was not being well utilised to support the Afghans, only to build a base that excluded them, and that both Afghans and Arabs thought was wasteful because of its questionable utility and unsustainability as a military position. It is little wonder then that bin Laden was mocked for his wastefulness and described as "someone who takes money and throws it into the sea."[100] Still, however, bin Laden ignored counsel to withdraw and continued to direct-recruit untrained youths from Saudi Arabia to join his project.[101]

Bin Laden's determination to continue at al-Masada convinced a small group of primarily Egyptians to decide to assist him.[102] This was not because they agreed with bin Laden's viewpoint but rather, having recognized he would press ahead regardless, they sought to "reduce the damage as much as… [they]… could."[103] Abu Ubaydah al-Banshiri, an Egyptian who would go on to become al-Qaida's first military commander was among a small number who travelled to Jaji in an effort to minimise damage and at least ensure the encampment had

appropriate fortifications, and its residents, basic training.[104] Another reason why some chose to join bin Laden was his financial power. Several of the Egyptians who worked with bin Laden at Jaji were, at that time, also members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, (EIJ), a group that was actively trying to convince him to fund its activities against the Egyptian regime.[105]

Al-Qaida Begins

Abu Ubaydah al-Banshiri's decision to stay and establish a formal training program at the camp marked the beginning of al-Qaida, as it transitioned from his nickname for the training base, to become the name for the group bin Laden built around his leadership in the opening months of 1987. Abu Ubaydah also convinced his friend Abu Hafs al-Masri to join him, and together the two took over training and camp leadership at al-Masada.[106] In January 1987 they were placed on bin Laden's payroll.[107]

By February 1987 the first training courses of around 40 men had begun in one of what would grow to be six camps within the al-Masada base.[108] While the base continued to grow in size and numbers, MAK's Sadda camp continued to attract the bulk of a small but growing number of volunteers arriving for training.[109] As a result, bin Laden continued direct recruiting from Saudi Arabia.[110]

Outside of training, al-Qaida's volunteers were mostly engaged in efforts to build base infrastructure, but they continually sought to participate in combat, with many not only wanting to fight but also to achieve martyrdom.[111] Consequently, discipline was a problem.[112] In this respect, constructing and running a growing base and training recruits while managing their overriding desire to fight, in a location that was already dangerously exposed, was challenging for the camp's leadership. Despite their efforts, the trainees continued to push bin Laden to allow them to participate in armed combat.[113]

The trainees' thirst for armed jihad had serious implications. Their demands to fight soon came to heavily shape bin Laden's thinking and directly influenced his decision to allow them to carry out a number of small attacks against nearby enemy positions.[114] Bin Laden did so because he was afraid if he did not allow trainees to carry out an attack they would leave the encampment and return to Saudi Arabia complaining that they had not participated in any combat while a part of his group.[115] Through these actions bin Laden let his leadership be dictated by the youths surrounding him, and his fear of them leaving. It would not be the only time he allowed himself to be influenced in this way. Indeed, it became an enduring characteristic of his leadership of the organisation.[116]

The attacks bin Laden allowed in April and May of 1987 precipitated al-Masada being attacked by the Soviets on May 25 of that year. That these skirmishes were allowed to happen demonstrates how self-serving bin Laden's approach to the conduct of jihad had become. His focus was no longer on assisting the Afghans, but rather on preserving his group. Not only did bin Laden agree to these attacks, he actively lobbied for them, and for assistance from Azzam and the Afghans in the area, because he needed the attacks to build morale and stem a potential exodus if recruits were not allowed to fight.[117]

The attack on Jaji and ensuing battle did not, therefore, come as a surprise to al-Masada's occupants or the Arab-Afghans more generally. For close to two months there had been anticipation that an attack was likely. Fearing for the safety of those at al Masada, and expecting the base to soon come under attack, Azzam allowed youths who had trained at Sadda to go to help in the defence of al-Masada and bolster its numbers.[118] This reflected both his concern at the situation and awareness that once conflict broke out they would most likely leave anyway. Abu Burhan al-Suri, MAK's chief trainer and the commander of the Sadda camp, also travelled to al-Masada to assist with training and preparation, although he left before the base was attacked, and did not return to assist in its defence.[119]

The Jaji Aftermath – Al-Qaida Takes Hold

When the Soviets did finally launch an assault on the base on May 25, 1987, its inhabitants were able to withstand the attack, and by doing so cemented al-Masada's place in mujahidin history.[120] The 'victory' at Jaji served to reinforce bin Laden's focus on military aspects of jihad, which had been the basis of his separation from MAK, with its broader agenda of support and assistance. It also bolstered bin Laden's hubristic belief in the superiority of his group, which had, by then, become known across the region as *Qaidat Ansarallah,* or al-Qaida, for short. In bin Laden's worldview, the steadfastness of the Arabs, not the assistance of the Afghans, prevented al-Masada from falling to the Soviets. This affirmed his focus on armed jihad and separation from the Afghans. Bin Laden's views were supported by al-Qaida's military commanders, Abu Hafs and Abu Ubaydah.

Although Afghan mujahidin commanders Sayyaf and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar dispatched forces to the area in support of al-Masada, the poor performance of the Afghans during the battle became a point of contention. [121] Abu Hafs, in particular, was scathing about Sayyaf's lack of promised support when the base came under attack, and argued that al-Qaida should stay away from the politics and corruption of the Afghan yard.[122] The souring of relations with Sayyaf would see al-Qaida move its main operations away from the al-Masada base in 1988 to Haqqani's camps in Khost, and camps in Jalalabad, before establishing what would become permanent camp complexes in Khost in territory under Hekmatyar's control in 1989.[123]

The Jaji battle was not only significant to al-Qaida's growth but also MAK's. Before the battle there had been a lack of support for training activities at Sadda. However, the superior performance of Abu Burhan's trainees at Jaji, and the important role they played in defending al-Masada, resulted in increased support for MAK's training activities. The growing number of volunteers arriving in Pakistan following the publicity surrounding the Jaji battle may have also driven greater support for MAK's training, particularly since a substantial number of them entered MAK's camps and not al-Qaida's. This was perhaps because they had read about the mujahidin's exploits in *Al-Jihad*, which was a MAK produced publication that contained its contact details. MAK's offices and training infrastructure were public knowledge and easy to locate in a way that al-Qaida's were not. At this time, al-Qaida's camps were in a state of flux, moving several times, and were also growing more secretive.[124]

Despite these constraints, a significant number of youth found their way to al-Qaida's camps, wanting to join with bin Laden. He had training bases, weapons, (unparalleled) financial resources, and following the Jaji victory, a public profile built on his battlefield exploits and status as a victorious field commander. This drew the youth to him. As Hamid notes, "the youth followed him because they thought he would lead them to the action."[125] As a result, over a short period of time al-Qaida expanded to be largest the Arab-Afghan organisation in the arena outside of MAK. Indeed, in the period between late 1987 and early 1989 al-Qaida reached its pre-911 membership apogee, with core member numbers topping 400 people.[126] Many more would become part of the combat groups that followed al-Qaida into the 1989 Jalalabad battle and fought under its command.[127]

As a result of its rapid expansion, command and control was relatively haphazard during al-Qaida's early period of development.[128] Al-Qaida's organisational structure did not keep up with its expansion and remained much as it had before the Battle of Jaji, with a structure comprised of bin Laden as ultimate amir, and a military council headed by Abu Ubaydah.[129] There was one addition, a small media wing operated for a brief time in early to mid 1988 by Abu Musab al-Reuters, until he left the organisation after bin Laden shut down his efforts to run an al-Qaida magazine.[130] Abu Musab had released a magazine that contained unapproved commentary, causing a storm of criticism in Peshawar against bin Laden, who had been away when the magazine was released.[131]

Bin Laden's frequent absences may have also contributed to al-Qaida's disorganisation. He was, according to Hamid, away quite often during the post Jaji period, before returning to lead al-Qaida and its combat groups in the Battle of Jalalabad.[132] Participation in this battle was something bin Laden pushed heavily for as part of his expansive new vision of al-Qaida as an elite armed combat group leading an Arab-Afghan army.[133]

Bin Laden's unique financial power allowed him to consolidate al-Qaida and push this new vision and agenda,

despite encountering opposition to his plans, which involved leading the military program for all Arab-Afghans. The increase in volunteer numbers reaching MAK did not escape bin Laden's notice. While al-Qaida's own numbers were very healthy, and it was rapidly growing, bin Laden also wanted to secure ongoing access to MAK's Sadda trainees. Sadda graduates were well trained, and would provide a ready-made recruit stream for al-Qaida. To gain access, bin Laden sought to continue the 'damage-reducing' arrangement that Azzam had put in place prior to the Battle of Jaji, where Sadda camp trainees were dispatched to al-Qaida's camps after finishing training.[134] Bin Laden was ultimately unsuccessful in co-opting Sadda graduates in this manner. However, it took a collective effort from the Arab-Afghans in Peshawar to prevent his sustained attempts to do so, especially as bin Laden's power within the Arab-Afghan milieu was growing.

Although bin Laden remained sensitive to criticism, as his shutting down of al-Qaida's magazine shows, it was nonetheless the case that reigning in his actions became more difficult after the Jaji victory. Several key players in the Arab-Afghan milieu did continue to seek means via which they could influence him and mitigate any damage caused by what was a growing divergence between MAK and al-Qaida, and competing military training programs. This required finding a way in which bin Laden could be mollified in the face of censure of his actions so as to prevent him departing the arena and criticising the Arab-Afghan jihad. Such criticism could have negatively impacted upon Arab-Afghan funding, which was an outcome all parties sought to prevent.

A solution came in the form of an advisory council, the formation of which bin Laden also advocated, not least because it ultimately resulted in him attaining the title 'Amir of the Arabs.' This body, which came to be known as the Peshawar Advisory Council, is the subject of much of the material in the 'minutes' often mistakenly thought to be related to al-Qaida's formation.

Amir of the Arabs: Bin Laden and the Peshawar Advisory Council

Established after the 1987 Jaji battle, and lasting until the beginning of the Arab-Afghan involvement in the Jalalabad Battle in May 1989, the Peshawar Advisory Council was a body that came together to try to coordinate and oversee the growing Arab-Afghan population in Peshawar.[135] It had its own military, financial and religious committees, and was intended to serve as the overall administrative body, organising the activities of the Arab-Afghans.[136] A key reason for the council's establishment was that there was growing competition and tension within the Arab-Afghan milieu and establishing a body whose function it was to coordinate activities was intended to help prevent conflict.[137] Bin Laden, as the leader of al-Qaida - by then the largest Arab grouping outside of MAK - was a key member of the council.[138] Also on the council were Azzam, Julaidan, Sayyaf or his delegate, and a number of 'semi-independent figures' within the milieu such as Abu Ibrahim al-Iraqi and Abu Hajr al-Iraqi.[139]

Through the auspices of the council, bin Laden was appointed 'Amir of the Arabs,' while Azzam was assigned the position of amir of Sadda, and Julaidan, amir of Peshawar activities.[140] According to Hamid, Azzam and Julaidan's positions were not new, rather a reflection of what they were already doing.[141] The only real new outcome from the council was bin Laden's amir appointment, which was little more than an honorary title because he held no authority over anyone outside of al-Qaida.[142]

By appointing bin Laden as 'Amir of the Arabs' the council was trying ensure ongoing Saudi funding for Arab-Afghan activities. Although he was no longer regularly funding MAK with his own personal money, bin Laden had great influence with other financiers and there was a general funding shortage at the time for Arab activities outside of MAK.[143] It was also thought bin Laden's appointment might encourage him to broaden his personal financing activities, which were then restricted to al-Qaida.[144]

In early 1988, the council also appointed a military committee to coordinate cooperation among the various Arab-Afghan groups and entities operating in the region.[145] Headed by Abu Ubaydah al-Banshiri, it also included Abu Hafs al-Masri, Julaidan, Abu Hajr al-Iraqi, and Issam al-Libi.[146] With membership of the military committee stacked in his favour, bin Laden attempted to pursue his plans for al-Qaida's expansion via this medium while also continuing to pressure the advisory council to cooperate more with al-Qaida.

As bin Laden pursued this agenda and moved al-Qaida further away from supporting the Afghan jihad, Azzam appears to have sought to distance himself from the council, instead sending his deputy Tamim al-Adnani in his place to meetings.[147] Documentation from one gathering attended by al-Adnani in late August 1988 has often been interpreted as the second of two meetings marking al-Qaida's formal establishment.[148] However, these meeting 'minutes' and assorted notes are a summary from a lengthy Peshawar Advisory Council meeting attended by al-Adnani in Azzam's place, as well as notes from al-Qaida's own follow-up meeting after the Advisory Council had met.[149]

The notes from the Peshawar Advisory Council meeting show al-Qaida's attempts to control the milieu, and the complaints made by bin Laden and al-Qaida against MAK and Azzam, and the general pressure put on the organisation.[150] Despite having little to do with MAK at that time, Bin Laden was able to do so because of his financial power and influence with 'merchants' upon whom other parties on the Advisory Council relied for funding. Hamid recalled there was a "need for all parties involved to support bin Laden because of his financial power, and recommendations to financiers in Saudi Arabia, and the weight of his family financially and politically within the Kingdom."[151]

Azzam, in particular, felt this pressure and feared funding would be impacted.[152] He, like many others, did not support al-Qaida's actions on the Council, but as Hamid notes at times he "bowed to the intransigence of bin Laden and his ability to do as he pleased as a result of his extraordinary financial strength over the poverty stricken yard."[153] The reasons for the pressure against Azzam become clear when viewing notes from an earlier meeting between bin Laden and Abu al-Rida, discussing "new military work." This meeting, on August 11, 1988, is often contended to have been the meeting at which the establishment of al-Qaida was discussed.[154] However, a close inspection of the document shows it does not relate to establishing a new group, but rather is a discussion about establishing a new military program, specifically, "the new military work."[155] The mention of Azzam in this document sheds light on the pressure against Azzam, and why such an effort was later made to secure continued access to Sadda's graduates; his military 'gang' was seen as 'ended.'[156]

Al-Qaida's notes from an internal meeting following the Peshawar Advisory Council meeting a week or so later (which al-Adnani attended) show very clearly that it wanted to secure access to MAK's Sadda camp graduates, as a feeder for its own recruitment objectives. This is clear by the framing of training at Sadda to be first part of "the military work," with the second stage being entry to al-Qaida.[157] It is not clear if the proposed course of work discussed among al-Qaida members was presented this way to a subsequent Peshawar Advisory Council meeting, but in Hamid's recollection al-Qaida was not successful in gaining access to Sadda's trainees in this manner.[158]

The 'military work' being discussed more generally in these documents was al-Qaida's program for Jalalabad, from which it was envisaged 314 trained brothers would be produced.[159] At the time these documents were written, al-Qaida had already moved away from al-Masada and was establishing and looking to expand its training infrastructure in the Jalalabad region.[160] It was also looking to formalise its military work.[161] As a part of this process, al-Qaida recruited Abu Ayub - one of the first Arabs to establish a training camp in Jalalabad - to run its Jalalabad program.[162] The al-Qaida meeting that followed the Advisory Council meeting in late August was in reference to its planned recruitment and training efforts in Jalalabad.

Bin Laden's ultimate plans for these trained brothers were not listed in the documents but as his actions in the lead up to the Jalalabad battle make clear, his vision had become increasingly expansive. As the key Arab-Afghan agitating for Arab participation in the Battle of Jalalabad, bin Laden not only wanted to field al-Qaida in battle, but he also wanted it to have command over all other Arab-Afghan combat groups.[163] It would be this 'army' that bin Laden would return to Afghanistan to lead during the Battle of Jalalabad, which began in early 1989.

The Jalalabad Defeat

On February 15, 1989, the last Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan. The previous day, in anticipation of this event, the main Afghan resistance groups announced they had formed an Afghan Interim Government (AIG). Headed by Sibghatullah Mujaddidi as President and Sayyaf as Prime Minister, the AIG believed that without military support, the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul could quickly fall, and so began moving forward with a plan to attack on Jalalabad, where they intended to establish a provincial capital. In strategic terms, Jalalabad was not as important as Kabul, but it was closer to the mujahidin's rear supply base in Peshawar. Not all were supportive of the plan, although bin Laden had been an enthusiastic advocate. Neither the Afghans nor the Arabs were ready to undertake the type of warfare required to conquer Jalalabad. To take Jalalabad successfully required a force much larger than the mujahidin groups had traditionally fielded, and called for conventional warfare, which they lacked the capacity and expertise to undertake and coordinate.[164]

However, with the Soviets gone, hubris prevailed, and on 5 March 1989 the Battle began. It soon faltered and by May there was concern defeat was looming. Al-Qaida was not formally represented in these early stages of the Battle.[165] Indeed, it was not until May when bin Laden arrived to join the battle that al-Qaida officially entered the fray.[166] Alongside it were the Arab-Afghans, numbering in their hundreds and organised into combat groups that were also led by bin Laden, who according to al-Yamani, had cajoled and funded his way to convincing them to join al-Qaida's forces on the battlefield.[167] Al-Qaida emptied its camps and cancelled all other projects to support the Jalalabad campaign.[168] Among the groups that 'followed' al-Qaida into battle were elements from Azzam's MAK, the Egyptian Islamic Group (GI), both of which were closely aligned with Sayyaf, as well as EIJ, which followed al-Qaida into battle despite its high-profile criticisms of the AIG.[169]

There was strong dissent about Arab participation in the battle from some members of the Arab-Afghan community, who saw defeat looming.[170] Moreover, while bin Laden was an enthusiastic participant in the campaign, not all of al-Qaida's leadership supported its involvement. Abu Hafs, for example, objected to the campaign seeing defeat as the only likely outcome. He told Hamid that throughout the siege he "was expecting at any time a decisive attack by the enemy that would end the situation."[171] When Hamid asked Abu Hafs why he did not speak out about this situation, he replied "I am in the tanzim [organisation], I cannot."[172] Abu Hafs was right about the battle's outcome for al-Qaida. Over 2 days in July 1989 al-Qaida (and the groups it had led in battle) was badly defeated and forced into a withdrawal in which bin Laden was nearly captured as he ordered his forces into a hasty retreat.[173]

Hamid was one of the most outspoken of the critics of al-Qaida's Jalalabad campaign, although he was not alone.[174] He alleged, "what is happening in Jalalabad is a crime because Arab blood is being needlessly spilt there.…Had I been in charge, I would court martial Abu Abdullah, Abu Ubaydah and Abu Hafs."[175] He assessed the Arabs had "never accomplished anything considerable for the Afghans or themselves. Or [they] achieved for themselves incomplete things which will lead to disasters. The incomplete preparation of the personnel, the huge mental deficit will lead to self destruction for them and their movement."[176] He was certainly correct in his assessment of al-Qaida's fortunes.

The defeat at Jalalabad was a disaster for al-Qaida, and the Arab-Afghans more generally. There was a heavy loss of life, resulting in anger among the Arab Afghans. Bin Laden faced heavy criticism for his role in pushing for the campaign and for Arab-Afghan mujahidin to join him.[177] His refusal to accept responsibility generated further anger, especially when he left for Saudi Arabia without answering the questions asked of him.[178] Bin Laden's actions seriously affected his standing among the older generation Arab-Afghans.[179]

In the aftermath of its defeat al-Qaida's numbers also began to drop. Bin Laden had anticipated battlefield glory and an increase in al-Qaida's strength and fortunes but the opposite happened. All of the combat groups that had fought with al-Qaida left, with none joining the organisation.

Al-Qaida's core membership also suffered, particularly after bin Laden's fateful decision to prohibit his organisation from participating in any further combat - the very activity for which it was formed.[180] This decision saw al-Qaida's core numbers drop so severely that it was reduced to little more than several dozen

members. Those who had joined al-Qaida because bin Laden was seen as a strong victorious leader, left, as did those who had joined believing al-Qaida offered their best chance of participating in combat.[181]

In bin Laden's absence, al-Qaida's commanders turned their attention to military training. They tried to rebuild the group by establishing it as the pre-eminent training institution in Afghanistan.[182] However, few it seemed, wanted to join a defeated group that had all but withdrawn from conflict and restricted itself to training.[183] Despite their best efforts al-Qaida's commanders were unable to attract and/or retain recruits in any significant number, and by the time the group left for Sudan in early to mid-1992, it was reduced in number to around 50 persons.[184] The battle of Jalalabad thus marked a turning point for the organisation. In the space of a little more than two years, almost all of the gains al-Qaida had made since its establishment at al-Masada were lost.

Conclusion

This article has explored the circumstances leading to al-Qaida's 1987 emergence as a MAK splinter group and the first two or so years of its organisational history. It has clearly demonstrated that al-Qaida was already operating well before the 1988 minutes commonly believed to have marked its establishment were authored, and offered new context to the organisation's early evolution as well as that of MAK.

The article's exploration of al-Qaida's first few years has traced its organisational trajectory from a base, to a small training group, to an organisation, and finally, to an armed faction with combat groups under its command that all but disintegrated following its Jalalabad battlefield defeat. In doing so, it has identified features in al-Qaida and MAK's early evolution that are important to the study of militant Salafist groups more generally, in particular factors influencing the growth and decline of such groups.

As both MAK and al-Qaida's tumultuous early histories have shown, enthusiasm and money, a training location and weapons, an open front, and a charismatic leader do not necessarily attract volunteer youths or ensure an organisation's growth. Nor does media and *dawah* on its own. During this early period of its evolution al-Qaida had no doctrine or ideology that could be used to attract youths, and despite the media and *dawah* efforts of MAK, volunteers only began to arrive in significant numbers after al-Qaida's battlefield success at al-Masada. They came to al-Qaida in growing numbers after the Battle of Jaji because it was seen as powerful and victorious, and offered them the best access to combat opportunities.

These two factors - battlefield success and access to combat - drove al-Qaida's early growth. Their removal, following al-Qaida's defeat at Jalalabad and withdrawal from combat activities in Afghanistan, in turn caused the organisation's near catastrophic decline, in which it lost over three quarters of its core membership and all of its combat groups. The bitter lesson bin Laden learned in the aftermath of the Jalalabad defeat was that financial power, training camps and weapons, and a past history of success cannot repair popularity lost in defeat, particularly if there are no opportunities for combat. To attract youths in significant numbers a group must be seen as winning; it must be, as bin Laden would later remark, "the strong horse," and it must offer access to combat at an open front. It would be this lesson that drove bin Laden to carry out the 9/11 attacks, and to try to recreate al-Qaida's Jaji apogee at Tora Bora in 2001.[185] As has become apparent since the start of the Syrian conflict, it also had some bearing on how al-Qaida's current senior leadership, who lived through this early rise and fall of al-Qaida, have sought to pursue opportunities for development and growth in the Syrian jihad.

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Notes

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[2] The term Arab-Afghan refers to volunteers who traveled to join the Afghan jihad. It is often used to denote all foreign volunteers, including non-Arabs.

[3] Bin Laden reportedly travelled to Pakistan within weeks of the invasion and met with the leaders of the Jamaat e Islami mujahidin to hand over money for the Afghan mujahidin. See Essam Deraz, *The Lion's Den of Ansar, the Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, Undated. URL: Previously available at http://www.jehad.net/ansar.zip.

[4] Basil Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*. (Jeddah: House of Learning Printing Press Co., 1991 2n ed.), 49 (English translation).

[5]See "Al Qaeda 'Founding' Minutes," INTELWIRE, 1988; URL: http://intelfiles.egoplex.com/1988-08-11-al-qaeda-founding.pdf. These minutes were submitted as evidence in a 2003 court case. See Patrick Fitzgerald, "Government's Evidentiary Proffer Supporting the Admissibility of Co-conspirator Statements," *United States of America vs Enaam Arnaout, No 02 CR892, United States District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division* (January 6, 2003), 34-37.URL:

 http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/bif/usarnaout10603prof.pdf . See also Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2006), 130-36; Peter Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006),75-81; and National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Against the United States, "9/11 Commission Report," (Washington DC: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Against the United States, 2004), 467, n24-25.URL:

 http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf .

[6] Leah Farrall. "Reconsidering al Qaeda's Evolution: An examination of its organisational, doctrinal and ideological evolution." (Ph.D. Diss., 2011), 110.

[7] This primary material includes first-hand accounts, interviews, and written histories by those who were involved with the Afghan jihad and/or those who participated in it.

 [8] Wright, *The Looming Tower,* 101-102. This seems to be an interpretation drawn from selected excerpts from Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 31. According to Deraz, bin Laden's trip was at the behest of Azzam, who told him to "go to…Jaji…where Sheikh Sayyaf is." Sayyaf had a presence in the Jaji area and is reported by Muhammad to have kept a tent reserved for Arabs in a safe area at his base. See Deraz, *The Lion's Den of Ansar, the Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*; Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 31.

[9] Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 76-77.

[10] Ibid, 62, 65, 67, 70.

[11] *Dawah* means to invite or call back to Islam. It is the means via which people are invited to or called back to Allah.

[12] See, for example, the efforts carried out as part of the Qais camp initiative. Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 55-59.

[13] Ibid, 67.

[14] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 67.

[15] At this time in the conflict, funding streams had not formalised in the way they would after the establishment of MAK and the arrival of a number of charities and other organisations through which money was funnelled. The funding sources being discussed as part of this proposal were coming straight from the contact networks of those Arab-Afghans involved in the project. That is, they were direct funds, and not coming from government or charity funding streams.

[16] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 66.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid,67.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid, 68.

[22] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid, 69.

[26] Ibid. Haqqani did not take the first part of Hamid's report, which highlighted corruption issues that had the potential to cause conflict between the groups.

[27 Ibid. The military training would include Arabs and Afghans.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Hamid contends that also Sayyaf changed his mind to support the project because he could see it would happen anyway. Ibid,79.

[30] Azzam had already seen an early version of Hamid's report, and excerpts from it were later published in *Al-Jihad*. It is not clear if this was published under his name as the report was provided confidentially to Azzam's then secretary, with instructions that it was only for Azzam and not public distribution. Ibid, 69-70.

[31]Ibid, 78.

[32] Depending on interpretations, the number of MAK members holding executive positions could have been as high as ten, leaving only three workers. Muhammad. *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 49. According to Abu Musab al-Suri, in 1984 there were 12 mujahidin with Azzam, 25 in 1985 and less than 200 by mid-way through 1986. See Abu Musab al-Suri, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call,* 714; Previously available at URL: http://www.fsboa.com/vw/files/books/2005/mqdoc.zip . According to Hamid's account, at one point MAK had 30 members, with 15 of those serving on the consultation council. See Mustafa Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky*, 20. See also Anas cited in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 41.

[33] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 49.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid, 49, 80-84. This is because shortly after its founding, MAK members in Peshawar attended the Badr camp for military training. During training, MAK members formed into a brigade (The Badr Brigade), elements of which, along with some other Arab volunteers, were dispatched to various locations within Afghanistan. Owing to the inexperience of some MAK members, and the ad-hoc nature of the training, brigade casualties were high and several members were killed. The deployments were also quite long; some members did not return for six months. See Ismail, cited in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 26; Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 38-42, 81, 84.

[37] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 41, 57-58. See also Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky,* 20.

[38] Ibid, 81-85.

[39] Ibid, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 49.

[40]Ibid, 57-58. See also Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky,* 20.

[41] *Tarbiyyah* in this context means Islamic education, in the context of upbringing, or raising. *Tarbiyyah* programs or lessons in religious development are often carried out in a mosque. Until 1986, largely under Azzam's stewardship, MAK had a concentrated focus on *dawah* and *tarbiyyah* as the means through which funding could be obtained, and volunteers recruited, organised and supported once they arrived in in Pakistan. This would later expand into the provision of military training. See Abu Ubayd al-Qurashi, "The September 11 Raid: The Impossible Becomes Possible," (2002), 15-16; URL://www.slideshare.net/rmuslim1978/the-11-september-raid-the-impossible-becomes-possible-by-abu-ubayd-al-qirshi Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky,* 19; Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 80. See also Yusuf al-Uyayri, "An Open Letter to Sheikh Safar Al-Hawali ," (2001) Previously available at URL: http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=trrei4g6 .

[42] Anas commented on the non–military support role played by the majority of MAK's members, and noted that even at its peak only 10 percent of MAK's membership was directly involved in military activities. See Anas in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 41. Ismail also comments on MAK's function becoming like a Non Governmental Organisation by 1987. See Ismail in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 63.

[43] The community centres were also called Religious Institutes and run by the religious council. See Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 84.

[44] Drawn from information contained in al-Qurashi, "The September 11 Raid: The Impossible Becomes Possible."; Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky,* 24; and Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*.

[45] It can be seen in Azzam's early efforts to bring the Afghan leaders together for *tarbiyyah* 'training.' The *tarbiyyah* training appears to have been focused on religious instruction in relation to jihad and the establishment of an Islamic state. For an account of training see Mustafa Hamid, *The Rock Gate Battles* (2006), 233-34, and Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 49.

[46] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan,* 81-84.

[47] Ibid, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 39.

[48] Ibid, 81-84. See also Ismail in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 63; and Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky*, 19, 22.

[49] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 81-85.

[50] Ibid.

[51] For details of earlier training at the Badr camp, see Ibid, 38-42. For details of training at the Qais camp see Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 55-59.

[52] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 82-83.

[53] Ibid, 83.

[54] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 81, 85, 87 92, 95. See also Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 83.

[55] Azzam spent much of his time providing lectures and lessons, which would also be included in a training regime for MAK volunteers when its Sadda camp program was established. See Ibid, 49.

[56 For separate accounts of the poor levels of preparation of the trainees and the Afghans not allowing them to train, see Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 71-75. See also Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 84.

[57] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 84.

[58] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 84-85,87. See also Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky,* 22-23.

[59] See Tamim al-Adnani's comments in Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 85. See also Rushdi cited in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 68.

[60] Bin Laden scouted other locations including Sadda, Khost and Jalalabad before he established al-Masada. See Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 84-85. See also Huthayfah Azzam in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 62.

[61] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan,* 84-85.

[62] Ibid. See also the comments of Julaidan and Ismail in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 62-63.

[63] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 83-84.

[64] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 78, 87, 89.

[65] Ibid, 89-90.

[66] They would stay through the winter with him, working on construction. Ibid, 87, 89, 90, 93; Deraz, *The Lion's Den of Ansar, the Arab Supporters in Afghanistan.*

[67] Both Deraz and Muhammad suggest bin Laden's initial proposal was to construct a series of fortifications along the border and in the Al-Areen area to assist the mujahidin. Bin Laden's assertion that he sought 'permission' may have in reality been more akin to his insistence. See Deraz, *The Lion's Den of Ansar, the Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*; Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky,* 49, 69; and Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 89, 90, 93, 98-99.

[68] While there were a number of other battles of greater consequence to the Afghan jihad, and which can be said to have gained more attention at the time, such as the Khost Battles, Masoud's exploits in the Panjshir, and the 1989 Jalalabad battle, the Jaji battle

has arguably become more broadly famous owing to its link to al-Qaida.

[69] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 76-78.

[70] bid, 77.

[71] Ibid, 77.

[72] Ibid, 78.

[73] Ibid, 76.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid, 77.

[76] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan,* 89-100. While Deraz's work provides a useful account of the activities at al-Masada, Muhammad's book is utilised extensively here, because in addition to outlining activities, it also highlights the differences of opinion among the Arab-Afghans regarding al-Masada.

[77] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan,* 90.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid. An after action report authored by al-Banshiri after the 1987 Jaji battles and later provided to Mustafa Hamid shows the camps' leadership had no intention of handing the camp over to the Afghans. Al-Banshiri wrote to bin Laden that "the presence of Afghan groups would be only for guarding the perimeters of al-Masada." See Hamid, *The Rock Gate Battles,* 260.

[80] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan,* 92, 96.

[81] Ibid, 89-90.

[82] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 92-93.

[83] Ibid, 92-93, 95. See also Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 97-100.

[84] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 97-100.

[85] Ibid, 91-92, 96, 98, 100-101.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid, 97-100.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid., 92, 96.

[91] Ibid., 103-104. See also Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 93.

[92] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 95.

[93] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 97-100.

[94] Ibid. See also Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 95.

[95] Ibid. Hamid recalls there were several meetings held in Islamabad. Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 95. The meeting cited here is the one that is also referenced in Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan,* 97-100.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan,* 97-100.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Bin Laden had argued that it was strategically important. The other priorities included securing Khost or participating in other fronts. See Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 89-100. See also Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky,* 22-23; and Hamid, *The Rock Gate Battles,* 345-46.

[100] Amin al-Haq, quoted in Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 97.

[101] Mustafa Hamid offered an interesting explanation as to why bin Laden continued with his plans in the face of such opposition, saying:

'Abu Abdullah [bin Laden] became stronger in his will when he was opposed by the mainstream; this made him feel like he was right, and he insisted to continue his way. Jaji was a prime example of this, because most of the people around him told him it was not a good idea to establish a permanent base there but he insisted on continuing. When they then won the Jaji battle in 1987, Abu Abdullah became certain of his way'. - Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 96.

[102] Hamid, *The Rock Gate Battles*, 241-42.

[103[Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 98-99. See also Hamid, *The Rock Gate Battles,* 241-42.

[104] Ibid.

[105] The group is also known as Tanzim al-Jihad, the Jihad Organisation. Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 99.

[106] Ibid., 95-97. Both had initially planned to return to Khost, but instead remained with bin Laden at al-Masada.

[107] "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 100," in *Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda*. Intelwire Press. Kindle Edition, Location 528-533.

[108] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 95-96, 101-102. Although the listing of six camps suggests that al-Masada was a highly developed complex, the camps were rudimentary.

[109] Sadda had by that time graduated its first course, which consisted of a two-month training program. Ibid., 98.

[110] Ibid., 96.

[111] Ibid., 103-04. This problem was not isolated to al-Masada; it was a problem facing MAK too. The youth were also seeking *agir* (rewards) that came from combat, believing them to be higher than non-combat related activities.

[112] Al-Banshiri was dismayed by the lack of discipline and unruly nature of al-Masada's recruits. Ibid., 103-04.

[113] Hamid, *The Rock Gate Battles*, 241. See also Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 103-06.

[114] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 106. The trainees also disobeyed bin Laden in his absence, by pressuring inexperienced commanders to launch a series of skirmishes.

[115] Ibid., 103-106. See also Hamid, *The Rock Gate Battles,* 241.

[116] Bin Laden's decision to expel a Shia Afghan commander from Jaji was also done as a result of the Salafi youth around him at the time. Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 102. See also p.104 and p.301 for other examples.

[117] Ibid., 105-106.

[118] For descriptions of this agreement see, Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 97-100. This was part of the broader strategy of reducing the damage bin Laden could do, which included earlier agreements and discussions among key Arab-Afghans. See also Hamid, *The Rock Gate Battles,* 241-42. The first graduates of Sadda who went to al-Masada nearly all died there.

[119] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan*, 85. Abu Burhan trained them on mortars and rocket launchers.

[120] The assault lasted for around three weeks. Deraz, *The Lion's Den of Ansar, the Arab Supporters in Afghanistan.*

[121] Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 122-24.

[122] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 100.

[123] Ibid., 133-137.

[124] Ayman Sabri Farag, *Memoirs of an Afghan Arab: Abu Jafar Al-Masri Al-Kandahari,* 28-29.

File no longer available: previously retrieved from URL: http://www.4shared.com/file/131645895/50da1395/Memories_of_Arab_Afghans.html

[125] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 122.

[126] Ibid., 115-116. See also Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 21; Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010 ; and Muhammad Mustafa Abu Shama, "The Future of Conflict in Afghanistan (the First Episode): Dr. Fadl, Founder of Al-Jihad Writes About the Complete Story of the Birth of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan." *Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 25, 2010; URL: http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=554311&issueno=11381 .

[127] Ibid.

[128] According to Santos, an early al-Qaida member, disorganisation was rife. He recollected "[i]n our group, there wasn't a well-defined hierarchy, we were rather disorganised; you could give a try to whatever entered into your head." See Santos in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 119-120.

[129] For an account of al-Banshiri as the amir of al-Qaida's military council, see Hamid, *Betrayal on the Road,* 65.

[130] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 115.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid., 105. Jalalabad had also been an area of longstanding focus for bin Laden. Before identifying Jaji as the location for a training base, bin Laden had also considered Jalalabad. See Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 15, 2010; and Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 84.

[134] This is visible in al-Qaida documentation, often referred to as 'Al-Qaida's founding documents,' or 'minutes', which are discussed in further detail in the following section.

[135] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 123.

[136] Ibid.; Hamid, *Betrayal on the Road,* 65; Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Hamid notes that al-Qaida was by then the largest Arab group on the scene and was renowned for the achievement at Jaji, so it was logical that he should have the nominal title of amir of all Arabs. Mustafa al-Yamani also writes of bin Laden's position; see Mustafa al-Yamani, "Conflict within the Arab Leaders, Peshawar," *Afghanistan, Memories of the Occupation*; Previously available at URL: http://tokhaleej.jeeran.com/archive/2008/6/597601.html.

[139] See Hamid, *Betrayal on the Road,* 65, 89-90. See also Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 15, 2010; Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010. These names can also be seen on the selected Peshawar Advisory Council notes, for example "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 127 - 127a," in Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda (Kindle Location 236). Intelwire Press. Kindle Edition. See also "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 93" in Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda (Kindle Location 281).

[140] Hamid, *Betrayal on the Road,* 65, 89-90; Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010. Al-Yamani also writes of bin Laden's position; al-Yamani, "Conflict within the Arab Leaders, Peshawar," See also the mention of bin Laden (Abu Abdullah) as amir in early Advisory Council documentation that pre-dates the August minutes, "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 93" in Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda (Kindle Location 281).

[141] Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010.

[142] Ibid.

[143] See Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?*, 21; Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010.

[144] Ibid. See also al-Yamani, "Conflict within the Arab Leaders, Peshawar."

[145] At this time Abdul Aziz Ali, another key Arab-Afghan figure had also started trying to establish his own training program at Warsak. See Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 133. See also "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 91," in *Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda*, Kindle Location 312

[146] Hamid, *Betrayal on the Road,* 65. Al-Banshiri at that time was the amir of three military committees/councils. These were the Tanzim al-Jihad, al-Qaida, and the Peshawar Council's military committees. See Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010.

[147] According to Hamid, this was a common tactic used when key figures did not agree with decisions being made, or were coming under criticism. See Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010.

[148] For the minutes, see "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 127 - 127a," in Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda (Kindle Location 230). For these being believed to mark the second part of the founding of al-Qaida, see Fitzgerald, "Government's Evidentiary Proffer Supporting the Admissibility of Co-conspirator Statements," *United States of America vs Enaam Arnaout, No 02 CR892,* 34-37. See also Wright, *The Looming Tower,* 131-36; Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's*

Leader, 75-81; and National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Against the United States, "9/11 Commission Report," 467, n24-25.

[149] For a longer more detailed explanation of these documents see Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 108-111.

[150] See, for example, "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 128-135," and "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 127 - 127a," in Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda.

[151] See Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010. For bin Laden's influence on Saudi aid see Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 21.

[152] Ibid. See also Muhammad, *Arab Supporters in Afghanistan*, 97.

[153] Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010. See also the comments of Essam al-Ridda, where he notes he was an early objector to relying on the financial power of bin Laden for reasons of his consequent ability to dominate decision making; in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 44. Al-Yamani's memoir also supports this contention. See al-Yamani, "Differences with Bin Laden and the Killing of Sheikh Jamil," and al-Yamani, "Preparation for the Jalalabad Battle by Osama Bin Laden," in *Afghanistan, Memories of the Occupation.*

[154] See for example, Fitzgerald, "Government's Evidentiary Proffer Supporting the Admissibility of Co-conspirator Statements," *United States of America vs Enaam Arnaout, No 02 CR892*, 34-37. See also Wright, *The Looming Tower*, 131-36; Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 75-81; and National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Against the United States, "9/11 Commission Report," 467, n.24-25.

[155] '[Al-Qaeda "Founding" Minutes]', p. 1; URL: http://intelfiles.egoplex.com/1988–08–11-al-Qaeda-founding.pdf. For the original Arabic, see page 3 of the document. For a discussion in relation to this mistranslation, see Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 109.

[156] '[Al-Qaeda "Founding" Minutes]', p. 1

[157] "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 127 - 127a," in Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda (Kindle Location 250). Intelwire Press. Kindle Edition. While these were separate phases, and graduates of Sadda were to go to the Afghan fronts and be supervised by the Peshawar Council Military Committee, al-Qaida's intent to tap into this recruit stream is clear in this document and in the collection as a whole.

[158]Hamid contends that even if al-Qaida was successful in doing so, it would have only been for a short time, explaining that the activities of the Peshawar Military Council amounted to little, which he knew from firsthand experience after dealing with it to try to secure support for his own military project in Khost in 1988. Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 121.

[159] "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 122 – 123"; in Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda (Kindle Location 158).

[160] Huthayfah Azzam's comments show the time frame for the Jalalabad program to be correct. See Huthayfah Azzam in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader*, 62.

[161]Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010.

[162] For details of Abu Ayub's involvement in that arena see Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 70. See also "Finding aid: Tareekh Osama 127 - 127a," Beatings and Bureaucracy: The Founding Memos of Al Qaeda (Kindle Location 266), and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 31, 2010; and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, June 6, 2010.

[163] See al-Yamani, "Preparation for the Jalalabad Battle by Osama Bin Laden." Interestingly, al-Yamani also argues the Afghan groups assembled "symbolic force" to appease bin Laden, who was encouraging their participation in his May offensive by offering them money, which they were increasingly reliant upon as other sources began to dry up in the changing climate after the Soviet withdrawal.

[164] Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan: The Bear Trap* (South Yorkshire: Leo Cooper, 1992), 226-231. See Hamid's reservations on the campaign; Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?*, 109. See also Al-Yamani who criticises the capabilities of al-Qaida and bin Laden and its poor planning and inexperience in anything other than guerrilla warfare. See al-Yamani, "Preparation for the Jalalabad Battle by Osama Bin Laden."

[165] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 147. Some members of al-Qaida had been involved but it was not organizationally represented until bin Laden's return.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Al-Yamani recalls funding was drying up from the Pakistanis and others, which also "forced some Afghan leaders to submit to Osama's decision." He also recounts that bin Laden's attempts to rally the troops were being promoted like a commercial. The

obvious security implications of this, where word had travelled to Saudi Arabia, meant the Afghan government (Najibullah) was no doubt aware of the forthcoming effort. The number of Arab-Afghans here excludes the Pakistani groups, who also participated. See al-Yamani, "Preparation for the Jalalabad Battle by Osama Bin Laden."

[168] Only administrative personnel remained as al-Qaida turned its total attention to Jalalabad. See Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 58-59.

[169] Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 58-59, 70, 73. It is interesting to note that the EIJ willingly sought to participate in this battle despite being part of the current that considered Mujaddidi, the head of the AIG, an apostate, and criticising Azzam--as well as what Hamid terms was EIJ's "general opposition to what was happening in Afghanistan." See Ibid, 13-19, 73, 147-148. The main reason for the EIJ's participation was to ensure continued access to bin Laden's finance. See Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan, 99,* 154-155. See also Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 15, 2010.

[170] By the time al-Qaida and the groups that followed joined the fighting in May, the battle had been going for close to two months, and the Afghans were already encountering problems. See Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan*, 146-148. Some figures were also critical of al-Qaida's incitement of volunteers from all currents to join the campaign, and in particular bin Laden's manipulation of the volunteers' desire for martyrdom. See al-Yamani, "Preparation for the Jalalabad Battle by Osama Bin Laden."; Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 59-60, 67, 93-94; and Hamid, Personal Correspondence, May 15, 2010.

[171] Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 59. Abu Hafs had first-hand experience of what it would be like for al-Qaida and the Arab-Afghans, having joined Sayyaf and his forces at the outset of the battle in March, and according to Hamid, he refused to return to fight with al-Qaida when it entered the battle in May. He instead stayed in Peshawar. See Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 148-149. Abu Hafs recounted that when he was in Peshawar senior mujahidin confronted him with a harsh critique of al-Qaida's participation in the battle. Conceding he had no authority over the matter Abu Hafs told them to take the matter up with bin Laden. Several did, including Hamid, but to no avail. See Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 59-61.

[172] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 149.

[173] Ibid.,150.

[174] Al Yamani's memoir details widespread anger at al-Qaida among the Arab-Afghans. See al-Yamani, "Differences with Bin Laden and the Killing of Sheikh Jamil."

[175] Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?*, 94.

[176] He likened the Jalalabad campaign to the pied piper because it led the youth to an untimely fate. Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?*,108, 110. See also page 86 where Hamid recalls he was so disgruntled he left the Afghan arena and travelled to the UAE.

[177] al-Yamani, "Preparation for the Jalalabad Battle by Osama Bin Laden."

[178] Ibid. Al-Yamani's account shows that bin Laden deflected responsibility and refused to accept the criticisms levelled at him.

[179] Ibid.

[180] Some cadre did participate in small clashes, according to Hamid. However, the Jalalabad battle was the last battle in which al-Qaida formally participated. See Hamid, *Big Folly or Goat's War?,* 21-22. Some al-Qaida members were allowed to travel to fight with Mustafa Hamid in Khost in 1990, but this appears to have been done without bin Laden's permission, as he was in Saudi Arabia at the time. The numbers were also small; less than 10. See Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 118-119, 159. According to al-Yamani, bin Laden later refused to support a campaign against Kabul; see al-Yamani, "Differences with Bin Laden and the Killing of Sheikh Jamil."

[181] In 1990, when Mustafa Hamid asked for al-Qaida to send him some recruits to assist him with his campaign in Khost, the organisation had less than 10 'spare' recruits to send. He recalled asking Sayf al-Adl why al-Qaida could not provide more people and was told that this was all the people it had at that time. The reason Sayf provided for the further drop in numbers after the Jalalabad defeat was that the EIJ also separated from al-Qaida at this time, further depriving it of trainers and 'members' who in the early stages of the group's evolution had dual membership across the groups, until the EIJ's separation. Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 118, 159.

[182] Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 159.

[183] By 1991, al-Qaida's recruit numbers had grown to around 60. Highly trained, they were also allowed to travel to join Hamid in Gardez, where he was coordinating the Arabs at the front and had requested extra support from al-Qaida. The al-Qaida group ultimately did not see combat, however, as Gardez had surrendered before their preparations for their planned participation in the campaign were completed. See Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan,* 85, 125,159,178, 191. Al-Qaida members at the time did claim to have participated in combat at Gardez. See Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 29.

[184] See Hamid, *Cross over Kandahar Sky,* 47, 279. See also Shama, "The Future of Conflict in Afghanistan (the First Episode): Dr. Fadl, Founder of Al-Jihad Writes About the Complete Story of the Birth of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan."

[185] Farrall. "Reconsidering al Qaeda's Evolution: An examination of its organisational, doctrinal and ideological evolution." (Ph.D. Diss., 2011), 513.

Al-Qaida and the Pakistani Harakat Movement: Reflections and Questions about the pre-2001 Period

by Don Rassler

Abstract

There has been a modest amount of progress made over the last two decades in piecing together the developments that led to creation of al-Qaida and how the group has evolved over the last 30 years. Yet, there are still many dimensions of al-Qaida that remain understudied, and likely as a result, poorly understood. One major gap are the dynamics and relationships that have underpinned al-Qaida's multi-decade presence in Pakistan. The lack of developed and foundational work done on the al-Qaida-Pakistan linkage is quite surprising given how long al-Qaida has been active in the country, the mix of geographic areas - from Pakistan's tribal areas to its main cities - in which it has operated and found shelter, and the key roles Pakistani al-Qaida operatives have played in the group over the last two decades. To push the ball forward and advance understanding of this critical issue, this article examines what is known, and has been suggested, about al-Qaida's relations with a cluster of Deobandi militant groups consisting of Harakat ul-Mujahidin, Harakat ul-Jihad Islami, Harakat ul-Ansar, and Jaish-e-Muhammad, which have been collectively described as Pakistan's Harakat movement, prior to 9/11. It finds that each of these groups and their leaders provided key elements of support to al-Qaida in a number of direct and indirect ways.

Keywords: al-Qaida, Harakat ul-Jihad Islami, Harakat ul-Mujahidin, Harakat ul-Ansar, aish-e-Muhammad, Osama bin Laden, Masood Azhar, Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil

Introduction

Before venturing into Afghanistan to assist the Afghan mujahidin during their conflict with the Soviets, Osama bin Laden reached out to leaders of the Pakistani Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami to get a sense of the landscape and how he could help. Close to two decades later the architect of the 9/11 attacks, a Pakistani by the name of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, monitored news of the dramatic plot he had planned in his operational home base in Pakistan's port city of Karachi. More than a decade after that, bin Laden's Pakistani courier - who used the nom de guerre Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti - led the Central Intelligence Agency to the al-Qaida chief's compound in Abbottabad, the same town that is home to Pakistan's military academy. Despite these data points, and al-Qaida Core's continued presence in Pakistan over multiple decades, the Pakistani dimension of al-Qaida is a phenomenon that remains understudied and poorly understood.

A number of factors help to explain why this is the case. First, the scale, complexity, and ever-evolving nature of Pakistan's fractious Sunni militant landscape, and the lightly documented histories of many Pakistani militant groups, can make study of the issue seem daunting. The sensitivity associated with researching an issue that touches on sensitive Pakistani state intelligence matters, like the country's historical and in some cases on-going support for various militant proxies that have ties to al-Qaida, also means that - at least for some researchers, especially those who live in the region - the task is not without its share of risk.[1] The likely diversity of al-Qaida's ties to different types of actors in Pakistan, from military and intelligence officials (or third parties entities who intentionally work on their behalf) [2] to private citizens, militant group leaders [3], and members of religio-political groups [4] compound these problems and enhance the scope of the issue to be studied. In sum, investigations into the Pakistani dimension of al-Qaida can both be complicated and quite messy.

To manage some of these challenges and provide insight into the topic, the present effort examines the ties al-Qaida had with one type of actor (Sunni militant groups) prior to September 11, 2001. Scaling down even further, it specifically focuses on examining the relations al-Qaida had with four Pakistani militant groups that emerged as breakaway factions or splinter entities from the same parent group. This collection of groups, which are referred to throughout this paper as the Pakistani Harakat movement, are Harakat ul-Jihad Islami (HuJI),

Harakat ul-Ansar (HuA), Harakat ul-Mujahidin (HuM), and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM). These groups were intentionally selected as a locus of study because collectively they constitute one major faction of Pakistan's Sunni jihadist militant milieu. These four groups also have shared histories and ideological orientations, and overlapping and integrated ties. All at one point or another, similar to the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, have also enjoyed patronage from the Pakistani state.[5] And, as this article will show, over the course of their respective histories each of these entities, or key members of these groups, have provided support to al-Qaida in a variety of ways. At times, this support has been visible, but mostly it has occurred quietly in the background. Thus, in addition to placing various data points that speak to the nature of pre-9/11 al-Qaida Pakistani Harakat ties in one place, this article aims to form an initial impression of those ties, and raise questions about them.

Foundations and Battlefield Bonds

Throughout the 1980s the battlefields of Afghanistan were key to the early operational development of HuJI, HuM, and al-Qaida, as well as other militant groups. Throughout that decade, and during the one that followed, Afghanistan functioned as a veritable melting pot where a diversity of interests, individuals, and networks intermingled, cooperated, and competed with one another. And while the early histories of HuJI, HuM, and al-Qaida are in many ways a complex - and in the case of HuJI and HuM a poorly understood - affair, enough is known to state that the battlefields of southeastern Afghanistan were key to the early and continued operational development of each of these three groups.

The foundation stories of each of these organizations, however, demonstrate how even though these three groups had similar experiences and emerged out of the same general orbit in Afghanistan, the conditions and partnerships that led to their creation and early operational development, were also quite different. HuJI, for example, was founded in 1979 by Maulana Irshad Ahmed, and over the course of the 1980s-1990s the group maintained a relationship with Harakatul Inqalab Islami, an Afghan mujahidin party led by Maulvi Mohammed Nabi Mohammedi.[6] Not much is known about HuJI's early operational ties, but the group is believed to have operated in partnership with Arslan Khan Rehmani - one of Mohammedi's commanders. [7] Some noteworthy HuJI commanders, like Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil, also had close relations with Jalaluddin Haqqani and Maulvi Yunis Khalis.[8] HuM was created in 1984, as a result of a leadership dispute that emerged after Maulana Irshad was killed in Afghanistan earlier that year.[9] As noted by Muhammad Amir Rana, "Maulana Qari Saifullah [Akhtar] was made the new Ameer [of HuJI] but some groups did not agree to his leadership."[10] This included Maulana Masood Alvi, who founded HuM along with Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil and Saifullah Shaukat.[11] It is believed that HuM "commenced jehadi activities under the leadership of Jalaluddin Haqqani."[12] Al-Qaida was founded in 1987, and prior to that date the individuals who would go on to militarily lead the group also participated in key battles in southeastern Afghanistan, many also in partnership with Jalaluddin Haqqani.[13]

One early glimpse into the operational collaboration that was taking place at the time between Jalaluddin Haqqani, HuM, and small Arab fighting groups comes from an article published by *The Times* in March 1988. The article describes a 12 hour-long assault commanded by Jalaluddin Haqqani against an outpost defended by Afghan forces near Khost that occurred that month.[14] Remi Favret, a French journalist who participated in the assault and recounted the tale to *The Times*, noted how Haqqani's fighters were "aided by Saudi, Egyptian, and Pakistani fighters."[15] And how "it was a very daring attack… the Arabs played a very important part in it. The Pakistanis too were very good. They were mostly Pakistanis of the Harakat al-Mujahidin, and they led the assault."[16]

While al-Qaida's participation in the historic 1991 battle for Khost in southeastern Afghanistan "appears to have been minimal,"[17] several HuM commanders were killed during the assault.[18] HuM fighters also participated in the mujahidin's assault on Gardez later that year [19], a battle which involved more substantial al-Qaida participation.[20]

The alliances that al-Qaida and Harakat groups had with the Taliban facilitated the direct military and

operational support that both groups would provide to the Taliban during the latter part of the 1990s, as the Afghan group sought to expel and defeat Ahmed Shah Masood, as well as other anti-Taliban elements. [21] Internal al-Qaida documents point to the support al-Qaida provided to the Taliban during this period, and the specific roles played by individuals like Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, who served as al-Qaida's Kabul front commander.[22] The military assistance Harakat groups provided to the Taliban prior to 9/11 is reflected in the background and organisational affiliation of prisoners held by the Taliban's primary battlefield rival - the Northern Alliance. For example, during the 1999-2000 period Julie Sirrs conducted interviews in Afghanistan with 113 prisoners held by the Northern Alliance.[23] Ninety-two percent of those prisoners were Pakistanis, and 46 percent of those who provided an organisational affiliation said that they were associated with one of the main Pakistani Harakat groups.[24] The gravestones of Pakistani Harakat fighters who died in Afghanistan during the late 1990s similarly substantiate Harakat military participation with the Taliban.[25] The presence of Harakat members on the Taliban's front lines is also confirmed by the number of Harakat member deaths that occurred during the initial days and months after the US invasion of Afghanistan. According to Imtiaz Gul, "HuJI lost as many as 340, HuM lost 79, JeM [Jaish-e-Muhammad] 36, and LeJ [Laskhar-e-Jhangvi] 27 in the coalition attacks."[26]

An internal al-Qaida document from November 1997 speaks of battlefield cooperation between al-Qaida's Kabul front and Harakat groups on the Taliban's front lines. As noted by Anne Stenersen, in the document Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi "discusses withdrawing the Arabs from Murad Beg and concentrating all the forces in Bagram. He says, if the Arabs and Harakat ul-Jihad ul-Islami (HuJI) put their forces together they can form "an appropriate sized group (its number is expected to be around 20 brothers."[27] The same document, however, also speaks to "petty day-to-day challenges" and points of frustration between al-Qaida and Harakat fighters, as they sought to work out the mechanics of their operational partnership.[28] As other evidence revealed in this article will show, those frustrations were not enough to limit the more strategic forms of assistance that HuM and HuJI would provide to al-Qaida in the years that would follow.

The International Network and Extra-Regional Affairs of Harakat Entities

The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan at the close of the 1980s led to the further fracturing and radicalisation of the local and regional Sunni militant scene. A key point of debate and friction revolved around the question of 'what comes next', and specifically what territories and countries should be defended or targeted by campaigns of political violence. For the state of Pakistan, this meant continuing strategic, operational, and logistics support for select Afghan mujahidin parities/leaders; leveraging the skills and know-how gained by Pakistani militant groups - and re-directing that energy towards the fight in Kashmir; and maintaining training facilities in Afghanistan so those bases could be used to support the country's regional and strategic objectives. The decisions made by Pakistan in this regard had a direct impact on HuJI and HuM, which were supported by Pakistan and functioned throughout the 1990s as its proxies. And while Afghanistan and the conflict in Kashmir have always been primary areas of focus for HuJI and HuM, the actions and behavior of the Pakistani Harakat entities during the 1990s also showed the other extra-regional ambitions of these groups, and how their interests and operational footprint extended well beyond Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir.

This specifically included the involvement of HuM and HuJI operatives in Bosnia, the Philippines, Chechnya, and Tajikistan [29], and the recruitment of, and training provided for, foreign volunteers from around the globe, to include Westerners, by these groups. For example, HuJI activists "fought in Bosnia arriving in 1992 and in Tajikistan."[30] The group also had Amirs for Burma and Uzbekistan, and a leader designated for Chechnya too.[31] Further, as noted by Amir Mir, "In the 1990s, many members of the HuM travelled to the southern Philippines as preachers and trained the cadres of the Abu Sayyaf and the MILF [Moro Islamic Liberation Front], and participated in their operations against the Philippine security forces."[32] The potential for these types of HuM 'deployments' to Philippines was certainly plausible, as there is evidence that during the 1990s HuM hosted and trained Philippine fighters at its camps in Afghanistan.[33] It is also worth noting that HuM's presence and investment in the Philippines, and the support it is believed to have provided to Abu Sayyaf and the MILF, transpired during a period when Bin Laden and al-Qaida were also interacting with, and providing

support to, these two groups.[34]

Now to be clear, just because HuJI and HuM had established relationships and footprints abroad - some of it in locations that overlapped with areas in which al-Qaida had connections or was active - does not mean that there was organizational or operational overlap between Harakat groups and al-Qaida outside of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. But, there are areas where HuJI's and HuM's international activity – and the activity of its group members – raises some questions, and where broader cooperation between al-Qaida and the Harakat groups might have taken place.

Azhar's African Adventures – Signs of a Deeper Partnership?

In additional to potential operational overlap between HuM and al-Qaida in the Philippines, one questionable area revolves around Masood Azhar, and the trips and role he is alleged to have played in Africa, principally in Somalia, during the early 1990s. Primary source evidence places Azhar in Somalia during the same period when al-Qaida deployed key operatives such as Saif al-Adl, Abu Hafs al-Masri, and Saif al-Islam to seek out safe-haven areas and to train local Somali units.[35] While not a definitive link, reports received by the United Nations at the time spoke to the presence of advisors and fighters from around the globe and how Osama bin Laden had been seen at the "Ali-Jihad base…established at Ras Kiamboni… along with "many Afghans and Pakistanis."[36] Data points like this suggest, but do not prove, that al-Qaida and Harakat operatives might have been cooperating with one another locally in the country.

According to Indian government interrogation files of Azhar and a diary the Pakistani militant leader penned while in Indian custody (from 1994-1999), Azhar "traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, in 1993 to meet with leaders of the Somalian group Al-Ittihad al-Islamiya. Azhar said the Somalis asked for assistance and got recruits and money from the ranks" of Harakat ul Ansar.[37] Azhar had reportedly been sent to the country on the orders of Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil, who after the merger of HuJI and HuM to form Harakat ul-Ansar (HuA) in June 1993 would serve as HuA's leader.[38] Indian intelligence officials also believed there was a connection between Azhar and the Yemen-based al-Qaida-affiliated militant Tariq Nasir Fadhli, who was a suspect in "two December 1992 hotel bombings in Yemen that targeted U.S. Marines headed for Somalia."[39]

Ahmed Rashid also claims that: "After President Clinton deployed troops to Somalia in 1993, Azhar was credited with teaching Somalian warlords how to trim the fins on their rocket propelled grenades so they would explode in midair and bring down US helicopters."[40] American helicopter pilots who flew missions in Somalia during Operation Restore Hope have corroborated that Somali fighters used this tactic, but there are a lack of details that tie Azhar - and the potential instruction he provided - to the incident.[41] The roles Azhar has played throughout his career, and the reputation he has developed as being an orator, writer, and ideologue, and much less of an operational tactician or experienced fighter, does not lend credence to the view that Azhar personally provided this type of tactical advice.[42] If Azhar was involved in this type of tactical knowledge transfer, it seems more plausible that he might have been the individual who oversaw or facilitated the effort.

Even more speculative and less well-sourced accounts suggest that Masood Azhar's interaction with al-Qaida was deeper during the early 1990s, and extended beyond cooperation taking place in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and overlapping presence in Somalia. For example, as noted by Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, there "is also an unsubstantiated rumor that Masood Azhar followed Bin Laden to the Sudan."[43] According to Muhammad Amir Rana, "two secret meetings between Maulana Masood Azhar and Osama bin Laden" occurred around this time: "The first was held in Kenya and the second in Masjid-e-Nabvi (Prophet's Mosque in Saudi Arabia) in 1994, where the two went in disguise."[44] Two secondary sources also suggest that the interaction between Bin Laden and Azhar at this time revolved around there being an interest in bringing "the mujahdeen of Harkatul Ansar directly under al Qaeda network."[45] That potential interest leading to that outcome has never been established, however. Details that Bin Laden shared with Robert Fisk during an interview conducted in 1997 in Afghanistan suggests that such an arrangement, or a more formal alliance, between al-Qaida and JeM might not have been so far-fetched, as while being interviewed Bin Laden made it a

point to stress "how he had now secured the support of thousands of Pakistanis for his jihad - holy war - against US troops in the Gulf."[46] Given the lack of sources that speak to the issue, it is hard to evaluate whether Bin Laden's statement is a reference to the support Pakistani clerics provided for Bin Laden's 1996 fatwa or if Bin Laden actually had the support of thousands of Pakistani militants as a result of some type of operational arrangement.

Targeting and the Legacy of Harakat's Diverse Membership and Open

Infrastructure

Another area that raises questions was the intentional recruitment and training of citizens from countries outside South Asia, especially Western nations, by Harakat entities - and operations that targeted Westerners, which Harakat groups, Harakat members, or Harakat splinter groups, conducted prior to 9/11. HuJI's and HuM's open door approach to recruitment and training helped to internationalize the Kashmir jihad and further globalize the conflict in Afghanistan during the 1990s. These dynamics largely transpired in plain sight and occurred during a period when Harakat groups were supported by Pakistan's state institutions. In the decade that followed HuM's and HuJI's international approach to recruitment and the accessibility of its training infrastructure would also be tied to key terror events that targeted or otherwise impacted the West.

A leaked interrogation transcript of Azhar reveals how the Binori Town seminary in Karachi served as a key feeder and place of recruitment for HuM and HuJI, including foreign students studying there. As noted by Azhar, "Jamia Islamia had on its rolls Arab nationals, Sudanese and Bangladeshis, apart from Pakistanis. All of them believed in the Deobandi ideology, and many were recruited for the Afghan jehad."[47] Other sources confirm the diverse nature of HuJI's and HuM's membership rosters, and how the groups trained recruits from around the world to fight in Afghanistan and against Indian security forces in Kashmir. For example, HuJI's publications claimed that prior to 2004 at least 650 of its fighters "were killed in battle against the Indian army: 190 belonged to both sides of Kashmir, nearly 200 belonged to Punjab, 49 to Sindh, 29 to Balochistan, 70 to Afghanistan, 5 to Turkey, and 49 collectively to Uzbekistan, Bangladesh and the Arab world."[48] An article written by Masood Azhar for the December 1991 issue of *Sada-e-Mujahid* provided an overview of a trip that Azhar made to Afghanistan along with several accomplices from France, including Umar Farooq, who was described as the leader of HuM's French contingent.[49] An investigative report based on interviews with HuM members that was published by the Pakistani media outlet *The News* in February 1995 also claimed that the group had trained sixteen African American Muslims from various cities across the United States.[50]

A look back at the personal journey of famed terrorist Omar Saeed Sheikh, a British national of Pakistani heritage, and others helps bring the spillover effects associated with HuM's and HuJI's accessibility into sharper focus. After spending time at university in the United Kingdom, Sheikh traveled to the Balkans to try and participate in the jihad in Bosnia, and while there he met Abdur Rauf, a Pakistani HuM fighter, who invited him to Pakistan to receive training.[51] To facilitate Rauf provided Sheikh with "a letter of recommendation for HuM" and "the name of a London imam who was a HuM sympathizer."[52] After spending some time in Britain, Sheikh traveled to Lahore, Pakistan. His journey then took him to Miran Shah in Pakistan's tribal areas, "then into Afghanistan to [the] Khalid bin Waleed camp" located between Khost and Zhawar Kili, where he arrived in late 1993.[53] At the time "many of Sheikh's instructors were from the Pakistani Army's elite Special Services Group."[54]

Not long after Sheikh joined HuA, Masood Azhar was arrested by Indian authorities in February 1994.[55] In an attempt to free him, HuA engaged in a campaign of kidnappings that targeted Westerners in India and Indian-administered Kashmir, starting in June 1994.[56] Sheikh was a key figure in one of those kidnapping operations, as during the months of September and October 1994 Sheikh and several accomplices kidnapped three British tourists and later one American in Delhi, India.[57] Ilyas Kashmiri, who would later go on to lead HuJI and serve as a key nexus point between al-Qaida and Harakat entities - and later join al-Qaida - managed the operation.[58] The four hostages were eventually recovered outside India's capital and Sheikh was sent to

prison.[59]

These attempts were followed by a similar kidnapping incident of six Western tourists that occurred in Kashmir in July 1995, by a small splinter group called al-Faran.[60] Blame fell on "Maulana Fazlur Rahman Khalil for masterminding the kidnappings as the two commanders who set up Al-Faran [Mohammad Sikander and Abdul Hameed Turkey] were from his group."[61] The kidnapping was seen as a way for HuA to apply additional pressure on the Indian government to secure Azhar's release. "Under intense pressure, Maulana Khalil simply disowned Al-Faran and dubbed it a creation of India's Research and Analysis Wing. Commanders Sikander and Hameed were killed soon afterwards, making it easy for Khalil to distance himself from Al-Faran."[62] While it still a matter of debate whether al-Faran was a legitimate HuA splinter group, or just acted as a convenient, organizational cut-out, a declassified Central Intelligence Agency cable from August 1996 cable revealed that the CIA believed al-Faran and HuA were one and the same.[63]

In October 1997, the United States government designated HuA as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The designation amplified existing fractures in the group.[64] To side-step sanctions, and address internal differences amongst leaders, the group devolved back into its two main factions – HuJI and HuM. These two groups also reverted back to using their old names.

In August 1998, after al-Qaida's operation against the US embassies in East Africa and the US attacked several training camps in Afghanistan in response, including Harakat facilities, two members of HuA/HuM were arrested for the killing of an Italian army officer working with the United Nations in Kabul.[65] Given the timing, this attack could have been conducted in retaliation for, or been motivated by, the US cruise missile strikes. It is not clear whether the two individuals arrested were acting in their own capacity, or under orders from a Harakat leader.

Since HuA's kidnapping efforts did not lead to the release of Azhar, HuM tried a different approach to secure his release later in the decade: the hijacking of a commercial airliner. In late December 1999 five Pakistani members of HuA took control of Indian Airlines flight IC-814 while it was en route from Kathmandu, Nepal to Delhi, India.[66] One of the hijackers was Ibrahim Athar, Masood Azhar's elder brother.[67] Some analysts believe that Amjad Farooqi, a member of HuA who after 9/11 would go on to function as a "lynchpin of the Al Qaeda network in Pakistan"[68] was also a hijacker.[69] After the plane finally landed in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Sheikh, Azhar, and Mushtaq Ahmad Zargar (chief of Al-Umar Mujahideen militant group) were released in exchange for the 154 passengers who were still on board.[70]

According to an interview with Nasser al-Bahri (known more commonly by his kunya Abu Jandal), who served as a bodyguard to Bin Laden during the late 1990s, "Bin Laden had wanted Azhar freed and… had ordered al Qaeda to plan the Indian airlines hijacking with Harkat."[71] This was reportedly done because "Bin Laden admired Azhar and needed his help. Bin Laden threw a lavish party for Azhar when he was freed in Kandahar."[72] Not much evidence exists to support this claim. But looking back, the IC-814 hijacking and the kidnapping of Westerners in India and Kashmir were an early warning sign of the internationalist direction of where things were headed.

Not long after being freed, Azhar founded JeM. Omar Saeed Sheikh is believed to have played an important role in helping Azhar to set up and build the organization.[73] Several months after the 9/11 attacks Sheikh would be in the spotlight again - this time for having kidnapped *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in Karachi. After holding Pearl for a temporary period, Sheikh handed him over to 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Muhammad – who executed the reporter. Pearl's body was later found in a shed on property owned by a Pakistani businessman who also served as a financier of Al Akhtar Trust International, a humanitarian relief agency established by JeM.[74] In an interview Sheikh conducted after his arrest, he acknowledged that at some point prior to Abu Hafs al-Masri's death in Afghanistan in November 2001, that al-Qaida's military commander gave him one million rupees for an undisclosed purpose.[75]

The HuM, HuA, HuJI and JeM network had other spillover effects during the 1990s and early 2000s, which helped to shape and provide opportunities for al-Qaida operatives and other aspiring foreign militants. While

still a matter of debate, some claim that "it was Azhar, a Pakistani cleric, who was the first to spread the seeds of modern jihadist militancy in Britain - and it was through South Asian mosques belonging to the Deobandi movement that he did it."[76] It is more likely, however, that the drivers of modern jihadist militancy in Britain were and are multi-faceted, as other key figures such as Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza, and Omar Bakri Mohammed have also played important roles in Britain in this regard.[77]

The story of Asif Sadiq (also known by his nom de guerre, Mohammed Bilal) from Birmingham speaks to this dynamic and how the networks between Azhar and other influential figures who have shaped jihadism in Britain overlapped. Sadiq was a member of Omar Bakri's Al-Muhajiroun network, an organization that was banned in the United Kingdom in 2005.[78] Omar Bakri is believed to have facilitated Sadiq's travel to Pakistan, and during his time in the country Sadiq stayed for a period at an Al-Muhajiroun safe house.[79] After spending several years with HuA and HuM, Sadiq was "one of the first recruits to [join] Azhar's new militant group" – JeM – after it was created in 1999. Not long after, Sadiq "blew himself up outside an army barracks in Srinagar, killing six soldiers and three students in December 2000."[80] That attack is believed to have been the first suicide bomber attack that occurred in Kashmir. The event is also noteworthy in that it was both an early sign of trouble and a leading indicator of other suicide attacks that would involve British Muslims of Pakistani descent. For example, less than five years after Bilal's attack, Mohammed Siddique Khan, the ringleader for the al-Qaida-linked 7/7 attacks in the United Kingdom, killed himself while serving as a suicide bomber. Prior to the multi-pronged operation, which killed 52 people, Khan and his attack accomplice Wahid Ali trained at a HuM camp in Pakistan.[81] It was easy for Khan to make contact with HuM, as he was introduced to the group through his uncle.[82] HuM even reportedly sent a van to pick him at the Islamabad airport.[83]

While the spillover effects associated with JeM's, HuM's, and HuJI's accessibility helped to foster key terrorist events that would take place close to and after 9/11 - their legacy and impact also reaches back further in history. For example, when Tanzanian al-Qaida operative Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, "who was involved in the bombing of the American Embassy in Dar es Saleem in 1998, was asked by the FBI where he had trained, he told them… that he had been taught bomb-making in 1994 and 1996 in camp run by 'Har Qatar', meaning 'Harkat ul Ansar', the name HuM were using at the time."[84] Mohamed did not make the bombs used in those attacks, but the specialized training that he received by HuA speaks to the flow of individuals between al-Qaida's and Harakat's training facilities during the 1990s.[85]

Facilitation and Overlap: Media Events, the Embassy Bombings, and US Cruise Missile Strikes

During the period between the Harakat-linked kidnapping operations and the hijacking of IC-814, HuM and HuJI leaders were working behind the scenes to help al-Qaida facilitate key events and spread its global jihadist message to the world.

When Bin Laden and al-Qaida began to give more interviews to the press during the latter part of the 1990s, individuals like Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil served as key interlocutors between Bin Laden and journalists. For example, when Hamid Mir went to Afghanistan in early 1997 to interview Bin Laden, he traveled with Maulana Fazlur Rahman Khalil and Maulana Allah Wasaya Qasim, who was also associated with HuA.[86] Then, when Bin Laden and other jihadi group leaders held their famous May 26, 1998 press conference to announce the release of a statement by the "World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders", the members of the press who attended "were escorted across the border into Khost from North Waziristan by members of Harakat ul-Ansar."[87] (The Front was formally announced by Bin Laden in February 1998, in an article he had published in *al-Quds al-Arabi* in February 22, 1998.) A number of Pakistani journalists attended the May event, as did representatives of HuM and HuJI.[88] Pakistani journalist Imtiaz Gul recalls how two days before the event, on May 24, 1998, he was invited by a deputy, "a trusted longtime aide and veteran of the Afghan war, code-named Allah Wasaya," to Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil to attend a meeting with Bin Laden in Afghanistan along with other Pakistani journalists.[89] (Gul backed out shortly before the trip and did not attend the event.)

Less than three months later, on August 7, 1998, al-Qaida conducted its dual-pronged attack against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing more than 200 people. Close to two weeks later, in retaliation for the attacks, the United States fired more than 50 cruise missiles at several training camps in eastern Afghanistan around Zhawara. Beyond sending a signal, these strikes aimed to kill Bin Laden and destroy a number of training camps that were either run by al-Qaida or by affiliated groups. The camps that were targeted, and the mix of individuals who died as a result of the strikes, speaks to the collaboration across groups that was taking place at the time. As noted by Anne Stenersen, the camps of "Al-Faruq and al-Siddiq were partly destroyed in the strikes, whereas al-Qaida's administrative headquarters at Jihad Wal was almost completely destroyed."[90] According to Mustafa Hamid, six of seven Arabs were killed at those facilities.[91] The cruise missiles also destroyed two camps run by HuM where five ISI agents and between nine and 21 HuM fighters were killed.[92] Jalaluddin Haqqani has also claimed that a base managed by him was destroyed and that a sizeable number of his men were killed by the strikes as well.[93]

At an event not long after the strikes, Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil used language identical to that found in al-Qaida's 1998 fatwa to describe how HuM planned to respond: "The US has struck us with Tomahawk Cruise missiles at only two places, but we will hit back at them everywhere in the world, wherever we find them. We have started a holy war against the US and they will hardly find a tree to take shelter beneath."[94] While it is hard to know if this statement was just bluster, the actions that HuM and Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil would take in the years to follow would demonstrate how even if HuM was not operating openly in support of al-Qaida, the group and some of its members would continue to provide background support for al-Qaida, and Bin Laden in particular.[95]

This appears to have included support HuM provided to help al-Qaida members escape and hide after the US invasion of Afghanistan. For example, according to Terry McDermott and Josh Meyer, "Even before the [9/11] attacks, KSM [Khalid Sheikh Muhammad] had helped organize a collection of safe houses in Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan, many of them operated by jihadi groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Harkat ul Mujahideen, Jaish e Mohammed, Sipah e Sahaba Pakistan, and Lashkar e Taiba, with whom KSM had had relations for years. He wanted al Qaeda to be ready for the US response."[96] An article released by *Dawn* in April 2002 also detailed the arrest of an Iraqi al-Qaida suspect in Quetta who was carrying an authority letter from HuM, which appears to have been provided to aid his travel.[97]

Ideological Backing: al-Qaida, Shamzai, and the Binori Town Madrassah

Connection

While individuals like Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil were facilitating the travel of Pakistani journalists to meetings with Bin Laden in Afghanistan during the latter part of the 1990s, the head of the madrassah that trained the majority of early Harakat group leaders was providing important ideological backing to Bin Laden's outfit. The collection of groups that constitute the Pakistani Harakat orbit emerged from the same place of learning: the Binori Town madrassah in Karachi (also referred to as Jamia Uloom al Islamia in Binori Town). [98] The seminary, its leadership, and a collection of noteworthy graduates have been central to the foundation, development, and sustainment of the four main Pakistani Harakat orbit groups. Veteran Pakistani journalist Khaled Ahmed has characterized "Jamia Banoria… as the ideological headquarters of the Deobandi terrorist outfits, although much lowered in profile" more recently.[99]

In many ways, the seminary has played a role similar to the role Darul Uloom Haqqania in Akora Khattak plays as a center of learning for senior leaders, as well as rank and file members, of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network.[100] For example, noteworthy figures who are either graduates of, or have been affiliated with, Binori Town have included two founders of HuJI - Maulana Irshad Ahmad and Maulana Abdus Samad Sial; former leader of HuJI - Qari Saifullah Akhtar; the founder of HuM - Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil; the founder and leader of JeM – Masood Azhar; the founder of al-Rasheed Trust - Maulana Mufti Rasheed Ahmad [101]; and the current leader of Al-Qaida on the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) - Asim Umar [102], as well as others.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Binori Town madrassah has also served as a key place of ideological support for al-Qaida in Pakistan. This support was principally rooted in the personalities of Nizamuddin Shamzai, the Binori Town chancellor who was killed in 2004, and Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil.

Although still a matter of speculation, "some say that Osama bin Laden met Mullah Omar" at the Binori Town madrassah "under the benign gaze of Mufti Shamzai."[103] John K. Cooley claims that "bin Laden used Shamzai's Banori Town seminary as his base in Karachi for some time" during the 1990s.[104] After al-Qaida released its famous 1996 and 1998 war declarations against the United States, Shamzai endorsed them.[105] (Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil and Sheikh Mir Hamzah, secretary general of the Jamiat e Ulema Pakistan, were the two Pakistanis who officially signed the 1998 version.) The language Shamzai used in 1998 stated that the "killing of any American was "legal and Islamic.""[106] This perspective was reinforced by a fatwa Shamzai issued one year later, in 1999, which argued that "the shedding of American blood" was permissible because "Washington was in a "state of war" with Muslims."[107] Shamzai's choice of words in these texts mirrored the language used by al-Qaida in its 1998 text.[108]

Another indication of Shamzai's standing amongst both Bin Laden and the Afghan Taliban was the role that he played in mediating a conflict between Mullah Omar and Bin Laden in early 1999. Shamzai's stature as the leader of the Binori Town seminary, as "highly respected among the Taliban's most important allies in Pakistan; the political party Jamiat-e-Ulema-Islam (JUI), the charity organization al-Rashid Trust, and the Deobandi militant outfits that directly supported the Taliban's fight against the Northern Alliance" gave him enormous credibility to play such a role.[109] In addition to being a vocal Taliban supporter, Shamzai was also a friend, admirer and spiritual advisor to Mullah Omar.[110] But, as Anne Stenersen points out, the public support that Shamzai had already provided to Bin Laden "put Mullah Omar in a delicate situation."[111] And it appears that Bin Laden used that to his advantage, as such top cover likely limited the options Mullah Omar could pursue in dealing with the al-Qaida leader.[112]

A lengthy interview conducted with Ayman al-Zawahiri provides an insider perspective on the dynamics of Shamzai's relationship with Bin Laden, and how he served as a friend and advisor to the Saudi al-Qaida leader. In the interview, Zawahiri mentions how "Bin Ladin had a very strong relationship with Pakistani ulema.... Among the most well-known names that I remember is Mawlawi Nizam Din Shamzai."[113] Zawahiri goes on to add that Shamzai:

[W]as among the beloved ones to Shaykh Usama and always visited Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin when he came to Afghanistan and stayed with him. They exchanged advice and discussed issues together....

In one of [these] meetings Shaykh Usama was explaining the Western Crusader aggression against the Islamic ummah. The shaykh [Bin Ladin] … had drawn a big map on the wall and Shaykh Abu-Hafs al-Masri…was using this map to explain the extent of the Crusader occupation of the Islamic world. He explained how the Western Crusaders were controlling the Islamic world, imposing a siege on it, and strangling it with their bases, fleets, and soldiers, and that all important land, sea, or air passageways were controlled by them. Shaykh Nizam Din Shamzai was very touched by this lecture and when he returned to Pakistan he gave an important lecture in one of the known hotels of Islamabad and invited people to attend. He also brought a map of the Islamic world and explained the same idea. When he returned to the shaykh [Bin Ladin] the second time, he told him: I went to Islamabad and gave them the same lecture that you gave me in Kandahar."[114]

The early 2000s provide a number of other data points about the relationship between Shamzai and Bin Laden and other al-Qaida members. For example, Shamzai was personally invited to and attended the marriage of Bin Laden's son in Kandahar prior to 9/11.[115] According to a eulogy released by *Jamia Hafsa* of deceased al-Qaida ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi, the young Libyan al-Qaida member received "permission and tradition" to quote the Prophet's sayings from Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai.[116] If the claim made by Jamia Hafsa is true, it would demonstrate how Shamzai also potentially served as an advisor to an al-Qaida figure who would end up playing a central ideological and operational role for the group in the mid-to-late 2000s.

The relationship between Shamzai and Bin Laden was not always straight forward, however, as according to some

sources Shamzai condemned the 9/11 attacks.[117] It appears that Shamzai did not support the operation as he believed that it led to the death of innocent people.[118] The 9/11 operation was certainly more controversial from an ideological perspective, and Shamzai's objection demonstrated that the Pakistani cleric was not just an al-Qaida pawn, and that his support for Bin Laden had limits.[119] But, when it came to ideological issues where there was more widespread and widely accepted agreement amongst Islamist thinkers and jihadist ideologues, like the need to provide support for defensive jihad, Shamzai would readily offer support.[120] For example, not long after Shamzai articulated his lack of support for the 9/11 operation, he traveled to Afghanistan as part of an official Pakistani contingent which hoped, at least on paper, to convince Mullah Omar to give up Bin Laden.[121] Instead, Shamzai, and the Pakistani general who led the delegation, reportedly encouraged Mullah Omar to wage war against the United States if they attacked.[122] And after the United States invaded Afghanistan, Shamzai issued another fatwa, which argued that it was permissible to retaliate and conduct defensive jihad against U.S. forces there.[123] Shamzai and other leaders of the Binori Town madrassa similarly issued a joint statement that said jihad against the United States had become an obligation for Muslims around the world after the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003.[124] When looking across Shamzai's support for Bin Laden, the most interesting and intriguing cases are the ideological issues that fell somewhere in between the 'more accepted' and 'more controversial' poles, or that skewed towards more controversial issues, such as Shamzai's support for Bin Laden's broad 1998 declaration of war against the United States.

According to Ahmad Zaidan, an al-Jazeera journalist who has long reported on al-Qaida, the assassination of Shamzai outside the Binori Town complex in May 2004 reportedly hit al-Qaida hard.[125] Over the years that followed Bin Laden and Zawahiri both honored Shamzai in official statements released by al-Qaida.[126] This included a statement Bin Laden released in response to the Pakistani government's assault in 2008 on the *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) complex in Islamabad, a seminary which served as a hub (and later a rally point) for radical Deobandi elements. In the message Bin Laden quoted a fatwa Shamzai delivered that called for action against Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, given the level of post 9/11 cooperation Pakistan's leader had extended to the United States.[127] As presented by Bin Laden:

'If any ruler of an Islamic state provides aid to an infidel state in its aggression against the Islamic states, it is the legal obligation of the Muslims to remove him from power and consider him to be legally a traitor to Islam and Muslims.' People of Islam in Pakistan: Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, may Allah have mercy on him, discharged a great duty which was upon him, and declared the word of truth and didn't care about the anger of the creation. He endangered himself and his wealth and made clear the ruling of Allah regarding Pervez: that he is a traitor to Islam and Muslims and must be removed. This Fatwa enraged Pervez and enraged his masters in America, and it is my opinion that the murder of the Mufti - may Allah have mercy on him - was at their hands.[128]

In this case, Bin Laden used the words of his former friend Shamzai, a famous and well-respected ideologue, to help make the case, and bolster support, for armed jihad against the Musharraf government and those state entities - like the Army and intelligence services - cooperating with the United States. Bin Laden's blunt accusation that Pakistani authorities killed Shamzai was also likely to have helped to stir up anger and support for armed rebellion against the state.[129]

Regional Tensions and a Strategic Distraction

Another important example that speaks to the helpful alliance-like support that JeM provided to al-Qaida at the turn of the century, is the attack that JeM conducted against India's Parliament on 13 December 2001. This attack killed at least 12 people. While the attack did not result in a high number of deaths, three factors - the timing of the incident, the target hit, and the response elicited - all contributed to the attack being one that was incredibly strategic. For example, the attack occurred during the Battle for Tora Bora - a key battle that took place shortly after the US invasion of Afghanistan. The battle was a seminal event as US forces were hunting and trying to capture Bin Laden and other al-Qaida members who were making their "last stand" in the Tora Bora mountains of Afghanistan, before fleeing into Pakistan. When viewed in retrospect, it seems quite coincidental

that the last radio message Bin Laden gave to his fighters before fleeing Tora Bora occurred one day after JeM's attack.[130] The target selected for JeM's attack was also quite strategic, as given the historical tensions between India and Pakistan, an attack against India's Parliament - in the heart of that country's capital New Delhi - conducted by militants from Pakistan was surely an event that would elicit a strong Indian response. Indeed, almost any nation would view an attack against their main legislative body by armed militants deployed by a known proxy of a neighboring country as an act of war.

Since India and Pakistan both have nuclear weapons, choosing how to respond was an important consideration. India's response would have to be strong, but it would also have to be limited, so conflict escalation and a nuclear exchange could be avoided. To send a signal and prepare for war, India deployed a massive amount of troops to the contested region of Kashmir late that December. The size of India's deployment, as noted by Steve Coll, "looked like the largest military mobilization in Indian history."[131] Pakistan followed suit and redeployed "more than seventy thousand troops and their equipment - two full corps, or four divisions…. away from the Afghan border."[132] The forces that Pakistan redeployed in the east were supposed to act as the "anvil" to fight and block the flow of al-Qaida fighters being pushed across the Afghan border by the United States' "hammer" operations, as typified by US actions in Tora Bora.[133] So instead of seventy thousand additional Pakistani forces being positioned to capture and detain the al-Qaida fighters flowing across its Western border, the bulk of Pakistan's military was focused elsewhere.

Given what was occurring at the time in Afghanistan, the timing of JeM's Parliament attack was rather coincidental. The timing of the event, and the dynamics that followed, raises questions about the attack's real purpose, and - given JeM's historic relationship with Pakistani state entities - what parties were involved. Unfortunately, due to the lack of evidence and primary sources that speak to this episode, it is difficult to properly evaluate whether the attack was a randomly timed coincidence or a more calculated and well-thought out affair, designed to support al-Qaida, even if only indirectly. What can be stated, however, is that even if JeM's Parliament attack was not conducted to directly support or benefit al-Qaida, the operation and the state responses it set in motion benefited al-Qaida at a critical time.

Conclusion

During the pre-2001 period, al-Qaida and the four main Pakistani Harakat groups have pursued and been involved in similar efforts, in similar places, at similar moments of time. The overlap is there, but it still is not clear what drove collaboration between these entities, how meaningful it was, and if that collaboration was ad hoc, limited, or more structured and enduring. The data reviewed for this article hints at there being a deeper, and potentially more encompassing, alliance between the Pakistani Harakat entities - and the leaders of those groups - and al-Qaida prior to and closely after 9/11. Given the level of interaction that the Pakistani Harakat groups had and continue to have with Pakistani state institutions, and the support they have received, such a revelation, if true, would be quite remarkable.

Based on the sources reviewed above, from the 1990s up to 2002, cooperation was most visible between al-Qaida and HuM, and, after 1999 with JeM. Key drivers of the relationship with al-Qaida from the Pakistani Harakat side have been Masood Azhar, Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil, Qari Saifullah Akhtar, Ilyas Kashmiri, Maulana Allah Wasaya Qasim, and Omar Saeed Sheikh, as well as others. Some of these individuals are ideologues, while others are field commanders. This reinforces the view that cooperation between al-Qaida and Pakistani Harakat entities occurred both on the ideological and the military level. During the pre-2001 period, some of the personalities who helped to coordinate al-Qaida's interaction with these groups included Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, and likely Abu Zubaydah. Yet, the sources do not provide much fidelity regarding how the relations the various Pakistani Harakat groups had with al-Qaida were substantially different from one another. There is also a paucity of data to explain potential points of tension in al-Qaida's relations with these groups and areas where cooperation between them was limited, or where al-Qaida might have been in direct competition with them.

Despite overlapping areas of investment and co-location in the same conflict zones far from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, it also remains an open question how the Pakistani Harakat groups might have influenced al-Qaida, or been influenced by Bin Laden's group. The data reviewed for this article also raises questions about the roles played by individuals like Masood Azhar, and the important and potentially more influential role he might have played in developing links between militant networks in Pakistan and key countries around the globe, actions which might have shaped - and had a more profound impact - on the direction of various forms of militancy than has thus far been recognized.

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Notes

[1] An important case in point is the mysterious death of Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad, who was killed in May 2011 after writing about links between members of Pakistan's military and al-Qaida. See Dexter Filkins, "The Journalist and the Spies: The Murder of a Journalist who Exposed Pakistan's Secrets," *New Yorker*, September 11, 2011.

[2] Thomas Joscelyn, "Osama bin Laden's Files: The Pakistani Government Wanted to Negotiate," *Long War Journal*, March 9, 2015; URL: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/osama-bin-ladens-files-the-pakistani-government-wanted-to-negotiate.php.

[3] Ibid.

[4] See details on Nizamuddin Shamzai provided below.

[5] The author has decided to focus on exploring al-Qaida's ties to Pakistani Harakat groups instead of Lashkar-e-Taiba, which also has known ties to al-Qaida operatives, because less developed scholarly work has been done on the histories and connections of the Pakistani Harakat groups. The Pakistani Harakat groups and Lashkar-e-Taiba are differentiated by their histories and the schools of Islamic jurisprudence that they follow (the Pakistani Harakat groups are Deobandi in orientation while Lashkar-e-Taiba follows the Ahl-e-Hadith school). They are also some important geographic distinctions between the Pakistani Harakat groups and Lashkar-e-Taiba in terms of where these various organizations are headquartered and have historically operated.

[6] Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, (Mashal: Lahore, Pakistan, 2006), p. 263.

[7] Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, pg. 263; Muhammad Amir Rana, *Jihad and Jihadi*, pp. 38, 124.

[8] Muhammad Amir Rana, Jihad and Jihadi, p.32.

[9] Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, p. 244.

[10] Ibid.

[1] Ibid.

[12] See Karachi 01617: U.S. Consulate Karachi, Cable, "The Harakat-ul-Ansar - The Pakistan Dimension [Excised]," March 29, 1995, http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB389/docs/1995-03-29%20-%20Karachi%20HUA%20and%20Haqqani.pdf; Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, p. 244; Muhammad Amir Rana, Jihad and Jihadi, pp. 32, 68-69.

[13] For context see Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, Fountainhead of Jihad, pp. 21-83; al-Qaida also received some support from Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as well as other local commanders. For background, see Anne Stenersen, Al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan, pp. 13-31, 35. For a discussion of al-Qaida's founding year, see Leah Farrall's article elsewhere in this Special Issue. Prior estimates have also suggested that al-Qaida was founded in 1988.

[14] Edward Gorman, "Khost Outpost Falls to Mujahidin Led by Foreign Fighters," *The Times*, March 21, 1988, p. 7.

[15] Ibid.; the report also mentions an Egyptian specialist who aided the effort. It is not known if this is a reference to Mustafa Hamid

or some other individual.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 28.

[18] For background see Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, p. 245; "Martyrs of Khost," *al-Irshad* (in Urdu), Vol. 28, Iss. 5, May 1991, pp. 29-40; Muhammad Masood Azhar, "Glimpses of Khost Conquest," *Sada-e-Mujahid* (in Urdu), Vol. 2, Issue 5, July 1991, p. 5.

[19] For example see, "Remembrance of Akhtar Shaheed," *Sada-e-Mujahid* (in Urdu), Vol. 3, Issue 3-4, March-April 1992, pp. 5-9.

[20] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, pp. 29-30.

[21] The nature of HuJI's partnership with the Afghan Taliban likely benefited from the alliance HuJI had with Nabi Mohammedi's Harakat party, as a number of famous Taliban, including Mullah Omar, also fought under Nabi Mohammedi. The author thanks Anne Stenersen for pointing this out.

[22] Ibid, pp. 130-141.

[23] For additional background on HuM's operational support for the Taliban during the late 1990s see Muhammad Amir Rana, Jihad and Jihadi, p. 36, and on HuJI's see pp. 39-40.

[24] As cited in Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 57-58; Julie Sirrs, "The Taliban's International Ambitions," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2001, pp. 61-71; One hundred ten out of the 113 prisoners interviewed mentioned an organizational affiliation.

[25] For example, see Dexter Filkins, "For Taliban Fighters, A Fading Memorial," *New York Times*, November 9, 2009.

[26] Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place: Pakistan's Lawless Frontier*, (New York: Penguin: 2009), p. 20.

[27] Anne Stenersen, citing AQ-MSLF-D-001-424, see Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, p. 137.

[28 Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, pg137.

[29] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil & Islamic Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 92.

[30] Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*, p. 28.

[31] Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, p. 266; As noted by Rana, according to a document published by the group in 2000, "Agile mujahideen of Harakat-ul-Jihad Al Islami were making history of valiant deeds in Kashmir, Burma, Tajikistan, Chechnya, Palestine, and the Central Asian republics. Harakat-ul-Jihad is the first organization to assemble mujahideen under the green flag in India, Bangladesh, Burma, Iran, Philippines, Malaysia, Africa, Britain, Ireland, Fiji, the United States, most of the Arab countries, and the Central Asian republics." Muhammad Amir Rana, *Jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan*, no date, p.139.

[32] Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jehadis: Inside Pakistan's Network of Terror*, (Delhi: Roli Books, 2006), p. 103.

[33] Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam,* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd., 2004), p. 96.

[34] For context, see Michael Scheuer, *Through our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*, (Washington, DC, Potomac Books, 2006), pp. 191-193; Ali Soufan, *The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), pp. 40-41.

[35] For background on al-Qaida's activity in Somalia at the time see *Al-Qaʿida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, pp. 5-6; Harmony document AFGP-2002-6000104; Ali Soufan, *The Black Banners*, pp. 41-42.

[36] *Al-Qaʿida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, p. 140.

[37] Paul Watson and Sidhartha Barua, "Somalian Link Seen to al-Qaeda," *Los Angeles Time*, February 25, 2002.

[38] Paul Watson and Sidhartha Barua, "Somalian Link Seen to al-Qaeda"; for details about Maulana Fazl Rahman Khalil and on the creation of HuA see Muhammad Amir Rana, *Jihad and Jihadi*, pp. 32-37.

[39] Paul Watson and Sidhartha Barua, "Somalian Link Seen to al-Qaeda"; for additional context see John F. Burns, "Yemen Links to bin Laden Gnaw at F.B.I. in Cole Inquiry," *New York Times*, November 26, 2000, URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/26/world/yemen-links-to-bin-laden-gnaw-at-fbi-in-cole-inquiry.html; for additional background on Fadhli and the role he played in helping Bin Laden and al-Qaida to open a jihad front in Yemen in the early 1990s, see Gregory Johnston, *The Last Refuge*, pp. 16-34.

[40] Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, (New York, Viking: 2008), p. 113.

[41] "Black Hawk Down: An American War Story," Philadelphia Inquirer, November 1996-December 1997;URL: http://inquirer.philly.com/packages/somalia/sitemap.asp.

[42] For example, see "The Meadow," *South Asia Journal*, July 2, 2012;URL: http://southasiajournal.net/meadow/.

[43] Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*, p. 30.

[44] Muhammad Amir Rana, *Jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan*, p. 103.

[45] Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, p. 220. Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian War: Pakistan's Sunni-Shia Violence and its Links to the Middle East*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 134.

[46] Robert Fisk, "Muslim Leader Warns of a New Assault on US Forces," *The Independent*, March 22, 1997.

[47] Praveen Swami, "Masood Azhar in His Own Words," *Frontline*, Vol. 18, Issue 21, October 13-26, 2001;URL: http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl1821/18210190.htm.

[48] "Terrorists or mujahideen?", *Daily Times*, March 22, 2004; a similar analysis of a ten year period of HuM's and HuJI's fallen fighters conducted by Muhammad Amir Rana found that in the decade prior to 9/11 18 Arab fighters, 32 Afghan fighters, 4 European / other fighters died while deployed with HuM, and that 14 Arab fighters, 120 Afghan, 10 European / other fighters were killed on missions for HuJI. Muhammad Amir Rana, *Jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan*, p. 14.

[49] Muhammad Masood Azhar, "Muhammad Akhtar's Journey in the Land of Jihad," *Sada-e-Mujahid* (in Urdu), vol. 2, issue 12, December 1991, pp. 26-28.

[50] Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jehadis*, p. 103.

[51] Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*, pg. 88; see also Muhammad Amir Rana, Jihad and Jihadi, pp. 53-56; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 7-8.

[52] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, p. 8; According to Nick Fielding, imam was "Maulvi Ismail, imam of the Clifton mosque in north London." See Nick Fielding, "The British Jackal," *Sunday Times*, April 21, 2002.

[53] Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*, p. 88.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Paul Watson and Sidhartha Barua, "Somalian Link Seen to al-Qaeda".

[56] For background see Stephen Tankel, *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 56; for background on the June 1994 incident see Kim Housego, "Who Took Me Hostage?", *Independent*, February 4, 1997;URL: http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/who-took-me-hostage-1276790.html.

[57] John Johnson, "American Recalls His 1995 Abduction," *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2002;URL: http://articles.latimes.com/2002/feb/09/news/mn-27168.

[58] Seth Nye, "Al-Qa`ida Key Operative: A Profile of Mohammed Ilyas Kashmiri," *CTC Sentinel*, September 1, 2010; for background on the Al-Hadid operation see Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, An Enemy we Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al-Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010, (London: Hurst & Company, 2012), pp. 460-461.

[59] "In a prison diary on file in an Indian court, Sheikh also admitted to kidnapping Californian Bela Josef Nuss and three British backpackers in October 1994 in a failed bid to spring Azhar from jail." John Johnson, "American Recalls His 1995 Abduction"; see also John F. Burns, "Indian Police Free 3 Britons Held Hostage," *New York Times*, November 2, 1994; URL: http://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/02/world/indian-police-free-3-britons-held-hostage.html?mcubz=0.

60 [] "Exhumed Body is of British Hostage, India Confirms," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 2000, http://articles.latimes.com/2000/jan/06/news/mn-51354; Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, pp. 246-247; Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jehadis*, p. 77;

[61] Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jehadis*, p. 77; prior to his membership in HuA Commander Sikander was affiliated with HuJI, see Muhammad Amir Rana, Jihad and Jihadi, p.127.

[62] Ibid.

[63] See DI TR 96-008 Central Intelligence Agency, "Harakat ul-Ansar: Increasing Threat to Western and Pakistani Interests," August

1996; URL: http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB227/10.pdf.

[64] Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, p. 272.

[65] For background see "After the Attacks: In Afghanistan; UN Officer Shot in Kabul After Bombing Dies; 4 Held," *New York Times*, August 23, 1998; URL: http://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/23/world/after-attacks-afghanistan-un-officer-shot-kabul-after-bombing-dies-4-held.html; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 75; Olivier Roy, "Islamic Radicalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan," United Nations WRITENET Paper No. 06/2001, January 2002, p. 16; URL: http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.634.6949&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

[66] Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 112.

[67] "Three get life term for hijacking Indian plane," *Dawn*, February 6, 2008; URL: https://www.dawn.com/news/288127/three-get-life-term-for-hijacking-indian-plane.

[68] "Security forces kill Amjad Farooqi," *Dawn*, September 27, 2004; URL: https://www.dawn.com/news/371810; "Profile: Amjad Farooqi," *BBC*, September 27, 2004; URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3692882.stm; B. Raman, "Amjad Farooqi: The Untold Story," South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No. 129, September 29, 2004; URL: http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/paper1129.

[69] Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jehadis*, pg. 166; see also John Wilson, "The New Face of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 2, Issue, 19, May 9, 2005; URL: https://jamestown.org/program/the-new-face-of-al-qaeda-in-pakistan/; for a list of the hijackers see "India Arrests Suspect in 1999 Kandahar Hijacking," *Dawn*, September 13, 2012; URL: https://www.dawn.com/news/749123 and "Three get life term for hijacking Indian plane".

[70] For background, see Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*, pp. 195-204.

[71] As quoted in Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 113; original source "Osama Guard Says Indian Plane Hijacked for Azhar's Release," *AFP*, September 17, 2006.

[72] See footnote 10, Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 422.

[73] For background and context see Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian Wars*, pp. 134, 175; Muhammad Amir Rana, Jihad and Jihadi, p. 55; and "Masood Azhar: The man who brought jihad to Britain," *BBC Magazine*, April 5, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35959202.

[74] Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian War*, p. 134; see also United Nations Security Council, "Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing: Al-Akhtar Trust International," February 3, 2015; URL: https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/al-akhtar-trust-international; US Treasury Department, "U.S. DESIGNATES AL AKHTAR TRUST Pakistani Based Charity is Suspected of Raising Money for Terrorists in Iraq," October 14, 2003; URL: https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js899.aspx; United Nations Security Council, "Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing: Al-Rashid Trust," February 3, 2015; URL: https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/al-rashid-trust .

[75] Abdul Hafeez Abid, "Interview with Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh" *Takbeer* (in Urdu), February 12, 2003, pp. 26, 27, 28.

[76] "Masood Azhar: The man who brought jihad to Britain".

[77] For background, see Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History*, (London: Hurst, 2015), pp. 41-44.

[78] Idem, p. 163.

[79] Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History*, pp. 41-44; Rafaello Pantucci, "The Tottenham Ayatollah and the Hook-Handed Cleric: An Examination of All Their Jihadi Children," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, Issue 3, pp. 232-233.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Mitch D. Silber, *The Al-Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 117.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

[84] As cited in Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*; original source USA vs. Usama bin Laden, New York Southern District, Direct Examination of Agent Perkins, March 19, 2001.

[85] For background see Ali Soufan, *The Black Banners* and Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan*.

[86] Hamid Mir, "Maulana Allah Wasaya Qasim's Jihad-i-Hind," *Islam* (in Urdu), June 6, 2003; Qasim also occasionally wrote articles for *Sada-e-Mujahid*.

[87] Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus – 1973-2012*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 114; Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Taliban let Bin Ladin Break his Silence," *The News*, January 6, 1999.

[88] Muhammad Amir Rana, A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan, p. 137.

[89] Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place*, p. 250.

[90] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan*, p. 99; for background on these camps see Chapter 5: "Training Under the Taliban," pp. 96-115.

[9] Ibid.

[92] Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad*, p. 110; Rahimullah Yusufzai, "A Cult Hero is Born," *The News,* September 1, 1998; Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jehadis*, pp. 78-79; Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, p. 251; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 92; Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 113.

[93] During a meeting with US officials after the cruise missile strikes Jalaluddin Haqqani stated, "it is good to meet someone from the country which had destroyed my base, my madrassah, and killed 25 of my mujahideen." See State 095538: U.S. Department of State, Cable, "Usama bin Ladin: Pressing High-Level Taliban Official Jalaluddin Haqqani on Bin Ladin," May 24, 1999; URL: http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB389/docs/1999-05-24%20-%20Haqqani%20Meeting%20on%20UBL.pdf.

[94] Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jehadis*, p. 79.

[95] For examples, see Praveen Swami, "More Qaeda-Pak Links: AQIS Chief was at 'ISI' PoK Camp," *Indian Express*, March 13, 2015; Carlotta Gall, Pir Zubair Shah, and Eric Schmitt, "Seized Phone Offers Clues to Bin Laden's Pakistani Links," *New York Times*, June 23, 2011; Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile*, pp. 245-247, 352-353, 374.

[96] Terry McDermott and Josh Meyer, *The Hunt for KSM: Inside the Pursuit and Takedown of the Real 9/11 Mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), p. 182; see also Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile*, p. 87.

[97] "Al Qaeda suspect held in Khuzdar," *Dawn*, April 17, 2002.

[98] For background see Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) pp. 508-511; Muhammad Amir Rana, Jihad and Jihadi, p. 10.

[99] Khaled Ahmed, "Al Qaeda and Karachi," *Express Tribune*, February 12, 2011.

[100] Senior members of the Taliban have also graduated from Binori Town. See Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox*, pp. 508-509.

[101] Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox*, p. 510; for background on Qari Saifullah Akhtar, Rasheed, and Azhar, see Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian Wars*, pp. 130, 133, and 134-135; and Muhammad Amir Rana, Jihad and Jihadi, pp. 24-26, 32, 38, 71.

 [102] Praveen Swami, "Notes of a Jihadi," *Indian Express*, October 19, 2014, http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/notes-of-a-jihadi/; Praveen Swami, "Head of Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent is From Uttar Pradesh," *Indian Express*, December 17, 2015, http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/head-of-al-qaeda-in-indian-subcontinent-is-from-up/.

[103] Khaled Ahmed, "Al Qaeda and Karachi,"; John K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 207; for biographical details about Shamzai, see Muhammad Amir Rana, *Jihad and Jihadi*, pp. 89-91.

[104] John K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, p. 207.

[105] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, p. 73.

[106] Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place*, p. 251; see also Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jehadis*, p. 76; Muhammad Amir Rana, *Jihad and Jihadi*, p. 90.

[107] *The News*, August 22, 1999; see also article by Muhammad Aurangzeb Awan, *Ausaf* (in Urdu), August 27, 1999, p. 11.

[108] For full texts of al-Qaida's 1996 and 1998 declarations see Bruce Lawrence (Ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, (New York: Verso 2005), pp. 23-30, 58-62; As noted by Khaled Ahmed, Shamzai's 1999 fatwa "was later modified in explanation." See Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian War*, p. 130.

[109] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, p. 73.

[110] John Lancaster and Kamran Khan, "At an Islamic School, Hints of Extremist Ties," *Washington Post*, June 13, 2004; Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*, pp. 59-60.

[111] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, p. 73.

[112] Ibid.

[113] "Days with the Imam 3," Al-Sahab, July-August 2012.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*, pp. 59-60; John Lancaster and Kamran Khan, "At an Islamic School, Hints of Extremist Ties".

[116] Jamia Hafsa Urdu Forum, September 20, 2012.

[117] John F. Burns, "A Nation Challenged: The Hunted; New Push to Get Bin Laden to Agree to Quit Afghanistan," *New York Times*, September 28, 2001; John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 31.

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[121] Salman Hussain, "Fundos boast thousands of Jehadis for Taliban cause," *Friday Times*, October 25, 2001; Zahir Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Path to Catastrophe and the Killing of Benazir Bhutto*, (Delhi: Penguin, 2007), p. 43; see also Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*, pp. 59-60.

[122] Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), p. 221.

[123] Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection*, pp. 59-60.

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[125] Ahmad Zaydan, "The Search for Al-Qa`ida," *Al-Jazeera*, September 10, 2004.

[126] "The Will of the Martyr Uthman Who Carried Out a Suicide Operation," *Al-Sahab*, August 5, 2007.

[127] For context see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), FN. 150, p. 244.

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[129] The author would like to thank Anne Stenersen for assistance with this point.

[130] Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in Flight*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 78-79.

[131] Steve Coll, "The Stand Off: How Jihadi Groups Helped Provoke the Twenty-First Century's First Nuclear Standoff," *The New Yorker*, February 13, 2006; URL: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/02/13/the-stand-off .

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The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM): Between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions

by Jerome Drevon

Abstract

This article analyses the evolution of the jihadi social movement (JSM) in changing environmental and factional circumstances. The author argues that internationalist groups like al-Qaida and Islamic State seek to become hegemonic in the JSM vis-à-vis nationally focused jihadis. Yet hegemony is associated with changing modes of organisation that can weaken centralised organisational control and exacerbate internal divisions. Moreover, the post-2011 expansion of Islamist local governance presents new expectations that jihadi groups set up local structures of governance, which can alter their internal dynamics and cannot endure as long as their allegiance to internationalist groups remains. This analysis illustrates the prospective choices of the components of the JSM after 2017.

Keywords: jihad, social movement, strategy, al-Qaida, Islamic State, Ahrar al-Sham

Introduction

The recent territorial losses of Islamic State organisation (IS) in Iraq and Syria have resumed post-9/11 discussions on al-Qaida's (AQ) strategic future.[1] Was IS's declaration of a state and international armed campaign against Western countries ephemeral in contrast with AQ's long-term strategy? Could AQ revive its activities by filling in the vacuum left by IS, recruiting some of its former members, and consolidating the group's participation in contemporary conflicts? Is AQ's message resilient or is its long-term decline inevitable? Many analyses are conjectural guesswork and cannot simply be taken at face value.[2] With a few exceptions, analyses often assume an unrealistic degree of internal cohesion without taking into account the interplay between AQ's past organisational developments, jihadi groups' inter-factional dynamics, and environmental change.

This article conversely analyses Salafi jihadi armed groups in their broader social movement instead of focusing on a single case study. Such contextualisation is important to dissociate these groups' external and internal objectives (i.e. what they officially want to achieve vis-à-vis their stated enemies versus their objectives vis-à-vis one another) and examine the consequences of changing social movement dynamics (especially evolving patterns of interactions between Salafi jihadi groups). In contrast with other studies based on social movement theory [3], this research does not explore these groups' mobilising or framing processes but uses this theoretical framework to highlight the constraints and opportunities inherent with their modes of organisation and the consequences of factional jihadi competition. This research accordingly situates Salafi jihadi groups in a three-level framework constituted by the evolution of (1) the jihadi social movement (JSM) [4], (2) macro-level conditions, and (3) armed groups' organisational dynamics.

This article argues that internationalist groups like AQ and IS seek to change the structure of the JSM and become hegemonic to marginalise nationally focused jihadis. Their success is often contingent on their ability to position themselves favourably when macro circumstances change, especially when new fronts materialise. However, this is a costly strategy. Hegemony over the JSM is associated with changing modes of organisation that can weaken centralised organisational control and exacerbate internal divisions. International opposition to AQ and IS affiliated groups additionally illustrates a second central dilemma particularly relevant to post-2011 expansion of Islamist local governance. New expectations that jihadi groups set up local structures of governance can change their organisational making. More importantly, local governance has become antithetical to organisational affiliation with internationalist groups. Such a contextualisation illustrates the prospective choices of the components of the JSM after 2017.

A Multi-level Understanding of the Jihadi Social Movement (JSM)

Jihadi strategic studies have successfully synthesised jihadi groups' ideological productions with their political and environmental underpinnings.[5] However, two quandaries remain. First, jihadi armed groups are constrained by their modes of organisations. Even though their long-term strategic objectives, ideological commitments, and doctrinal positions inform their actions [6], jihadi groups are not strategic black boxes following a written strategic recipe.[7] Rationalist analysis argues that, regardless of their intentions, armed groups are affected by multiple trade-offs between security, efficiency, and control.[8] How to control the actions of group members and their financial provisions when the requirements of tight organisational control is incompatible with the secrecy required by your group? What is the most appropriate organisational structure between decentralised designs, which are safer but less conducive to internal discipline, and hierarchical models?[9] Although rationalist paradigms tend to overlook armed groups' ideological frameworks, additional ideational constraints exist. Socialising armed groups' members around strong ideological tenets means that the latter cannot easily be dismissed when they become counter-productive. Armed groups' ideologically committed members are more likely to defect or switch allegiance when their leaders retreat from their stated ideological commitments.[10]

Second, jihadi groups' broader patterns of interaction matter. This includes the number of groups, their relative size, and the overall balance of power.[11] Jihadi groups' analogous ideological outlooks and objectives have exacerbated factional rivalry in increasingly competitive environments.[12] If they want to achieve their long-term publicised objectives, they have to prevail over multiple competitors who are vying to recruit new members in similar constituencies, attack the same enemies, and potentially control shared geographic areas. This setting explains why organisational survival often predominates over the achievement of other long-term objectives. Analysing these groups' internal interactions is therefore necessary to interpret the interplay between their ideological and organisational construction, factional interactions, and reaction to broader environmental change. Furthermore, considering the Salafi jihadi trend as a whole instead of merely focusing on individual factions can help to distinguish jihadi groups' internal and external objectives. Jihadi groups compete to achieve their stated ideological objectives (the external dimension) and to prevail within their broader social movement (the internal dimension). However, internal hegemonic drives are often overlooked, although these easily trump armed groups' explicit objectives.

This research therefore examines the Salafi jihadi trend in a multilevel analytical framework that integrates the ideational and material features of these groups' modes of organisation, macro-level developments, and cross-factional interactions. Moreover, this article analyses the Salafi jihadi trend in the *longue durée* to reconstitute broader patterns of developments that cannot necessarily be altered easily, as argued in recent civil war studies. [13]

This research situates individual Salafi jihadi groups in a jihadi social movement (JSM) from which they initially originated. Social movement studies define the JSM by its structuring networks, shared ideological corpus and approach to religion, as well as conflict issues, and use of violence in their repertoires of action.[14] The roots of the JSM are situated in Egypt and Syria where armed groups embracing the Salafi approach to Islam legitimised the use of violence against authoritarian domestic authorities in the 1970s. The JSM then coalesced during the war in Afghanistan when thousands of Muslim foreign fighters and activists gathered to undo the Soviet occupation. These actors collectively elaborated an activist approach to political action, legitimising the use of violence against domestic Muslim authorities and foreign occupants within a Salafi theological corpus. [15] The Salafi jihadi trend that evolved agglomerated a plurality of groups and networks fighting to impose their conception of Islamic law across the Muslim world and expel foreign forces. From Afghanistan to Bosnia and Iraq, the constitutive networks of the JSM, its ideological corpus, historical narrative [16], and peculiar repertoires of violence then collectively differentiated it from other Islamist armed groups [including those stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)]. Numerous internal conflicts, sometimes degenerating into violent confrontations, do not negate Salafi jihadi groups' shared initial belonging to the JSM, from the inclusive Ahrar al-Sham to the exclusivist Islamic State.

The second analytical level is formed by the macro-level. Armed groups are affected by structural changes inducing substantial consequences on their evolution. As in the political opportunities theorised by social movement scholars, macro-level developments transform the features of armed groups' external environments and their collective actions. The American decision to invade Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2011 Arab uprisings are quintessential systemic changes; these decisions altered the Salafi jihadi trend's ideological corpus, organisational making, and relation to the broader environment. In contrast with non-systemic developments, macro-level changes have lasting, transformative effects.

The last analytical level refers to Salafi jihadi groups' internal making. Armed groups' structures vary across cases, depending on distinctive pre-war networks and wartime modes of organisation. Pre-war networks notably shape their organisational developments after the beginning of a conflict in combination with endogenous and exogenous processes.[17] For instance, uncontrolled organisational expansion can erode armed groups' ability to control their followers, use violence in line with their political objectives, and control broader ideological developments. It is therefore necessary to consider armed groups' internal structures and their interplay with broader social movement and macro developments.

The JSM: From Multiparty Rivalry to AQ's Hegemony

The JSM is the fruit of the 1980's war in Afghanistan. The JSM crystallised against the backdrop of a moment of reckoning for the Islamist movements settled in the region. How to use in-war military experience to free the Muslim world from domestic despotism and foreign occupation? What should be the military priority? What is the position regarding strategic alternatives, including parliamentary opposition? Such questions divided these groups according to diverging national priorities, ideological commitments, and political preferences. Moreover, inter-factional rivalry in a competitive environment radicalised their positions on an array of political and theological issues - with lasting consequences. The crystallisation of the Salafi jihadi trend in exile triggered its doctrinal formalisation in a Salafi theology demarcated from the ideologies of other Islamist movements. The political rationales of jihad motivated by authoritarianism were notably supplanted by theological rationales based on Salafi doctrinal concepts (primarily *al-wala wal-bara*) by new ideologues, including Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada, and Sayyid Imam al-Sharif.[18]

The JSM remained scattered throughout the 1990s. Most Salafi jihadi groups departing Afghanistan focused on their homelands. Only a minority dispatched throughout the Muslim world, including Osama bin Laden's organisation whose early achievements were rather modest in scope. As a self-defined elitist vanguard, al-Qaida was torn between different strategic choices before dedicating itself to focusing on the American enemy by the mid-1990s. This decision coincided with nationally-focused Salafi jihadi groups' strategic failures in Algeria and Egypt. AQ tried to exploit the momentum and absorb them under its banner but ultimately failed. [19] The 1996's declaration of war against the United States and the 1998's creation of a World Islamic Front did not achieve the intended objectives. Beyond tactical cooperation, no Salafi jihadi group formalised any organisational integration with AQ before 2001. Bin Laden's plan to unite the Salafi jihadi trend was opposed by major jihadi groups and commanders, from the Egyptian Islamic Group (*al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*) to Khattab in Chechnya. Bin Laden only managed to integrate several leaders of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad in spring 2001 but AQ remained a comparatively minor player in the 1990s. The organisation paled in comparison with larger Algerian and Egyptian groups while its cause failed to reach the popularity of jihadi groups' war in Chechnya.

AQ's 9/11 attacks facilitated the seizure of the JSM's leadership. Although the rationale and modus operandi behind the 9/11 attacks was very contentious amongst most jihadi groups, including AQ's own consultative council, the American declaration of a never-ending "war on terror" favourably positioned the group at the forefront of Islamist armed opposition to America's military presence in the Middle East. The U.S.'s successive interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were critical macro upheavals that significantly bolstered AQ's popularity among a new generation of Muslims appalled by the apparent impunity of America's military operations in the region. Moreover, the American focus on AQ marginalised the nationally-focused Salafi jihadi groups that previously had failed to achieve their domestic objectives. AQ exploited the aftermath of 9/11 to recruit

previously unaffiliated youths in the Middle East, gather extensive financial support, and eventually impose its hegemony over the Salafi jihadi trend through its franchising strategy.[20] After 9/11, jihadi Salafism became virtually indistinguishable from AQ as bin Laden's organisation exploited American ill-fated choices to become the new social movement hegemon.

AQ's hegemony was also consolidated in the 2000s on non-military fronts. The group's exclusive opposition to Western countries coincided with the growth of new means of communication. Online platforms and satellite TV channels *(especially al-Jazeera)* publicised AQ's communiqués and positions, which bolstered the group's monopolisation of the Salafi jihadi narrative in the absence of any significant alternative. New sympathisers therefore embraced the group's symbols, including the Afghan dress code and musical *nasheeds,* based on their support of AQ's agenda. Domestic opposition to authoritarian Muslim states gradually merged with AQ's foreign enemy agenda when local groups adopted AQ symbols, brand, and tactics to boost their own popularity.

But AQ's domination over the JSM combined with the dissolution of its safe-haven in Afghanistan substantially affected its internal factionalisation. While the organisation defined itself as an elitist avant-garde seeking to liberate the Muslim *ummah* from foreign and domestic oppressors, the dispersal of its members abroad, in addition to the group's growing popularity, transformed its organisational structures. From a small organisation composed of a few hundred members sharing a joint experience in the Afghan conflict, AQ's new franchising strategy from North Africa to Yemen unprecedentedly broadened its ranks. The internal reaction to 9/11 and its immediate consequences demonstrated that even a small organisation whose leadership reside in a single place can easily divide over the wisdom of a single operation. But when thousands of previously unaffiliated members and commanders associated with AQ thereafter, bin Laden's main challenge became the maintenance of tight operational control over the effective use of violence.[21] Exercising internal hegemony over the JSM brought with it high costs for the organisation.

AQ's main predicament was that clear ideological tenets did not always align with limited political preferences. Newcomers' approach to violence often differs from the one of established leaders. This issue was particularly acute in Iraq, where AQ's designated leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi unleashed a counterproductive spiral of violence against Shi'ite Iraqis that contained the germs of post-2011 developments. In addition to the revulsion of many jihadis over AQ's Iraqi branch undisciplined violence against local opponents and, increasingly, against much of the population, AQ's reputation was tarnished in the Muslim world by the actions of Zarqawi's group. The brand became a costly banner for the Salafi jihadis that were still willing to be endorsed, including Somalia's Al Shabaab movement. Although AQ maintained its hegemony over the JSM until 2011, the factors that precipitated its decline preceded the Arab uprisings and the rise of IS.

The Diversification of the JSM and IS's Relative Domination after the Arab Uprisings

Unprecedented uprisings shattered the Arab world in 2011. In a few months, several states partially democratised while Libya and Syria descended into civil wars. In Libya, Western support for the burgeoning armed opposition successfully helped to overthrow the regime before militias started to assert their local control throughout the country. In Syria, the repression of massive protests triggered its transformation into a full-fledged civil war where Islamist armed groups gradually took the lead. Salafi jihadi groups prospered in these two countries, where they began to mobilise locally and internationally. The Arab Spring of 2011 represented a new macro upheaval for the JSM.[22]

This macro change presented new opportunities that restructured the JSM after the death of Osama bin Laden along three lines that reflected unspoken pre-2011 divisions. The new political openings in the Middle East and North Africa differentiated: (1) the individuals and groups that remained faithful to AQ and its legacy; (2) AQ's former branch in Iraq, whose dissociation from the organisation's central leadership emerged; and (3) the jihadi Salafis formerly marginalised by AQ's hegemony over the JSM, especially those who opposed the internationalisation of AQ's agenda from the late 1990s onwards.

AQ's pre-2011 domination seemed to publicly wane after the uprisings. Even the Salafi jihadis who remained faithful to AQ and their leaders initially downplayed the organisation's brand. Many groups endorsed the

generic label *ansar al-shari'a* (the partisans of sharia) to suggest that they were primarily local organisations with territorial concerns untainted by AQ's controversial legacy. This arrangement was particularly significant in Syria with the emergence of *Jabhat al-Nusra* (the Front of Support - JN). JN initially concealed its ties to AQ before going public when the split with Islamic State (IS) imposed the need for expressing an official allegiance to AQ to maintain the loyalty of its troops. However, the group's official allegiance did not entail a reproduction of pre-2011 public hegemony over the armed opposition to the regime. JN instead endeavoured to embed itself within the opposition to secure its long-term interests and gradually impose its project under non-AQ generic labels.

But JN's organisational expansion and integration in the Syrian opposition were costly for AQ. The group's transformation from an elitist vanguard into a larger entity with territorial aspirations altered the nature of its project. Although territorial aspirations previously materialised in Mali and Yemen, the multi-party nature of the Syrian insurgency imposed a repeal of the group's allegiance to AQ. While the nature of group's abrogated links to the organisation is contested, several former JN leaders and AQ-linked religious figures have strongly opposed the decision.[23] In all cases, JN's national priorities have taken precedence over AQ's transnational agenda.

The second group that distanced itself from AQ is IS. The roots of their disagreements spanned more than a decade, when AQ demurred al-Zarqawi's behaviour in Afghanistan. IS's dissent nonetheless remained forcibly concealed by AQ's unquestionable hegemony over the JSM before 2011. The death of bin Laden combined with new opportunities in Iraq and Syria, against the backdrop of a gradual 'Iraqisation' of IS's leadership, subsequently facilitated the group's emancipation.[24] When JN refused to remain under IS's authority, the latter's dispute with AQ's new leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was used to assert its independence. Then, the group's military prowess - in addition to new means of mobilisation abroad - magnified its influence worldwide. Although IS did not replicate AQ's hegemony over the JSM, the group undoubtedly became its dominant player. This status subsequently attracted new franchised groups, from Nigeria to the Philippines.

The restructuring of the JSM finally gave space to Salafi jihadi critics of AQ. These voices did not emerge in a vacuum. They had previously been marginalised by AQ's post-9/11 hegemonic control over the JSM. They were formed by jihadi fighters and ideologues who participated in previous jihads abroad and opposed bin Laden's agenda from the beginning or gradually expressed doubts over AQ's actions (especially after the war in Iraq).[25] But these jihadis did not have the means to propose a Salafi armed alternative to AQ before 2011, when the war in Syria presented an unprecedented opportunity. Most of the AQ critics identified with the group *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya* (AS), which was determined to develop a non-AQ non-MB alternative in Islamic politics from its early days. The group's gradual integration with the opposition only reinforced this strategic direction overtime.

The end of AQ's hegemony was finally reflected on non-military fronts. While Salafi jihadi cultural attributes used to be monopolised by AQ, post-2011 organisational diversification materialised along with cultural differentiation. IS's extensive use of social media and associated recruitment of adroit Westerners widened its production of Islamic *nasheed* and visual banners, broadcasting its modus operandi and *raison d'être* to a wider audience. Being a self-declared state with an internationalist outlook meant that IS broadened AQ's more limited constituency since every Muslim can potentially play a role in a state. Cultural production was also essential for AQ's jihadi critics. For instance, AS felt threatened by AQ's former monopoly on Salafi jihadi concepts and symbols. The group's founder argued that it soon became necessary to develop its own jihadi symbols and to reinterpret Salafi jihadi concepts in order to foster a distinctive collective group identity that could pre-empt the defection of its members to JN.[26] However, the group's national objectives and the absence of an explicit focus on foreign fighters narrowed down its cultural appeal to Syria. While AS can serve as a model for Salafi critics of AQ in other countries, it is questionable whether its influence can have a lasting impact comparable to AQ and IS's internationalism. AS is nonetheless a significant dissociation from the previous Salafi jihadi trend, towards a new and more inclusive project, reasserting national politics over theology and internationalism.

The Arab uprisings helped to fracture AQ's hegemony over the JSM. New opportunities and the succession

of the group's leadership by Zawahiri after bin Laden's death exposed pre-existing dividing lines and fuelled the emancipatory development of new actors on both sides of the spectrum. IS fought with AQ based on purist credentials and established a long called-for caliphate. AS distanced itself from AQ and jihadi Salafism itself by becoming a mainstream armed opposition group. Even AQ's initially faithful followers started to fluctuate between the national priorities and the organisation's transnational ambitions.

Future Prospects after IS's Territorial Losses

In 2017, two major developments changed the balance of power inside the JSM. When IS lost its wide territorial anchorage in Iraq and Syria, JN formed a new dominant player in the Syrian opposition (*Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), the Committee for the Liberation of the Levant) that nearly took over North West Syria after officially cutting ties with AQ. This new internal setting is not a macro upheaval per se. It is primarily the outcome of a combination of endogenous processes and some level of foreign state intervention. But these developments potentially mark a turning point for the future of the JSM. These groups' recent histories help to delineate their prospects after 2017, based on a combination of internal decisions and Western countries' actions.

The first inference is that the JSM will remain internally diverse for the foreseeable future. No single actor is currently in a position to reproduce AQ's post-2001 hegemony over the JSM. IS's territorial losses will erode the group's domination over the JSM but the group is likely to survive. Recent setbacks are reminiscent of the misfortunes suffered in 2010, which did not impede the group's subsequent resurgence. IS still retains the allegiance of franchised groups abroad whose existence is not directly threatened. Its leaders will substitute territorial control with guerrilla warfare to destabilise new local authorities while waiting for the next phase of the conflict. In the meantime, IS's membership will become simultaneously more elitist and geographically centred on local strongholds. Foreign sympathisers will be conversely incited to attack their home countries to maintain the group's standing in the JSM. More generally, IS will build upon the narrative of the glorious days of the caliphate to maintain its distinction from AQ's failure to create a state while AQ could try to achieve some local or international victories to contest IS's recent domination over the JSM and thereby reassert itself.

On the other side of the spectrum, the nationally-focused jihadi critics of AQ will maintain their strategic dissociation from the JSM. AQ critics had long opposed the organisation's strategic choices and the war in Syria merely catalysed the emergence of an alternative on the ground. This alternative will not vanish. Its future prospects in Syria are primarily contingent on local developments. This inference does not mean that affiliated individuals cannot dissent and join AQ or IS if they believe that their group is in a strategic deadlock or on the verge of collapse. But the idea of a national jihadi project that opposes transnational violence while striving to be embedded in its local constituency is likely to remain. This project will not directly compete with AQ and IS's projects in terms of transnational mobilisation, although it is a credible alternative for jihadi groups fighting local authorities. While AQ's local branches have hitherto maintained their allegiance to the organisation, they could eventually be inclined to pursue a similar path if their loyalty erodes and if and when they realise that their interests would better be served by taking an independent course.

Third, the rise of local jihadi governance will have lasting consequences. With a few exceptions, pre-2011 governance was a rarity but local experiments quickly spread afterwards throughout the Muslim world. [27] These attempts are very diverse. They range from IS's establishment of an encompassing caliphate to local militias' control over limited territories to the gradual development of Syrian Islamist courts. The first consequence is that Islamist governance has materialised as a practical reality rather than an impalpable long-term objective. New experiments signify that Salafi jihadi constituencies have reasonable expectations that local armed groups establish local infrastructures to rule the population instead of remaining elitist avant-gardes. In turn, these expectations might transform jihadi organisational structures. When Salafi jihadi groups become more encompassing and internally diversified, their practical realities will change. The creation of state building alternatives means that they have to choose between the replication of the unviable IS's model, which entails the combination of local governance and foreign attacks that will be thoroughly opposed internationally, or insist that they do not have foreign objectives and gamble on the absence of foreign intervention. In all cases, the development of local governance is likely to alter their strategic outlooks.

This pivotal choice poses a particular dilemma for al-Qaida. While the development of locally embedded Salafi jihadi groups is imperative to compete against IS's model, their survival is contingent on their dissociation from the organisation. Remaining affiliated to AQ antagonises local allies and captures international attention if not intervention, which conjointly threatens a group's long-term viability. This puzzle has proven particularly fierce in Syria, where AQ's former local branch gradually had to modify its strategic approach. Notwithstanding existing debates on JN's real or pretended rupture with AQ, the group had to incorporate contested actors from a Salafi jihadi standpoint into a broadened organisational structure, consider compromises with so-called apostate regimes, and renounce foreign endeavours. Under present conditions, the group's utility for AQ is questionable, which explains its affiliated ideologues' quarrels with the new strategic direction. In the long run, AQ leaders face a problematic question: do they want AQ's domination over the JSM or simply the emergence of local and independent forms of Islamist governance throughout "liberated areas" in the Muslim world? These objectives might be eventually antithetical.

Other factors will additionally shape the fate of the JSM. Ongoing developments in Syria will be critical for the future. National and (unlikely) international acceptance of some form of HTS's governance in North West Syria could help the group consolidate itself locally, potentially eradicate its competitors (including AS), and erode AQ's local role. The alternatives presented by the group's competitors (including AQ, AS, and IS) would conjointly lose relevance. An intervention by Russian, Syrian, Turkish, Iranian or Western military forces that would eventually eradicate HTS's experiment would conversely reinforce AQ proponents. Losing local anchorage could help to resurrect a new AQ-led organisation that could resume its transnational ambitions.

This predicament has implications on Western governments' decisions. Any military intervention against officially non-AQ unaffiliated groups that do not directly threaten Western countries is paradoxically poised to bolster AQ and IS supporters. Western countries have to clearly delimit the frameworks of foreign military endeavours.[28] Furthermore, disaggregating the JSM [29] and exploiting their diverging viewpoints is critical to exacerbate internal differentiation. In turn, this choice means that Western countries have to tolerate the rise of Islamist alternatives on the ground, although their practices can be antithetical to Western world order preferences. The endogenous development of practical alternatives to AQ and IS's internationalist agendas is more credible than the "counter-messaging" increasingly promoted by Western countries.

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Notes

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[2] As argued by Seth G. Jones, "Will al Qaeda Make a Comeback?." *Foreign Affairs* (2017).

[3] E.g. Wiktorowicz, Quintan, (Ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004; Wickham, Carrie Rosefsky. *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political change in Egypt*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005; Meijer, Roel, "Taking the Islamist Movement Seriously: Social Movement Theory and the Islamist Movement." *International Review of Social History,* 50 (2005): p. 279; Wagemakers, Joas. *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[4] Armed groups combining the Salafi approach to Islam for the legitimisation of the use of violence against local Muslim rulers or Western states are included in this definition. The Egyptian Islamic and Jihad Groups, Algerian GIA, Libyan LIFG, and al-Qaida are the precursors, but Salafi armed groups active in Chechnya, Iraq, Syria, and other parts of the Muslim world are also included. Groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood legacy like Hamas are not.

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Bombings." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* 27,5 (2004), pp. 355-375; Ryan, Michael. *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

[6] Meijer, Roel. "Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong as a Principle of Social Action." *The Case of the Egyptian al-Jama'al al-Islamiyya;* in: Meijer, R, *Global Salafism. Islam's New Religious Movement,* Hurst (2009), pp. 191-195; McCants, William. *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. New York: Macmillan, 2015.

[7] For instance, many insisted that IS thoroughly followed Abu Bakr Naji's *Management of Savagery (2004)*.

[8] Shapiro, Jacob N. *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

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Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences

by Tore Refslund Hamming

Abstract

While known and feared as the most dangerous global jihadi group, since 2014 al-Qaida has only been involved in one attack in the West. In the same period, al-Qaida's renegade affiliate and current competitor, the Islamic State, has organised or taken responsibility for as many as 38 attacks, thus legitimately positioning itself as the primary threat against the West and pioneer of the global jihad movement. This article argues that the contestation and competition that emerged between the two groups as a result of their split in February 2014 is part of the explanation of the dramatic change in the enemy hierarchy, or political preferences, of the two most dominant Sunni jihadi groups. Furthermore, the article explains how the inter-group competition also prompted the definition of other jihadi actors, identified as the internal enemy, into the enemy hierarchy of al-Qaida and the Islamic State, although to a different extent.

Keywords: Al-Qaida; Islamic State; jihadism; strategy; competition; target selection

Introduction

The period 2014-2016 saw a record high number of jihadi plots in Europe [1], and, more broadly, in the West. Not only have jihadi groups or sympathisers never attempted on such a regular basis to conduct attacks against the *far enemy* in the West, but the main perpetrator responsible for such attacks has also shifted. Since 9/11 we have expected attacks against the West to come from al-Qaida (AQ), or one of its affiliates, but since 2014 the primary perpetrator of such attacks has, in fact, been the Islamic State (IS) [2] although al-Qaida continues to emphasise the importance of external operations in the West. Simultaneously, this time-period witnessed a hitherto unseen scale of 'domestic' jihadi campaigns against the *near enemy*. Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, the Sahel-region, Somalia, Chechnya, the Philippines, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region have all suffered from active jihadi campaigns of varying intensity whereby the primary enemies have been national governments and opposing religious groups. Interestingly, this intensification of the jihadi struggle against both Western targets and national governments in the Muslim world correlates with the emergence of the most momentous example of intra-jihadi contestation and competition witnessed in modern times. It began on February 3, 2014, when al-Qaida declared that the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham was no longer an al-Qaida affiliate.[3]

Studying the importance of ideology in terrorists' target selection, Drake has argued that "there is no single cause which can adequately explain terrorists target selection".[4] This article endeavours to examine to what extent the intra-jihadi contestation and competition [5] which emerged in early 2014 can be considered one of several causes that has affected how prominent Sunni jihadi groups, namely al-Qaida and the Islamic State, have prioritised their enemy hierarchies. Next to the increase in attacks and plots in the West, an important change occurred in the wake of *jihadi competition*. The Islamic State became more hybridized in its discourse and operations, targeting both local and global enemies. Al-Qaida, on the other hand, continued with its local focus, adopted after the Arab Spring. While losing the capability to launch centrally controlled external attacks, AQ nevertheless continues to promote global jihad rhetorically. In addition, the jihadi competition has emphasised the importance of a frequently neglected enemy category, *the internal enemy*, referring to other groups within the jihadi current. For both al-Qaida and the Islamic State the internal enemy has become of increasing importance, but the two groups have approached this sensitive issue in very different ways.

A convincing argument has been made that the Islamic State's external focus was a result of the launch of the international coalition against the group in Syria and Iraq.[6] Another argument is that such expansion of operational focus is a natural extension accompanying its transformation from a local jihadi group to a transnational caliphate. The intention here is not to discredit any of these explanations, but to present a

complementary one; that the inter-group competition similarly has affected the enemy targeting hierarchy of al-Qaida and the Islamic State, based on two distinctive logics. To show this, the article is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the concepts of contestation, competition and political preferences and how they may relate to one another. The second part presents the methodological approach and challenges of the research, including a discussion of the main empirical material used for the analysis. The third part briefly looks at historical examples of how the behaviour of jihadists has been affected by contestation and competition, while the fourth part zooms in on the relationship between al-Qaida and the Islamic State. This last part examines how the discourses and behaviour of al-Qaida and the Islamic State in relation to their political preferences have been before and after the competitive environment emerged. It is argued that competition played a part in the increasing hybridization of the Islamic State while it strengthened al-Qaida's re-orientation that was initiated already before the split between the two groups.

Contestation, Competition and Political Preferences

Contestation and competition between jihadi groups, or more broadly between insurgents and terrorist groups, is nothing new.[7] Della Porta explains that "radical organizations, like other political organizations, aim at attracting sympathizers through structure, actions, and frames that are apt for propaganda. In doing this, clandestine organizations compete in a crowded organizational field, in which they need to outbid their competitors".[8] The question here is how the dynamics of such competitive environment potentially affects the behaviour of these groups. Until the rise of the Islamic State, the jihadi movement appeared unified until 2013, with al-Qaida at the top of the hierarchy [9], representing the greatest threat to the West. However, since 2014 the vast majority of attacks and plots in the West have been linked one way or the other to its renegade affiliate, while al-Qaida has continued with a strong discursive focus on the far enemy. The simple argument would be that the Islamic State has been better at attracting actors in the West sympathetic to the jihadi cause and that al-Qaida as a result simply has not been capable of mobilising and orchestrating the kind of attacks it once became so infamous for. Although al-Qaida certainly has found it increasingly challenging to mobilise people due to the competition from the Islamic State, this argumentation is not satisfactory.

It is an often-held belief that al-Qaida is the main proponent of global jihad focused on the far enemy and believing that the establishment of the caliphate can wait. In contrast, the Islamic State was initially portrayed as a local and revolutionary group focusing on the near enemy and the resurrection of an Islamic state that would qualify as a caliphate.[10] On occasions this difference has been explained through the strategic maxims of Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji. Al-Suri (in addition to his often forgotten argument of open fronts) argued in favour of de-centralised jihad consisting of small, unaffiliated cells that attack in the West, a strategy – it is argued [11] – that corresponds to al-Qaida's strategic outlook post-9/11.[12] The Islamic State, on the other hand, has been following the ideas of Abu Bakr al-Naji, originally an al-Qaida ideologue. These stressed the importance of conquering and holding territory where an Islamic state can emerge and from where the jihadi campaign will continue.[13] Perhaps this strategic distinction did hold sway at some point and helped explain the strategy of al-Qaida and the nascent Islamic State in the past, but the global and revolutionary/local labels attached to the two groups fit less and less. In fact, this problem of labels, or certain typologies, was already addressed in 2009 by Hegghammer in an article on ideological hybridization, claiming that in recent decades almost all jihadi groups have been hybrids in terms of their enemy hierarchy, focusing both on the far and near enemy, although at varying degree and with temporal change.[14]

Several authors have already discussed the 'competition for jihadi supremacy' between al-Qaida and the Islamic State.[15] Most often they look at the trajectory of the groups, their ideological differences [16], the polarising effect of competition [17], and which one of the groups is most successful.[18] Some good recent studies on the jihadi threat against the West have been conducted, but mainly with a focus on the Islamic State. One conclusion has been that the Islamic State's interest in and/or ability to strike the West emerged in mid-2014 and since then the group has been the main jihadi threat based on number of committed attacks and planned plots.[19] Few thoughts, however, are given to how the *rivalry* between the two groups may affect their behaviour. Despite this relative absence of academic attention, we can rest assured that the internal competition certainly does

matter to these groups.[20] Since 2014, almost not a single magazine, statement or speech has been published by AQ and IS without mentioning the other ,explicitly or implicitly condemning the other. In the eyes of the Islamic State, al-Qaida has deviated from the correct jihadi methodology (*manhaj*) of Osama bin Laden [21]; its members have even been called the 'Jews of Jihad' [22] while 'wanted dead' posters for Zawahiri and other leading al-Qaida figures have been published. From the al-Qaida perspective, the Islamic State are extremists (*ghuluw*) or *khawarij*, who broke their pledge of allegiance (*bayah*) to al-Qaida and unrightfully claimed to be the sole legitimate proponents of jihad despite not commanding the necessary authority. Thus, when al-Qaida in January 2014 established al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) the emerging competition with the Islamic State most likely played a role.[23] Something similar can be said about both groups' strategic attitude to attract pledges of allegiance from other groups.[24]

Perhaps the most explicit treatment of the competitive dynamics between the two groups and their behaviour is Clint Watts' article '*Deciphering Competition Between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State*'. Watts differentiates between *escalating* competition and *destructive* competition to explain two modes of behaviour resulting from the internal competition. Escalating competition is when groups attempt to "outpace each other through expansive competition and it occurs when competing groups separate geographically and the perpetration of successful attacks leads to gains in notoriety and subsequent increases in resources." Destructive escalation on the other hand is "when terror groups attack each other"; it "arises predominately from internal splits when terrorist factions occupy the same terrain".[25] Watts' argument is that from the summer of 2013 until the caliphate was proclaimed in late June 2014 the two groups' relationship was characterised by destructive competition and only after the caliphate it took on an escalating character, which – he claims - from the perspective of the jihadists is positive. This, however, does not really fit with the realities on the ground as the competitive relationship is better explained as having both destructive and escalating features since the fall of 2013. However, it became increasingly more destructive as time went on. Attacks from one group on the other continue to this very day. The Islamic State's excommunication (*takfir*) of al-Qaida's Jabhat al-Nusra came at a later stage and not immediately after the split.

In the terrorism literature, the concept of *outbidding* has been the dominant theory to explain the effect of competition between terrorist groups on their behaviour.[26] The logic of outbidding is to demonstrate a group's capabilities, commitment and intentions relative to other groups. This logic was indeed evident in Mia Bloom's research on how both religious and nationalistic Palestinian groups adopted suicide bombings as a tactic to keep up with the popularity of Hamas.[27] Using a quantitative approach to study the likelihood of outbidding as the result of competition between terrorist groups, Nemeth nuanced Bloom's argument by arguing that in some contexts competition is more likely to lead to less violence and thus not to outbidding. However, Nemeth claims this is mainly valid for left-wing terrorist groups and not for religious groups. For those he concludes, similarly to Bloom, that competition often does indeed lead to a process of outbidding. [28] Although most studies of outbidding processes have focused on the tactical level, the theory can plausibly be extended to a strategic level as well. This can help us to understand how the struggle for power between al-Qaida and the Islamic State influences the groups' strategic decision *which* enemies to attack.

In this context, competition is understood to occur when groups that share an ideology (or an almost similar ideology) start targeting each other through words and/or actions or when they adopt new strategies and/or tactics clearly caused by the success of a rival group. This is in line with Nemeth's view of competition between groups that *share* an ideology as well as with Donatella Della Porta's idea of intra-movement competition between groups emerging from the same *social movement family*.[29] Even though discursive and, in some instances, military attacks of one group against the other did occur during 2013, local cooperation between al-Qaida and Islamic State members was still feasible.[30] Hence, it is more plausible to propose that intra-movement competition really emerged only from February 2014 onwards when the two groups officially split, cooperation was no longer taking place and infighting became a regular occurrence. Watts is, of course, correct when observing that competition both provides risks and opportunities. The emergence of the Islamic State undoubtedly influenced how other jihadi groups, including al-Qaida, were perceived - both regarding their *radicalness* and in terms of the threat they pose. Therefore, it presented al-Qaida with an opportunity to

position itself in a positive light in contrast to the Islamic State's barbarity. The risk for al-Qaida, however, was that it would be overtaken and considered more or less obsolete. This, in fact, has been a clear objective of the Islamic State as it has strived to become the most prominent jihadi group on the market and its strategy to achieve this feat has been to do what other groups do, but do it better. If the Islamic State came to be perceived as the strongest challenger to the enemies of the *ummah* [Islamic community]both locally and globally then there would be no room for other jihadi groups, including al-Qaida.

Interestingly, from the perspective of the power struggle within the global jihadi movement, two distinctive mechanisms seem to be at play. For the Islamic State a process of *outbidding* began around 2014 as a way of challenging the supremacy of al-Qaida. The Islamic State's escalation of gruesome tactics such as videotaped decapitations and burning captives can be considered examples of outbidding on a tactical level while its increased focus on international targets amounted to outbidding on a strategic level. Based on Kydd and Walter's identification of outbidding as one of five logics for terrorist action [31], Novenario has studied Islamic State and al-Qaida magazines and she also concludes that Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine shows a much higher percentage of the use of outbidding strategy compared to the al-Qaida magazines (42% to 23%).[32] Already concerned about its popular image well before the rise of the Islamic State, al-Qaida has been hesitant to follow the example of its more violent competitor, despite its initial success, and has stuck with a more cautious approach of hedging bets. Hedging bets is understood as a more conservative approach whereby an actor abstains from taking a clear position with the aim of not making a future mistake. In the case of al-Qaida, it seems likely that, as part of its changed strategy, it has largely abstained from organising or directing attacks in the West with the objective to win the support of local populations in its areas of operations. At the same time AQ continued to stress a Western focus in its discourse in order not to lose support from its more radical constituency. Alternatively, it could be argued that the decline in al-Qaida's Western attack is a direct result of its diminishing international attack capability, mainly caused by the loss of core operational figures. Although this certainly had an impact, it does not explain the almost complete halt in Western attacks and planning in a satisfactory manner - as will be elaborated later on. Belittling the importance of intra-movement dynamics on political preferences, a strong argument can be made that the uptick in Western attacks was a consequence of the call for attacks by Adnani as a retaliation to the launch of the international anti-Islamic State (and later against al-Qaida as well) coalition bombing attacks on IS positions.[33] This also fits with the general framing of retaliation employed by the Islamic State. It seems unlikely, however, that the launch of the international campaign would cause the Islamic State, a previously nationally (or regionally) focused group, to become the lead proponent of global jihad and, furthermore, it does not help us understand the logic behind al-Qaida's behaviour.

Methodological Reflections

The best way to study a group's political preferences, or enemy hierarchy [34] is to examine its discourse and behaviour, i.e. on whom it actually focus its attacks on. Therefore, I examine quantitatively and qualitatively how senior group leaders have defined the enemy in their official speeches and statements and what kind of actors the two groups have been targeting. The time-period starts in 2010 and goes until June 2017. It is divided into two periods: 2010 to 3 February 2014 (characterised by no competition) and 4 February 2014 to 30 June 2017 (characterised by competition). I am aware that some level of competition certainly was present while the Islamic State was still part of al-Qaida, especially in the period April 2013 to February 2014, but to simplify the analysis, the intersections are made according to formal events that affected the inter-group relations. The examination begins in 2010 to facilitate an analysis of the group discourse and behaviour for a longer period *before* the competitive environment emerged and even before the Arab Spring erupted. I have compiled a database of attacks and plots in the West (understood as Europe, the United States, and Australia) related to either al-Qaida (including its affiliates, except al-Qaida in Iraq) or the Islamic State covering the period 2010 until June 2017. The selection criteria for attack/plot inclusion follows that of Nesser and Hegghammer in their assessment of the Islamic State's commitment to attacking the West.[35] This implies that attacks/ plots that are not orchestrated by a group, but merely claimed afterwards or that the perpetrator somehow

indicates affiliation with, or sympathy for, one group are included. Creating similar databases for attacks/plots against the near enemy and the internal enemy would be desirable but is simply not feasible due to the vast number of attacks. Hence, this aspect will be dealt with qualitatively. Of course, some may argue that it does not make sense to look at the Islamic State prior to 2014 independently as it was still believed to be an affiliate of al-Qaida and therefore operating under al-Qaida's directives. However, as history clearly shows, the Islamic State's predecessor was not afraid of acting in accordance with its own ideas - no matter what the opinion of the al-Qaida leadership was. How the group prioritised its enemies prior to the split with al-Qaida is thus considered an expression of whom it considered as its main adversaries. The reason for studying the discourses and operations of the groups before and after the competitive environment emerged is to find out if and how the groups have changed - how they define their enemies and to what extent they act upon it.

The study of jihadi groups' political preferences, i.e. which enemy jihadi groups focus on, has already been initiated by a few excellent scholars. The traditional distinction, popularized by Fawaz Gerges' work on Sunni militancy, is that of the *near* and the *far* enemy. It has been widely used in academia and in political analyses. [36] Hegghammer subsequently offered a more elaborate and nuanced typology that provides five different rationales for violent (and non-violent) behaviour.[37] For the purpose of this research, however, a simple typology to distinguish enemy hierarchies is sufficient. In addition to Gerges' categories of the near and far enemy, I will add a third: the *internal* enemy. The internal enemy is the definition of another jihadi actor (individual or group) as an enemy. More than ever this extremely sensitive category has become relevant in the era of intense intra-jihadi contestation.

Sources and Database

The sources used to analyse the discursive identification of the enemy are speeches and statements from the most senior group figures as these are considered the most authoritative persons when it comes to defining the enemy hierarchy of the group. For al-Qaida, I rely on speeches and statements from group leader Osama bin Laden and, after his death, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Seven speeches of bin Laden from the period 2010-2011 and 40 speeches and statements from Ayman al-Zawahiri from 2011-2017,totalling 47, are included. For the Islamic State and its predecessor, I look at speeches and statements from its leader and spokesperson. It includes one speech by late emir Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, 10 speeches from the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 19 speeches by the late spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, and three speeches by the current spokesperson Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir (totalling 33). Although some speeches and statements may have been missed, the included material is considered sufficient for a trustworthy examination of how the two groups have defined their enemy hierarchy in the covered period. For an overview of the material, see Appendix A.

The database developed by this author includes jihadi attacks and plots connected to al-Qaida and the Islamic State respectively, for the period 2010-2017. It builds upon existing databases collected by Hegghammer and Nesser on Islamic State related attacks in the West from January 2011 through June 2015 [38], Nesser on jihadi attacks and plots in Europe [39] and Orton on Islamic State's external attacks.[40] However, the database has been expanded and updated to fit the purpose of this research. For the Islamic State, a total of 38 attacks and 32 plots are included and for al-Qaida five attacks and 20 plots. For an overview of attacks and plots, see Appendix B. All attacks and plots have been categorised based on their connection to either the Islamic State and al-Qaida, using the four categories presented by Orton: *controlled, guided, networked* and *inspired*.[41] This allows for excluding only loosely connected attacks and plots. The focus is on *controlled* and *guided* attacks that have some level of active group engagement.

The Enemy Hierarchy of al-Qaida and the Islamic State

Despite the contentious nature of the 9/11 attacks within al-Qaida, the attack certainly cemented the group as the primary proponent of global jihad and the foremost jihadi threat to Western security. In al-Qaida's view, however, establishing an Islamic state let alone a caliphate could wait as the priority was to cut what it termed 'the head of the snake', meaning external states supporting Arab regimes - foremost among these the United

States. Initially, when the Islamic State of Iraq expanded into Syria in 2013, it was seen as more locally oriented, focusing on creating an Islamic state in Iraq and Syria and mainly advocating defensive jihad against Muslim rulers. In two separate speeches from 2007 and 2008, respectively, its former leader, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, had argued that "The rulers of Muslim lands are traitors, un-believers, sinners, liars, deceivers, and criminals" and that "[we believe that] fighting them is of greater necessity than fighting the occupying crusader."[42] Today's priorities of the Islamic State have become much more hybridised. Interestingly, this shift in priorities fits well with the organisational trajectory of splitting with al-Qaida and engaging in a momentous struggle for jihadi authority. The next section looks into how the two groups' leadership have defined the enemy discursively. This is followed by a section on what actors the groups have been fighting in the 2010-2017 period.

The Discursive Definition of the Enemy

Al-Qaida and the Islamic State both regularly publish official speeches, statements, magazines, videos etc. Often such publications, partly at least, deal with whom they consider the legitimate enemy or what enemy that should be prioritised at a given time. Here I study leadership statements from the period 2010-2017 of both groups. I consider such statements particularly indicative of which enemy the groups should fight or, at least, what enemy hierarchy the groups would like to be associated with. The statements have been divided into the two defined periods – the first ranging from 2010 to January 2014 characterised by an absence of competition and the second, from February 2014 to July 2017, characterised by intra-movement competition. As these statements always discuss a wide range of issues, including talking about all enemies in condemnatory language, only direct calls for attacks against a certain enemy are included. Table 1 shows the number of times the near, far or internal enemy has been defined as an explicit target in the given period.

Al-Qaida leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri			
	Near enemy	**Far enemy**	**Internal enemy**
2010 - January 2014 (19 speeches/statements)	8 times	10 times	0
February 2014 – July 2017 (28 speeches/statements)	8 times	9 times	0
Islamic State leaders Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and spokespersons Abu Muhammad al-Adnani and Hassan al-Muhajir			
2010 - January 2014 (12 speeches/statements)	9 times	1 time	0
February 2014 – July 2017 (21 speeches/statements)	14 times	11 times	2 times

Table 1: Al-Qaida leaders' calls for attack against the near, far and/or internal enemy.

In the period 2010 to January 2014, 19 statements by al-Qaida leaders, Osama bin Laden (seven statements in 2010-2011) and Ayman al-Zawahiri (12 statements from 2011-2014), have been included. As Table 1 shows, calls for attacks against both the near and the far enemy have been regular in the discourse of the al-Qaida leaders, illustrating an example of almost perfect hybridization. Interestingly, in his seven statements from 2010 until his death in May 2011, Bin Laden called for attacks against the West on five occasions, while he at no point called for similar attacks against apostate governments. When al-Zawahiri took over the leadership of al-Qaida this picture changed as the near enemy became the main focus for a period. Some might argue that this shows al-Zawahiri's consistent focus on the near enemy back from his time as leader of the Egyptian Al Jihad group, never really subscribing to global jihad to the extent Bin Laden did. However, a better explanation is probably the occurrence of the Arab Spring which al-Zawahiri tried to capitalise on. Especially in 2012, al-Zawahiri's full focus was on the local rather than the global struggle. This changed in 2013 and from July to September of that

year, the al-Qaida leader published three statements calling for attacks against the US. In his *General Guidelines for Jihad* he argued that "The military work firstly targets the head of (international) disbelief, America and its ally Israel, and secondly its local allies that rule our countries" and that the mujahideen should "(a)void entering into an armed clash with the local regimes, except if forced to do so".[43] A few days later he elaborated that "keeping America in tension and anticipation only costs a few disparate attacks here and there, meaning as we defeated it in the guerrilla warfare in Somalia, Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan, so we should follow it with that war on its own land".[44] This 'renewed' focus on the far enemy came about in April 2013, at the time when tensions started to emerge between the Islamic State and al-Qaida.

In the same period, the Islamic State leadership, represented by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and quickly replaced by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and its spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, issued 12 statements. In stark contrast to the discourse of the al-Qaida leaders and very much in continuation of Abu Umar's early statements, the leaders of the Islamic State almost exclusively called for attacks of the near enemy, meaning the Iraqi government and Shiite militias. Illustrative of this discourse, al-Adnani explained that "(y)our first enemy is the [Shi'ites], and after them the Jews and the Crusaders".[45] A year later, he was supported by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's instigation of attacks: "So rise, O lions of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and cure the frustration of the believers and attack the hateful Rafidah [Shi'ites], the criminal Nusayris, the Party of Satan [Hezbollah] and those who come from Qum, Najaf and Tehran."[46] Only in July 2012 did the Islamic State leader threaten the US by saying: "As for your [US] security, your citizens cannot travel to any country without being afraid. The mujahideen have launched after your armies, and have sworn to make you taste something harder than what Usama had made you taste. You will see them in your home".[47] Interestingly, in the last two statements, in January 2014, al-Adnani and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi both intensified the rhetorical focus on the far enemy without explicitly inciting to attacks. In his speech *The Pioneer Does Not Lie to His People*, al-Adnani said that "(a)lthough the Americans are a primary enemy, too, the danger posed by the Rafidah is greater and their harm is more severe and deadly on the Ummah than the Americans."[48] In this period, neither al-Qaida nor the Islamic State leaders called for attacks on the opposite group, *the internal enemy*. In his *guidelines* from September 2013, al-Zawahiri mentions for the first time the internal enemy as a potential conflict focus, but instead of calling for attacks, he commands that aggressiveness from other Muslim groups be only responded with minimal force. Two months earlier, in July 2013, al-Adnani was slowly grooming his group's sympathisers for a fiercer attitude towards competing jihadi factions when stating that "the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant faces the fiercest wars, and it has in this field three foes: the disbelievers with all their trumpets and media; the apostates from among us with all their sects and bad scholars; and the people of desires and false innovations, and those Muslims who follow deviant methodologies, and not only that, but even from some of those who are counted from among the mujahideen."[49]

The official split between al-Qaida and the Islamic State in early February 2014 (the Islamic State, of course, claims this had already happened in October 2006) critically affected both groups' discourses, but in very different ways. For al-Qaida, Zawahiri continued a hybridized discourse, emphasising attacks on both the near and the far enemy, but at the same time he started to spend considerably more time discussing other jihadi groups, namely the Islamic State, again without ever calling for attacks against the group.[50] Especially his *Islamic Spring* lectures dealt with the Islamic State; in these he tried to position al-Qaida as the group following the correct jihadi methodology (*manhaj*). Although he continues to call for attacks against the near enemy [51], he is nevertheless consistent in defining the far enemy as the primary enemy. In April 2015 al-Zawahiri said: "So I see that we should focus now on moving the war to their own home and the cities and installations of the Crusader West, led by America" [52] and in two statements from November and

December, respectively, he said: "The first matter is striking the West and specifically America in its own home, and attacking their interests that are spread everywhere",[53] adding: "We must move the battle to the enemy's own home, especially Europe and America, because they are leaders of the contemporary Crusader campaign".[54] His calls for attacks against the Saudi and Egyptian governments and the Ba'athists-Nusayri-Rafidah alliance fade in comparison. A similar identification of the far enemy as the primary enemy is echoed by al-Qaida's affiliates. Abdulmalik Droukdel, the leader of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), called,

in March 2017, on his group to attack French cities.[55] In the magazine Al Masra, the new al-Qaida outfit Jama'at al-Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimeen identified France as enemy number one.[56] For al-Qaida's affiliate in Yemen, Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the West is defined as the ultimate enemy although AQAP had intensified its anti-Shia rhetoric since 2014 .[57] A similar message can be found in Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent's (AQIS) new *Code of Conduct* from June 2017.[58] In Zawahiri's own statement *Sham will submit to none except Allah,* from April 2017, he warned in a clear reference to his former affiliate now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham that the mujahideen in Syria should be careful about not becoming too nationalist when focusing its actions.

The new competitive environment also led the Islamic State to adopt a much more hybridised focus in its leaders' discourse. Already in March 2014, Islamic State spokesman al-Adnani had asked rhetorically "Who is it today that are the bitter enemies of America? (…) Who is it that enrages them? Who is it that threatens their security? (…) There is no doubt that they are the mujahideen, but I ask you by Allah, O seeker of Jihad, is the Islamic State not on the top of this list?".[59] Four months later, but still one month prior to the first airstrikes by the international coalition against the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi started to call for attacks against Western crusaders, and as coalition airstrikes intensified, so did the Islamic State's rhetoric. In September 2014, al-Adnani pronounced his now infamous order: "kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State".[60] In January 2015, he said "we renew our call to the muwahhidīn in Europe and the disbelieving West and everywhere else, to target the crusaders in their own lands and wherever they are found." In the same speech he calls upon his supporters to destroy the Saudi monarchy, but simultaneously promotes a familiar global jihadi argument saying "There is no difference whether they are present or not, for the real rulers of the lands of al-Haramayn are the Jews and crusaders, not Salman or Bin Nayef".[61] This certainly does not sound like Abu Umar al-Baghdadi in 2007-2008 or even 2010. Around this time, however, the near enemy still appeared to be the main enemy of the Islamic State, but this was about to somehow change when al-Adnani in May 2016 called for sympathisers to focus on Western attacks rather than emigrate and fight the near enemy. "O slaves of Allah, O muwahhiddin!" he said, "If the tawaghit [tyrant] have shut the door of hijrah [migration] in your faces, then open the door of jihad in theirs. Make your deed a source of their regret. Truly, the smallest act you do in their lands is more beloved to us than the biggest act done here; it is more effective for us and more harmful to them".[62] Illustrative of an important difference between the Islamic State and al-Qaida, al-Adnani continued arguing that all targets were legitimate and even what some considers civilians would be the best of targets.[63] Al-Adnani's successor, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, has continued this new hybridised rhetoric, calling for attacks against both the near and the far enemy in each of his three statements.

Although the two groups officially had split at this point in time, exchanging harsh words for one another, and in the context of Syria they were quickly to be caught in infighting, their leaders were still hesitant to explicitly call for attacks against the other part. At no point did al-Zawahiri cross the line and call for attacks against the Islamic State and in the initial period of infighting his commander in Syria, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, even instructed his Jabhat al-Nusra fighters to stay passive in case of Islamic State attacks and not retaliate under any circumstances.[64] The absence of explicit calls for attacks on the Islamic State does not imply that al-Zawahiri had not discussed the group and its transgression against al-Qaida. Especially in the second lecture of *the Islamic Spring* he opens up for a discussion of the renegade al-Qaida affiliate, defining the boundaries for when jihadis are either with or against the group.[65] Islamic State leaders initially showed a similar hesitance to call for attacks against other jihadi groups after the split, but on several occasions al-Adnani came close to crossing this 'sacred' line. In his two statements *This is not Our Method, and It Will not Be* and *Apologies Amir al-Qa'ida* from April and May 2014, respectively, he gets as close as possible, but he stays on the path of clarifying the relationship between the groups. In October 2015, however, this was no longer enough, as al-Adnani, in a clear reference to al-Qaida, said,

"We will divide the groups and break the ranks of the organizations. Yes, because there is no place for groups after the revival of the Jamaʿah (the Khilāfah). So away with the organizations. We will fight the movements,

assemblies, and fronts. We will tear apart the battalions, the brigades, and armies, until, by Allah's permission, we bring an end to the factions, for nothing weakens the Muslims and delays victory except the factions."[66]

Indicative of how sensitive the issue of proclaiming takfir on another well-respected jihadi faction was, is the fact that the Islamic State did, to this author's knowledge, not officially pronounce takfir (excommunicate) on al-Qaida (or rather Jabhat al-Nusra) before November 2015. Locally on the battlefield, it happened well before and in its propaganda material, it took important steps in the direction such as in the article series *The Allies of al-Qa'idah in Sham* in Dabiq; here it finally culminated in part five of the series: Jabhat al-Nusra is referred to as apostates. Yet this delay clearly shows the sensitivity in proclaiming it loud and clear.

Fighting Which Enemy?

Rhetoric is one thing, actions another. This section looks into how the groups' discursive identification of the enemy corresponds to what enemies they are actually fighting. Using quantitative and qualitative material, it is divided between the *near enemy*, the *far enemy*, and the *internal enemy* to offer a nuanced depiction of how enemy hierarchies have been prioritised.

The Near Enemy

Based on their operations, it would probably be correct to argue that the near enemy, understood as national regimes and affiliated actors, such as security forces, has consistently been the enemy of highest priority for both al-Qaida and the Islamic State since 2010. Although known for core AQ's focus on the West and especially the US, al-Qaida's affiliates' focus has been on fighting national actors. Of course, the Arab Spring and the opportunities public protests created have to some extent facilitated this. However, arguably it is more a result of a new approach of al-Qaida as dictated by Osama bin Laden in an internal letter to Atiyyatullah in May 2010 and reiterated the following year in a letter from Atiyyatullah to Nassir al-Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP.[67]

This local focus has been striking in all of al-Qaida's main conflict arenas including Yemen, the Sahel, Syria, and Somalia. The fight against local regimes was only intensified after the conflict with the Islamic State broke-out as al-Qaida affiliates around the region saw its chance to position themselves as legitimate defender of local Muslims, sometimes in contrast to the Islamic State, and sometimes to other rebel factions. Historically perceived as the 'most dangerous' and 'international' of al-Qaida's affiliates, AQAP in Yemen has almost exclusively focused its attacks on government and Houthi forces.[68] Similarly in Syria, al-Qaida's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra was explicitly ordered not to launch attacks in the West and rather direct its actions against the regime and, to some extent, the Islamic State. Al-Qaida's affiliate in the Sahel and North Africa, AQIM, has continued a combination of a local and a global focus, as previously explained by Filiu.[69] However, there is no doubt that the near enemy is the main operational focus while the far enemy (especially France) is attacked with words rather than actions and exclusively in the Sahel region and not in France. In Somalia al-Shabaab's main enemies have been Somali, Kenyan, and Ethiopian security forces and politicians.

For the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in the period from 2010 till early 2014, the Iraqi regime and the country's Shia population were the main enemies. This was already the case before 2010 and continued until ISI separated from al-Qaida in February 2014. On a few occasions prior to 2014, ISI had been connected to foreign plots, but five out of a total of six attacks took place between 2004 and 2005 [70] and the vast majority of its attacks have been directed against the government or Shia targets.[71] Although the Islamic State's enemy hierarchy became much more hybridized from 2014 onwards when the far and internal enemies started to take up more focus, it nonetheless continued to fight national regimes, most extensively in Syria and Iraq, but also in Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Nigeria and Afghanistan [72] (attacks have also taken place in other Muslim majority countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Tunisia, Turkey, Bangladesh, and the Philippines). Since the Islamic State is present in several active war theatres, this prioritisation of the near enemy - including its Shia component - will continue as the local struggle is a matter of survival and legitimacy. Of course, this is especially the case in Syria and Iraq as the Islamic State is here fighting the Assad and Abadi regimes and their militant Shia supporters on several

fronts. In places like Sinai and Libya, after being expelled from Sirte, the group could have opted to change its priorities, but it appears to stick to a focus on national targets.

The Far Enemy

Since 2010, al-Qaida has been connected to five attacks in the West, but four of these took place before 2014 and thus before strong competition with the Islamic State became a fact. On the other hand, the Islamic State has been connected to 40 attacks between 2010 and June 2017; 38 of these occurred after the group split from al-Qaida (see Figure 1). The split between the two groups thus represents a catalyser for a changing enemy hierarchy within the Islamic State and likely also reinforced al-Qaida's strategic plans. The wave of international attacks started in May 2014 when Mehdi Nemmouche, a young French man who had fought in Syria in the ranks of the Islamic State, killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. This was prior to the launch of the international coalition force's anti-Islamic State campaign, but really took off in the Fall of 2014. After the attack in Brussels, it emerged that Nemmouche was coordinating with Abdelhamid Abaaoud who was a central figure in the Islamic State's external operations.[73] The Islamic State had decided to launch an external operations campaign that a few months later would escalate and once again in the Summer 2015, after the group directed a large number of operatives to initiate a wave of violence in Western Europe.[74] In fact, according to Dutch intelligence, the Islamic State had begun, as early as late 2013, to put in place a specific internal structure to conduct external operations.[75]

As already touched upon by Hegghammer and Nesser, many attacks related to jihadi groups either because they explicitly claimed them or were due to other factors, have in fact little connection with the central organisation either through a direct command to carry out the attack not to say training with the group to prepare for an attack. If we only take into consideration attacks that have been either *controlled* (meaning attacks where operatives have been trained and have received specific instructions on targets and timing) or *guided* (meaning operatives receiving endorsement to attack and maintaining communication with the organisation during the preparation) [76], the picture remains almost the same as the total number of attacks connected to the two groups indicates (see Figure 1). Controlled or guided Islamic State attacks in the West similarly began in May 2014. These have consistently occurred at a high rate, peaking in the first half of 2016. For al-Qaida the picture is a little different as the group has only been responsible for one controlled or guided attack in each period. Although al-Qaida's rate of external operations in the West has never been comparable to the Islamic State's post-2014 attacks, the low number of attacks and plots after 2010 and particularly from 2014 forward indicates that al-Qaida did shift its code of conduct around 2010 and that it stayed true to, if not even reinforced, this strategy after the emergence of intra-jihadi competition.[77]
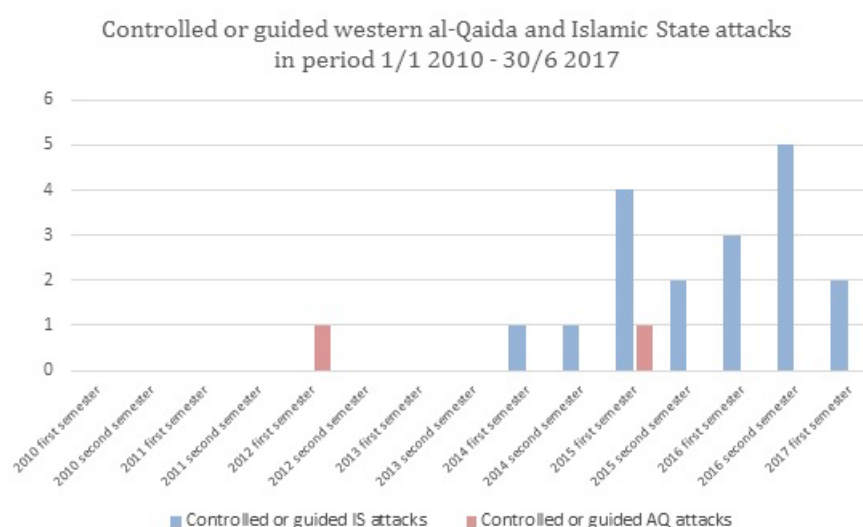
Figure 1

If we are to expand the examination to also include known plots related to the two groups, the conclusion remains the same (see Figure 2). Figure 2 shows plots that showed signs of control or guidance from one of the two organisations since 2010. Although information related to such plots is often scarce, it should be the same for both organisations and thus not entail any bias for one group or the other. The development of the number of plots corresponds well with the development in attacks as Islamic State related plots were discovered from February 2014 (none before) while al-Qaida related plots were of more frequent occurrence before 2014.
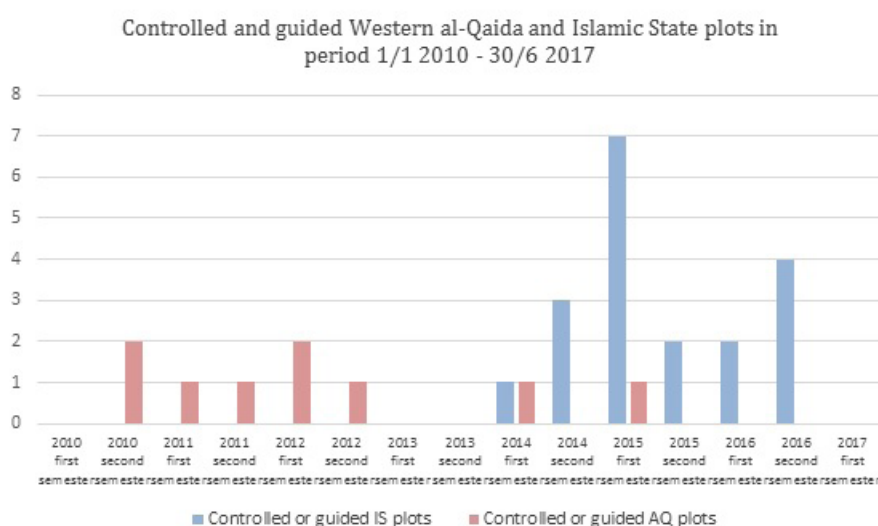
Figure 2

Examining the attacks and plots together, there is a clear image that up until February 2014, al-Qaida was the main jihadi threat against Western targets although this threat has often been exaggerated. The Islamic State was at this time still considered an al-Qaida affiliate, but in theory could have adopted a more international focus in line with AQAP, but this was not the case. Both numbers of executed attacks and plots linked to the organisations show that al-Qaida (one attack and seven plots from 2010 to February 2014) and not the Islamic State's predecessor (neither attacks nor plots from 2010 to February 2014) prioritised Western attacks. These numbers are in strong contrast to the post-February 2014 period where the Islamic State (18 attacks and 19 plots from February 2014 to June 2017) has positioned itself as the main proponent of global jihad,

leaving al-Qaida in the backseat (one attack and two plots from February 2014 to June 2017). Although the extremely high numbers of Islamic State related attacks and plots since February 2014 should be viewed in the context of the situation in primarily Syria and Iraq (and thus hardly compare to the pre-2014 period), the ratio between Islamic State and al-Qaida attacks and plots does indicate a shift in priorities and capabilities. As mentioned, the emergence of Islamic State attacks in the West is often framed as 'retaliation' for Western military engagement in the Middle East and certainly such retaliation helps account for the critical escalation that occurred in 2015-2016, not least due to the effects it had on mobilisation. However, it does not explain why it started in the first place.

Al-Qaida has suffered from diminishing capabilities to conduct external operations in the last decade. Between 2008 and 2009 the group lost several central external operations operatives [78] and in 2010 and 2011 lost important administrative coordinators.[79] Perhaps the most devastating blow, however, was arguably the shifting allegiance of al-Qaida sympathisers in the West after the split with the Islamic State since many potential AQ recruits chose to support its renegade affiliate IS.[80] Despite these operational setbacks, there are no indications that al-Qaida does not enjoy sufficient support among Western jihadi sympathisers or that it has lost so much of its operative capability that it can no longer coordinate or guide attacks in the West. Al-Qaida continues to have supporters in the West and foreign fighters among its ranks in battle zones, including more senior people who could function as entrepreneurs and coordinators. In his 2015 interview with al-Jazeera Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, then emir of al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, remarked that he had "received guidance [from al-Zawahiri] not to use Syria as a base for attacks against the West or Europe so that the real battle is not confused".[81] This was most likely similar for al-Qaida's affiliates in Yemen, Somalia and North Africa.

The Internal Enemy

Compared to the near and far enemy, the issue of fighting the internal enemy is much more sensitive both from a jurisprudential (*fiqh*) perspective, as it touches upon the illegality of shedding Muslim blood which should be avoided because it may lead to *fitna* (internal discord), and from a strategic perspective. Hence, fighting the internal enemy, understood as other groups that are considered part of the Sunni jihadi community and sharing a somehow similar ideology to oneself, rarely occurred before contestation erupted between al-Qaida and the Islamic State. Examples do exist, of course, especially from Afghanistan and Algeria which saw the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) and other jihadi groups at each others throats, but it was never institutionalised the same way as it became from January 2014 onwards. The conflict between al-Qaida and the Islamic State started already in April 2013 when the latter expanded its activities into Syria and declared that Jabhat al-Nusra had become part of the Islamic State - a claim that was quickly rejected by Nusra-leader Jawlani and by Ayman al-Zawahiri.[82] However, between April 2013 and February 2014 the inter-group relationship was not a full-blown conflict and reconciliation efforts were ongoing. When exactly the first armed aggression of one group against the other occurred is unknown But the first high-level attack was in late September 2013 when the Islamic State killed Jabhat al-Nusra's emir in Raqqa, Abu Sayyed al-Hadrami, just a few months after Jabhat al-Nusra had taken the city from Assad forces. According to Abu Firas al-Suri, a leading Nusra-figure, the reason Jabhat al-Nusra did not react more forcefully was because of the delicate timing of the killing which was during peace negotiations between the two groups.[83] Yet it could also have been due to the order issued by Jawlani not to respond aggressively at this stage.[84] From a Zawahiri letter dating May 2014 to Tareq Abdulhalim, Hani al-Sibai, Iyad Qunaybi, Abdullah al-Muhaysini, Muhammad al-Hassem, and Sami al-Uraydi we even know that this non-aggression command originally came from Zawahiri himself.[85] Alongside tensions and reconciliation efforts, the two groups still managed to collaborate in the Summer 2013 in coordinated attacks against the Assad regime. The last major joint operation was probably the one code-named 'Liberation of the Coast' in August 2013 as the inter-group relationship turned increasingly hostile one month later.[86] Not only was al-Hadrami killed but so was a senior Ahrar al-Sham member Abu Obeida al-Binnishi and the following month the Islamic State escalated the situation when it beheaded an Ahrar al-Sham fighter in Aleppo.[87] The Fall 2013 thus witnessed an emerging inter-group conflict mainly led by the Islamic State's expansionist ambitions in Northern Syria, but not an all-out war as was about to come.

From January 2014 onwards, the conflict between Syrian rebel groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State, escalated substantially, mainly as a result of the Islamic State upscaling its aggression. In what has been termed the *jihadi civil war*, most groups turned against the Islamic State after it killed Ahrar al-Sham's emir in Aleppo in January 2014 and a few months later Jabhat al-Nusra's emir in Idlib [88]. Yet perhaps the most influential event was the killing of Abu Khalid al-Suri, a founding member of Ahrar al-Sham and a long-time al-Qaida ally, by Islamic State suicide bombers on 21 February. On 14 January 2014, Ahrar al-Sham published a fatwa that legitimised fighting the Islamic State [89]. Although a similar aggressive attitude was not followed by al-Qaida affiliated ideologues, Jabhat al-Nusra did engage most substantially in the fight against the Islamic State from this point on. After the killing of al-Suri, Jabhat al-Nusra leader al-Jawlani wanted to step-up aggression against the Islamic State, but he referred the decision to the three acknowledged jihadi scholars Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filastini and Abu Sulayman al-Ulwan.[90] As explained by Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, two of the three scholars advised not to escalate the infighting. As a result Jabhat al-Nusra decided to respond only to Islamic State aggression when absolutely necessary.[91] Nonetheless, since February 2014 the internal enemy has been a regular priority on the enemy hierarchy of al-Qaida and the Islamic State although the latter's aggressiveness towards other jihadi groups including al-Qaida has been much fiercer.

Thus, despite scholars like al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada continuing to argue for non-aggression and only accepted retaliation against the Islamic State.[92] Infighting between jihadi groups is now of regular occurrence in Syria and, less so in other areas, where both groups are present. For example, after announcing its Wilayat Khorasan in January 2015, the Islamic State similarly started to fight the Taliban.[93] While al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada emphasised that focus should be on the local regimes and the Shia militias and neither on the far enemy nor the internal enemy, the Islamic State eventually proclaimed takfir on Jabhat al-Nusra, thus enabling a further escalation of the infighting. The sensitive nature of attacking other jihadi groups is underlined precisely by the hesitation of the Islamic State to officially proclaim takfir on Jabhat al-Nusra (or al-Qaida more generally) despite regularly attacking its soldiers. To this author's knowledge, the first example of the Islamic State excommunicating the al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra was in December 2015 in its magazine *Dabiq* when it referred to the group as apostate. A more formal explanation of the legitimacy of attacking Jabhat al-Nusra came in an internal Islamic State document numbered '*175*' in June 2016. Before that, already back in 2014, local Islamic State commanders declared takfir on Jabhat al-Nusra to facilitate the group's expansion in areas under Nusra's control. One example, as documented by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi from Wilayat al-Furat dating 8 January 2015, when the Islamic State calls for Jabhat al-Nusra fighters to repent.[94] Another early example is a series of tweets from 2014 by Abdur-Rahman al-Marzuqi, an Islamic State *shar'i* [legal scholar], in which he claims to provide evidence for Jabhat al-Nusra's apostasy.[95] Although such hostility towards other Muslims and even jihadists is a rather new phenomenon on this scale, the fight against the internal enemy has since 2014 become either a necessity or a priority of several jihadi groups. While the Islamic State has certainly been the main aggressor, other groups, including al-Qaida affiliates, do consider it legitimate to target other jihadi factions in practice.[96]

Intra-Movement Competition and the Far, Near, and Internal Enemy

Drake is right in arguing that ideology is hugely influential in groups' definition of their enemy hierarchies, but so is the context these groups find themselves in. One important element of the context is the degree of intra-jihadi contestation and potential ensuing competition. Neither al-Qaida nor the Islamic State have changed their ideology, understood as the political objectives they strive to achieve, sufficiently to explain any dramatic changes in attack patterns. My argument here is that strategic considerations, the Islamic State's caliphate claim, and the intra-movement competition have influenced what targets the two groups have focused on. After an initial period from April 2013 to February 2014 characterised by uncertainty and emerging tensions, the intra-movement conflict has subsequently infested and dominated the dynamics of Sunni jihadism. The January 2015 twin attacks in Paris, one by the Kouachi brothers against Charlie Hebdo and claimed by al-Qaida and the other by Coulibaly, pledging allegiance to the Islamic State, are interesting in this context as Coulibaly allegedly

aided the Kouachi brothers. This shows that it took some time for the jihadi rivalry to manifest itself outside the Middle East region. A similar cooperation now is highly unlikely if not unthinkable.

Comparing the discourses and actions of al-Qaida and the Islamic State before and after competition between them emerged, some striking developments stand out. Not surprisingly, the focus on the near enemy has been constant for both groups, but the main jihadi threat against the West in the post-February 2014 period was no longer al-Qaida, as we had become accustomed to believe, but the Islamic State. Already in March 2014, al-Adnani claimed the Islamic State presented the most severe threat against the West and if looking at the numbers of attacks a few years after his speech, one would have to agree with him. The sudden rise in Islamic State executed attacks and plots in the West testify that the group is now prioritising Western attacks and that it has gained the sympathy of many a *lone mujahid* [holy warrior] who previously would have conducted attacks in the name of al-Qaida. Holding the numbers up against the discourse of the Islamic State leaders, it becomes evident that the group's Western focus is not just the result of random jihadi sympathisers conducting attacks in the name of the group or exclusively retaliation against the international coalition, but founded in a desire to position itself as the leading global jihad proponent. Between 2014 and mid-2016, almost no matter what reason led you to sympathising with the jihadi project, the Islamic State rather than al-Qaida would tick the box as the group to join.[97] This is not irrelevant in an extremely competitive environment where the potential for recruitment and funding is relatively scarce.

As explained, the decrease in al-Qaida attacks in the West is probably partly a result of a conscious strategic decision. Al-Qaida knows how important it can be to prioritise enemy hierarchies in certain periods in order not to put too much pressure on oneself by opening new fronts. This was part of the message Osama Bin Laden had sent to his deputy, Atiyyatullah al-Libi, in May 2010; it has been promoted by al-Zawahiri as well.[98] For several years, al-Qaida has tried to strike a delicate balance between maintaining its image as the leading global jihad proponent and winning the sympathy of a broader spectrum of the Muslim population. The latter would entail refraining from unpopular indiscriminate attacks in the West and not opening too many battle fronts; two issues that the former to some extent depended on. This challenge was only exacerbated when the Islamic State launched its wave of attacks against the far enemy. As a reaction, al-Qaida continued its discursive focus on the far enemy. In some instances, like the Islamic State inspired attack in Nice in June 2016, AQAP even applauded the attack, but besides the January 2015 attack against Charlie Hebdo al-Qaida has not targeted the West and barely plotted such attacks. Especially in 2014, rumours started to emerge that al-Qaida was indeed planning attacks in the West as stories about the so-called *Khorasan Group* flourished, but whether the small unit of senior al-Qaida figures that relocated to Syria were in fact working on external operations remains uncertain. So far there has been nothing to show besides talk. Countering this suspicion, it has been reported that Sanafi al-Nasr, who was briefly the leader of the Khorasan Group, was involved in local efforts in the March 2014 Latakia offensive.[99] The approach followed by al-Qaida has been to discursively attack the West and, in some cases, trying to capitalise on the Islamic State's attacks against the far enemy. Illustrative of this approach is a video from Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (NIM), the al-Qaida affiliate in Sahel, in which a fighter says "Our targets are firstly France then Mali and all apostates".[100] Although NIM occasionally does target French soldiers in the region, the majority of attacks are directed against local targets, while the group has not been connected to any attempted attacks against France in Europe in the last few years.

At an early point in September 2013, it seemed the Islamic State agreed when al-Adnani claimed "it is wise to neutralize enemies and reduce the fronts. It is foolish to open up several fronts and fight everyone".[101] Yet soon afterwards IS escalated the infighting with other rebel groups, including local al-Qaida affiliates in addition to the near and far enemy. This introduction of a new category, the *internal enemy*, into the enemy hierarchy of jihadi groups is a testimony to the competitive and exclusivist nature of the jihadi current. It has forced jihadi groups to find legitimising rationales for fighting actors that naturally and historically have been considered allies and, in extreme cases, it has even entailed labelling other jihadists as apostates. Afghanistan in the 1990s witnessed similar episodes of inter-group infighting and Salafi muhajireen [emigrants] labelling non-Salafi mujahideen apostates.[102] However, this was only a minor issue at the time and not comparable in scale to what we are witnessing now. In the jihadists' own words, what has been playing out since early 2014

is nothing less than a *fitna* (social discord) [103]- something already feared by most contemporary jihadists' ideological reference point, ibn Taymiyya, who famously had noted already centuries earlier that 'sixty years of tyranny are better than one night of fitna'.

Concluding Remarks

Jihadi groups are typically put in boxes when it comes to whom they fight, often without such conclusions being the result of any in-depth research. Until recently, al-Qaida was known as the most prominent proponent of global jihad while its renegade affiliate, the Islamic State in Iraq, now simply known as the Islamic State, focused on the near enemy. This article has shown that the intra-jihadi competition that emerged in early 2014 has critically changed this stereotypical perception; the result being important changes in the enemy hierarchies of the two most prominent Sunni jihadi groups:

Increasing hybridisation of the Islamic State's enemy hierarchy as it has adopted a strong focus on the far enemy both in discourse and in action.

Decreasing hybridisation of al-Qaida as it has refrained from attacks against the West, except through speech.

The introduction of a new enemy category, the *internal enemy*, referring to the definition of another jihadi actor/group as a legitimate target.

Interestingly, the dynamics set in motion by the intra-movement competitive relationship critically affected the enemy hierarchy both in terms of scope, priorities and categories. Not only did the Islamic State overtake al-Qaida as the main perpetrator of attacks in and on the West, but its aggression towards other jihadi groups also led to the introduction of the extremely sensitive category of the *internal enemy* into the enemy hierarchy of several of the most prominent groups. Two different mechanisms help to understand this development. For the Islamic State a process of intra-jihadi *outbidding* led to the strategic expansion to focus on the far enemy, while for al-Qaida a logic of *hedging bets* strengthened an already adopted new strategy to win the hearts and minds of Muslims through distancing itself to the excessive violence of the Islamic State.

As Hegghammer already explained, enemy hierarchies are not static but dynamic. Thus, the decrease of al-Qaida attacks in the West should not lead to the conclusion that it is no longer a global jihadi group, but rather that preferences, or capabilities, have temporarily changed as a result of the context. In recent months, as the Islamic State has experienced successive failures, al-Qaida leaders have once again stepped up their discursive attacks against the West. The most prominent agitator for renewed attacks in the West has been Hamza bin Laden, the son of Osama, who is currently working his way up the al-Qaida hierarchy. In five of his six speeches so far he has called for attacks against the West. In a similar tone, AQAP-leader Qassim al-Rimi, in a video dating 7 May 2017, encouraged lone wolf attacks in the West. According to a prominent al-Qaida member in Syria, these threats are not just empty talk. "I do think we will see renewed attacks in the West by AQ" he told this author, continuing "now that HTS [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham] broke its ties completely [with al-Qaida], AQ are not restricted by any risks for Syria anymore".[104]

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Appendix A: Overview of al-Qaida and Islamic State Statements

ISLAMIC STATE 2010 - January 2014			
Title	Author	Year	Month
Prevent Them, Don't Kill Them	Abu Omar al-Baghdadi	2010	March
The State of Islam will Remain Safe	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2011	August
I Exhort You to One Thing Only	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2012	May
And O the Wind of Paradise	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2012	June
But Allah will not Allow except that His Light should be Perfected	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2012	July
And Give good news to the believers	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2013	April
So Leave Them Alone with their Fabrications	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2013	June
Remaining in Iraq and the Levant	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2013	June
They Will Do You No Harm, Barring a Trifling Annoyance	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2013	July
May Allah be With You, O Oppressed State	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2013	September
The Pioneer Does Not Lie to His People	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2014	January
No title	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2014	January

ISLAMIC STATE February 2014 – July 2017			
Title	Author	Year	Month
Then let us invoke the curse of Allah upon the liar	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2014	March
He will surely establish for them their religion which He has preferred for them	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2014	April
This is not Our Method, and It Will not Be	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2014	April
Apologies Amir al-Qa'ida	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2014	May
What Comes To You Of Good Is From Allah	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2014	June
This Is the Promise of Allah	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2014	June
A Message to the Mujahideen and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2014	July
Al Nuri mosque khutba	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2014	July
Indeed, You Lord is Ever Watchful	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2014	September
Even if the disbelievers despise such	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2014	November

Title	Author	Year	Month
Say Die in your Rage	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2015	January
So they kill and are killed	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2015	March
March Forth Whether Light or Heavy	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2015	May
O Our People Respond to the Caller of Allah	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2015	June
Say to those who disbelieve "You will be overcome"	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2015	October
"So Wait, Indeed We, Along with You, Are Waiting"	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2015	December
And Those Who Lived [In Faith] Would Live Upon Evidence	*Abū* Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami	2016	May
This is what Allah and his Prophet promised us	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	2016	November
You will remember what I have told you	Abu Hassan al-Muhajir	2016	December
So be Patient. Verily, the Promise of Allah is True	Abu Hassan al-Muhajir	2017	April
And When the Believers Saw Al-Ahzab (the Confederates)	Abu Hassan al-Muhajir	2017	June
AL-QAIDA 2010 - January 2014			
Title	Author	Year	Month
No title	Usama bin Laden	2010	January
To Obama	Usama bin Laden	2010	February
No title	Usama bin Laden	2010	June
Pauses with the Method of Relief Work	Usama bin Laden	2010	October
Help Your Pakistani Brothers	Usama bin Laden	2010	October
From Sheikh Usama bin Laden (May Allah Protect Him) to the French People	Usama bin Laden	2010	October
No title	Usama bin Laden	2011	January
"And the Noble Knight Dismounts"	Zawahiri	2011	June
To the People of Pakistan On the American Attack on Pakistan Army in Mohmand	Zawahiri	2012	February
To Our People in the Place of the Revelation and the Cradle of Islam	Zawahiri	2012	March
Why Did We Revolt Against Him? A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt ep 9	Zawahiri	2012	Unknown
Yemen Between a Departing Agent and a Deputy Agent	Zawahiri	2012	Unknown
A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt ep 11	Zawahiri	2012	September
46 Years After the Year of the Naksa	Zawahiri	2013	July
General Guidelines for Jihad	Zawahiri	2013	September
Faith defeats arrogance	Zawahiri	2013	September

The 65th Anniversary of the Founding of the Occupation State of Israel	Zawahiri	2013	Unknown
An Urgent Call to Our People in al-Sham	Zawahiri	2014	January
Liberation from the Circle of Futility and Failure	Zawahiri	2014	January

AL-QAIDA February 2014 – July 2017			
Title	Author	Year	Month
The Reality Between the Pain and the Hope Part 1 & 2	Zawahiri	2014	April
A Testimony to preserve the Blood of the Mujahideen in Shaam	Zawahiri	2014	May
Answers to the Esteemed Shaykhs	Zawahiri	2014	May
Zawahiri establishes AQIS	Zawahiri	2014	September
Islamic Spring Part 1	Zawahiri	2015	March
Islamic Spring Part 2	Zawahiri	2015	April
Islamic Spring Part 3	Zawahiri	2015	April
Islamic Spring Part 4	Zawahiri	2015	April
Islamic Spring Part 5	Zawahiri	2015	October
Islamic Spring Part 6	Zawahiri	2015	October
Let's unite to liberate Jerusalem	Zawahiri	2015	November
Support your prophet	Zawahiri	2015	December
Islamic Spring Part 8	Zawahiri	2016	January
The Levant is Entrusted Upon Your Necks	Zawahiri	2016	January
Killing of Mujahideen by Al Saud regime	Zawahiri	2016	January
Hasten to ash-Shaam	Zawahiri	2016	May
Upon Promise to Continue	Zawahiri	2016	May
Islamic Spring Part 7	Zawahiri	2016	June
Islamic Spring Part 9	Zawahiri	2016	July
Eulogy for Abu Basir	Zawahiri	2016	July
Brief Messages to a Supported Ummah 1 "Who Protects the Quran?"	Zawahiri	2016	August
Brief Messages to a Supported Ummah 2 "Do Not Be Divided"	Zawahiri	2016	August
Brief Messages to a Supported Ummah 3 "Allah Allah Fi Al-Iraq"	Zawahiri	2016	August
Brief Messages to a Supported Ummah 4 "One United Structure"	Zawahiri	2016	August
Those who defy Injustice	Zawahiri	2016	September
Brief Messages to a Supported Ummah 5 "To Other than Allah We Will Not Bow"	Zawahiri	2017	January
Brief Messages to a Supported Ummah 6 "Shaam will submit to none except Allah"	Zawahiri	2017	April
Brief Messages to a Supported Ummah 7 "One Ummah, One War on Multiple Fronts"	Zawahiri	2017	June

Appendix B: Al-Qaida and Islamic State (-linked) Attacks and Plots in the West

DATE	"NAME"	COUNTRY	TYPE
ISLAMIC STATE ATTACKS 2010 – JANUARY 2014			
Dec/2010	Stockholm bombings	Sweden	Networked
19/09/2012	Paris kosher grocery market	France	Inspired
ISLAMIC STATE ATTACKS FEBRUARY 2014 – JUNE 2017			
24/05/2014	Jewish Museum in Brussels	Belgium	Guided
24/09/2014	Melbourne Police Stabbing	Australia	Inspired
20/10/2014	Quebec Car attack	Canada	Guided
23/10/2014	NYC Axe attack	USA	Inspired
15/12/2014	Sydney hostage taking	Australia	Inspired
20/12/2014	Tours knife attack	France	Inspired
07/01/2015	Coulibaly attack	France	Guided
14/02/2015	Copenhagen attack	Denmark	Inspired
19/04/2015	Villejuif assassination	France	Guided
03/05/2015	Garland attack	USA	Guided
26/06/2015	Lyon gas factory attack (St.-Quentin-Fallavier)	France	Guided
21/08/2015	Amsterdam-Paris high-speed train shooting (Thalys train)	France-Holland	Controlled
04/11/2015	University of California Merced Stabber	USA	Inspired
13/11/2015	Paris attack (Bataclan, Stade de France, restaurants)	France	Controlled
02/12/2015	San Bernardino attack	USA	Networked
07/01/2016	Paris Axe threat	France	Inspired
11/01/2016	Marseille machete attack	France	Inspired
26/02/2016	Hannover police stabbing	Germany	Guided
22/03/2016	Brussels bombing	Belgium	Controlled
12/06/2016	Orlando night club attack	USA	Inspired
13/06/2016	Magnanville police officer killed	France	Guided
14/07/2016	Nice Promenade attack	France	Networked
18/07/2016	Wurzburg Axe train attack	Germany	Guided
24/07/2016	Ansbach bombing	Germany	Guided
26/07/2016	Normandy church attack	France	Guided
06/08/2016	Charleroi attack	Belgium	Networked
01/09/2016	Christiania attack	Denmark	Inspired
17/09/2016	St Cloud shopping mall attack	USA	Inspired
01/10/2016	Malmø shiaangreb	Sweden	Guided
28/11/2016	Ohio University attack	USA	Inspired
19/12/2016	Berlin Christmas market	Germany	Guided
22/03/2017	London Parliament attack	UK	Inspired
07/04/2017	Stockholm Truck attack	Sweden	Guided
22/05/2017	Manchester attack	UK	Guided

03/06/2017	London Bridge and Borough market attack	UK	Networked
06/06/2017	Notre Dame attack	France	Inspired
19/06/2017	Paris Champs-Élysées 2 attack	France	Networked
20/06/2017	Brussels Central Station	Belgium	Inspired
ISLAMIC STATE PLOTS 2010 – JANUARY 2014			
None -			
ISLAMIC STATE PLOTS FEBRUARY 2014 – JUNE 2017			
Feb/2014	Riviera Plot	France	Controlled
Jul/2014	Creteil plot	France	Guided
17/09/2014	Baryalei-Azari plot	Australia	Guided
25/09/2014	Surgeon plot	UK	Networked
Oct/2014	Vienna teenager plot	Austria	Guided
06/11/2014	Remembrance Day plot	UK	Inspired
Jan/2015	Cornell Capitol plot	USA	Inspired
15/01/2015	Verviers plot	Belgium	Controlled
10/02/2015	Fairfield plot	Australia	Networked
21/02/2015	Ohio Plot	USA	Guided
10/03/2015	Ceuta plot 1	Spain	Guided
Apr/2015	Velentzas/Siddiqui plot	USA	Networked
18/04/2015	Anzac day plot	Australia	Networked
Apr/2015	Fort Riley plot	USA	Inspired
Apr/2015	Catalonia plot	Spain	Networked
08/05/2015	Greenvale plot	Australia	Guided
21/05/2015	West Chester Plot	USA	Guided
02/06/2015	Usamaah Rahim plot	USA	Guided
Jun/2015	NYC aeronautics student plot	USA	Inspired
19/06/2015	Morganton Plot	USA	Guided
14/07/2015	Luton Plot	USA	Guided
30/12/2015	NYC NYE Plot	USA	Guided
14/01/2016	Kundby plot	Denmark	Guided
02/06/2016	Dusseldorf Plot	Germany	Controlled
10/08/2016	Ontario Plot	Canada	Guided
04/09/2016	Notre Dame Plot	France	Guided
10/09/2016	Schleswig- Holstein Plot	Germany	Controlled
21/09/2016	Roanne Plot	France	Guided
25/09/2016	Nice Plot	France	Networked
Feb/2017	Montpellier plot	France	Networked
Mar/2017	Venice Rialto bridge Plot	Italy	Networked
Apr/2017	Marseille Plot	France	Networked
AL-QAIDA ATTACKS 2010 – JANUARY 2014			
May/2010	Roshonara Choudhry's stabbing of Stephen Timms	UK	Inspired
Mar/2012	Merah attacks	France	Controlled

Sep/2012	Cannes-Torcy attack	France	Networked
Apr/2013	Boston bombing	USA	Networked
AL-QAIDA ATTACKS FEBRUARY 2014 – JUNE 2017			
07/01/2015	Charlie Hebdo attack	France	Guided
AL-QAIDA PLOTS 2010 – JANUARY 2014			
Feb/2010	Rajib Karim Heathrow plot	UK	Guided
Jul/2010	Davud cell	Denmark (and other places)	Controlled
Sep/2010	Europe Mumbai plot	UK, France and Germany	Controlled
Dec/2010	London Christmas plot	UK	Networked
Feb/2011	Aldawsari plot	USA	Inspired
Apr/2011	El-Kebir plot	Germany	Controlled
Jun/2011	Seattle Military Processing plot	USA	Networked
Sep/2011	Irfan Naseer plot	UK	Guided
Nov/2011	Pimentel NYC plot	USA	Inspired
Jan/2012	Osmakac Tampa plot	USA	Inspired
Apr/2012	Luton Cell	UK	Guided
May/2012	AQAP plane bomb plot	USA	Controlled
Aug/2012	Gibraltar plot	Spain	Networked
Sep/2012	Chicago bar plot	USA	Inspired
Oct/2012	Federal reserve bomb plot	USA	Networked
Nov/2012	Qazi brothers plot	USA	Guided
Mar/2013	Marignane plot	France	Networked
Dec/2013	Wichita bomb plot	USA	Inspired
AL-QAIDA PLOTS FEBRUARY 2014 – JUNE 2017			
Jun/2014	June 2014 UK plot	UK	Guided
Feb/2015	Mohamud plot	USA	Guided

Notes

[1] Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen, and Emilie Oftedal, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 6 (2016): 3 - 24.

[2] Sam Mullins, "The Road to Orlando: Jihadist-Inspired Violence in the West, 2012-2016," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 6 (2016): 26 - 30.

[3] Statement published by al-Qaida on 3 February 2014 titled "bayan bishan 'alaqah jama'at qa'idat al-jhad bijama'ah al-dawlat al-islamiyya fi-l-'iraq wa-l-sham) [Statement on the relationship between the group Qaida al-Jihad and the group of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham].

[4] C J M Drake, "The Role of Ideology in Terrorists ' Target Selection," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 2 (1998): 54.

[5] The intra-jihadi competition is not just relevant in the context of political preferences. Other studies on the effects of intra-jihadi competition could adopt a focus on legitimate ways of establishing the Islamic caliphate, the implementation of sharia, attitudes to establishing alliances (through a focus on al-wala' wa-l-bara'). A concrete example that intra-jihadi competition does translate to changes in action is witnessed in Yemen where the local al-Qaida affiliate, AQAP, has adjusted its behaviour after the emergence of a Yemeni Islamic State affiliate. For information, see: Elisebeth Kendall, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences," in Simon Staffell and Akil N., Awan (Eds.) *Jihadism Transformed : Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 89 -110.

[6] Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," *Prespectives on Terrorismn Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 14–30.

[7] Although jihadists have often contested and competed with each other, little academic work has been done on

such contestation, fragmentation or competition. Two important exceptions are Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and the work done by the CTC's Harmony Program, especially Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman (Eds.), *Self Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within Al Qa'ida and Its Periphery* (West Point: CTC Harmony Project, 2010). Insights from the Social Movement Studies literature can be found in Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Framing Jihad: Intramovement Framing Contests and Al-Qaeda's Struggle for Sacred Authority," *International Review of Social History* 49, no. S12 (December 2004): 159–177. In contrast, scholarly work on jihadi *cooperation* has recently flourished with important works such as Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad : Understanding Cooperation among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise : The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Michael C. Horowitz and Philip B.K. Potter, "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 2 (2012): 199–225.resource sharing, joint training exercises, and operational collaboration. They build alliances and lesser partnerships with other formal and informal terrorist actors to recruit foreign fighters and spread their message worldwide, raising the aggregate threat level for their declared enemies. Whether they consist of friends or foes, whether they are connected locally or online, these networks create a wellspring of support for jihadist organizations that may fluctuate in strength or change in character but never runs dry. [This book] identifies types of terrorist actors, the nature of their partnerships, and the environments in which they prosper to explain global jihadist terrorism's ongoing success and resilience. [This book] brings to light an emerging style of 'networked cooperation' that works alongside interorganizational terrorist cooperation to establish bonds of varying depth and endurance. Case studies use recently declassified materials to illuminate al-Qaeda's dealings from Iran to the Arabian Peninsula and the informal actors that power the Sharia4 movement. The book proposes policies that increase intelligence gathering on informal terrorist actors, constrain enabling environments, and disrupt terrorist networks according to different types of cooperation.\"-- Introduction -- Part I. Understanding contemporary terrorist cooperation. The puzzle of terrorist cooperation -- Actor spectrum : organizations, networks, and entrepreneurs -- Shifting environment : ideology, social media, and armed conflicts -- Contemporary terrorist cooperation : a holistic typology -- Part II. Terrorist cooperation in the global Jihad. Pre-9/11 cooperation in the global Jihad -- Post-9/11 cooperation in the global Jihad -- High-end cooperation : Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP

[8] Donatella Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 151.

[9] Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State" (Brookings Doha Center, 2015), 8.

[10] Celine Marie I. Novenario, "Differentiating Al Qaeda and the Islamic State Through Strategies Publicized in Jihadist Magazines," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 11 (2016): 953–967; Kendall, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences," 102; Cole Bunzel, "Jihadism on Its Own Terms" (Hoover Institution, 2017), 8.

[11] See, for instance, Paul Cruickshank and Mohannad Hage Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 1 (2007): 1–14.

[12] Abu Musab Al-Suri, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, 2004.

[13] Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, 2004 (Translation by Will McCants 2006).

[14] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9 (2009): 26–45.

[15] Examples include Nelly Lahoud and Muhammad Al-`Ubaydi, "The War of Jihadists against Jihadists in Syria," *CTC Sentinel*, March 2014; URL: https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-war-of-jihadists-against-jihadists-in-syria ; Katherine Zimmerman, "Competing Jihad : The Islamic State and Al Qaeda," *Critical Threats Project*, September 2014; Charles Lister, "Jihadi Rivalry: The Islamic State Challenges Al-Qaida" (Brookings Doha Center, 2016); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross et al., "Islamic State vs. Al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict," no. December (2015); URL: https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/12103-islamic-state-vs-al-qaeda/ISISvAQ_Final.e68fdd22a90e49c4af1d4cd0dc9e3651.pdf ; Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Simon Staffell and Akil N. Awan Eds.), *Jihadism Transformed : Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016).

[16] See, for example, Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu Rumman, *The "Islamic State" Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015).

[17] See, for example, Will McCants, "The Polarizing Effect of Islamic State Aggression on the Global Jihadist Movement," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 7 (2016): 20–23 and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The Al Qaeda–Islamic State Rivalry: Competition Yes, but No Competitive Escalation," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017, 1–18.

[18] See, for example, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Al Qaeda Is Beating the Islamic State," *Politico*, April 2015.

[19] Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West"; Nesser, Stenersen, and Oftedal, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect."

[20] Another important effect of the competition is the fragmentation that it caused within existing groups and jihadi communities. An example of the first is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). In 2016 it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, but in June 2016 one part of the group once again sided with al-Qaida/Taliban. A great example of the second type of fragmentation is provided in Wagemakers' analysis of the shift in ideological alliances in Jordan between the *Zarqawiyyun* and *Maqdisiyyun*; see Joas Wagemakers, "Jihadi-Salafism in Jordan and the Syrian Conflict: Divisions Overcome Unity," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2017, 1–22.

[21] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "This Was Not Our Method, and It Will Not Be," *Chabab Tawhid Media*, April 17, 2014.

[22] Abu Maysarah Al-Shami, "The Jews of Jihad: Dhawahiri's Al-Qa'idah," 2016.

[23] Novenario, "Differentiating Al Qaeda and the Islamic State Through Strategies Publicized in Jihadist Magazines." For a more nuanced analysis of the establishment of AQIS, see Anne Stenersen, "Al-Qa`ida's Comeback in Afghanistan and Its Implications," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 9 (2016): 21–27.

[24] See for instance Lister, "Jihadi Rivalry: The Islamic State Challenges Al-Qaida."

[25] Clint Watts, "Deciphering Competition Between Al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 7 (2016): 1–6.

[26] A rather similar notion to outbidding is that of *competitive escalation* proposed by Donatella Della Porta. Competitive escalation happens when two or more social movement organisations within the same social movement family compete and the use of violence increases as a result of this competitive relationship. Della Porta considers such escalation in the context of protest cycles and argues that escalation of violence primarily occurs in the initial period of the protest cycle. See Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* and Hamming, "The Al Qaeda–Islamic State Rivalry: Competition Yes, but No Competitive Escalation."

[27] Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill : The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[28] Stephen Nemeth, "The Effect of Competition on Terrorist Group Operations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 2 (2014): 336–362.

[29] Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, chap. 3. See also: Mayer N Zald and Bert Useem, "Movement and Countermovement: Loosely Coupled Conflict," *CRSO Working Paper 302*, 1983, 1–31; Eitan Y. Alimi, "Relational Dynamics in Factional Adoption of Terrorist Tactics: A Comparative Perspective," *Theory and Society* 40, no. 1 (2011): 95–118.

[30] In August 2013, al-Qaida's Syrian outfit, Jabhat al-Nusra, cooperated with the Islamic State in 'Operation Liberation of the Coast'. See Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015), 157.

[31] Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49 - 80.

[32] Novenario, "Differentiating Al Qaeda and the Islamic State Through Strategies Publicized in Jihadist Magazines."

[33] Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West"; Nesser, Stenersen, and Oftedal, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect."

[34] The terms 'political preferences' and 'enemy hierarchy' are used interchangeably throughout the article.

[35] Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West."

[36] Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc., 2007).Gerges went to Cairo on a McArthur Fellowship, to interview (Arabic is his first language

[37] Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

[38] Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West."

[39] Petter Nesser, "*Islamist Terrorism in Europe, A History*", Chronology of Jihadism in Europe 1994-2015: http://www.hurstpublishers.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Islamist-Terrorism-in-Europe-Appendix.pdf .

[40] Kyle Orton, "Foreign Terrorist Attacks by The Islamic State, 2002-2016" (The Henry Jackson Society, 2017).

[41] Ibid.

[42] Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," 10. The two speeches referred to are: Abū ʿUmar al-Baghdādī, "Waʿd Allāh," Muʾassasat al-Furqān, 22 September 2008. Transcript in Majmūʿ, 76–82 and Baghdādī, "Qul innī ʿalā bayyina min Rabbī," Muʾassasat al-Furqān, 13 March 2007. Transcript in Majmūʿ, 12–16.

[43] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," *As-Sahab Media*, September 2013.

[44] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Faith Defeats Arrogance," *As-Sahab Media*, September 2013.

[45] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "I Exhort You to One Thing Only," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, May 2012.

[46] Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, "Remaining in Iraq and the Levant," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, June 14, 2013.

[47] Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, "But Allah Will Not Allow except That His Light Should Be Perfected," *Al Furqan Media Foundation*, July 2012.

[48] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "The Pioneer Does Not Lie to His People," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, January 2014.

[49] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "They Will Do You No Harm, Barring a Trifling Annoyance," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, July 2013.

[50] Over time al-Zawahiri's criticism of the Islamic State intensified, especially since mid-2015, and although he had never referred to the group or its leaders as apostates (*murtadd*) he has labelled it *khawarij*.

[51] Especially in A Testimony to preserve the Blood of the Mujahideen in Shaam, see Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Testimony to Preserve the Blood of the Mujahideen in Shaam," May 2, 2014.

[52] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Islamic Spring Part 2," April 2015.

[53] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Lets Unite to Liberate Jerusalem," *As-Sahab Media*, November 2015.

[54] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Support Your Prophet," December 2015.

[55] Abdulmalik Droukdel, "Bénédictions et Félicitations Pour l'Union Des Mujâhidîn Du Sahara," *Al-Andalus*, March 2017.

[56] Abu Al-Fadl Iyad Ag-Ghali, "Al-Masra Tahaawur Al-Sheikh Aba Al-Fadl Iyaad Ghaali," *Al Masra*, April 2017.

[57] Kendall, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences," 101–102.

[58] AQIS, "Code of Conduct," *As-Sahab Media*, June 2017.

[59] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "Then Let Us Invoke the Curse of Allah upon the Liar," *Al-I'tisaam Media Foundation*, March 2014.

[60] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "Indeed, You Lord Is Ever Watchful," *Al Hayat*, September 2014.

[61] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "Say, 'Die in Your Rage!'," *Al Hayat*, January 2015.

[62] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "That They Live by Proof," *Al Hayat*, May 2016. See also in the Islamic State' magazine *Dabiq*, issue 15, the article titled "Why we hate you and why we fight you" from July 2016; it elaborates on why the group fights the West.

[63] In the Code of Conduct by AQIS, guidelines for whom are considered legitimate targets are provided. Civilians are indeed considered illegitimate targets.

[64] Author's interview with Danish foreign fighter, Copenhagen, June 2017.

[65] A few months later, probably the strongest attack against the Islamic State was delivered by Adam Gadahn in the second edition of the magazine Resurgence.

[66] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "Say to Those Who Disbelieve 'You Will Be Overcome,'" *Al Hayat*, October 2015.

[67] For Bin Laden's letter to Atiyyatullah, see *SOCOM-2012-0000019*; URL:

https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-UBL-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-4-Translation.pdf ,and for Atiyyatullah's letter to al-Wuhayshi, see *Letter from Atiyah to Abu Basir*; URL: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Atiyah%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf .

[68] Kendall argues that AQAP's role in Yemen has indeed been challenged by the Islamic State's Yemen *wilayah* and that AQAP has adjusted its behaviour to this new competitive environment. See Kendall, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences," 108.

[69] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 2 (April 1, 2009): 213–226.

[70] Brian Fishman*, Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.*

[71] ISI launched several military campaigns from 2010 onwards and all of them focused on national targets. One example is the campaign '*Axe of al-Khalil [the Friend]'* launched by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on March 18,

2010 with the objective to target Iraqi political parties.

[72] Islamic State vs AQ New America report, DIIS report, Jihadism Transformed book.

[73] Rukmini Callimachi, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze," *New York Times*, March 29, 2016; URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html?_r=1 .

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[75] Government of the Netherlands, "Threat of Attack on the Netherlands Remains Realistic," July 11, 2016;URL: https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2016/07/11/threat-of-attack-on-the-netherlands-remains-realistic .

[76] Orton, "Foreign Terrorist Attacks by The Islamic State, 2002-2016," 2.

[77] E.g. for an overview of jihadi-related attacks and plots in Europe in the period 1994-2015. Some have been connected to al-Qaida. See Petter Nesser, "Appendix: Chronology of Jihadism in Europe 1994-2015": URL: http://www.hurstpublishers.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Islamist-Terrorism-in-Europe-Appendix.pdf .

[78] Saleh al-Somali, Abu Sulayman Jazairi and Osama al-Kini, all occupying the position of 'head of external operations', were killed between 2008-2009. Additionally, al-Qaida's arguably two most important senior operatives, Sayf al-Adl and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, have been imprisoned one way or the other in Iran since the early 2000s.

[79] Al-Qaida's 'General Managers' Mustafa al-Yazid and Atiyyatullah al-Libi were killed between May 2010 and August 2011.

[80] Examples include the Sharia4Belgium and its Danish version called 'Kaldet til Islam'. The leader of Kaldet til Islam, Shiraz Tariq, shifted allegiance to the Islamic State after his emigration to Syria; so did most of the other members of Kaldet til Islam.

[81] For the full interview with Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, see URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EVaBgSAJ3o (accessed 17 November 2017)

[82] Charles Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," *Brookings Analysis Paper*, July 2016.

[83] Abu Firas Al-Suri, "Silsalah Al-Shahada II," *Al Basira*, March 2014.

[84] Author's interview with Danish foreign fighter, June 2017. This conciliatory tone is also heard in Jawlani's speech "Allah, Allah, in the Field of al-Sham" from 7 January 2014 and again in the speech "A Message of Support and Acceptance for the "Initiative of the Ummah" from 24 January 2014.

[85] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Answers to the Esteemed Shaykhs," *As-Sahab Media Productions*, May 2014.

[86] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, 148 and 160.

[87] Ibid., 171 and 175.

[88] Hamming, "The Al Qaeda–Islamic State Rivalry: Competition Yes, but No Competitive Escalation."

[89] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, 192.

[90] Abu Muhammed Al-Jawlani, "I Wished for You to Eulogize Me," *Al-Manara Al-Baydha Media Foundation*, February 2014.

[91] Abu Sulayman Al-Muhajir, "Interview with Abu Sulayman Al-Muhajir," *Al Basira*, 2014; URL: http://jihadology.net/2014/04/12/al-baṣirah-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nuṣrah-an-interview-with-abu-sulayman-al-muhajir/ .

[92] "Fatwa by Some of the Scholars of Jihad Regarding the IS Group's Attack on the Mujahideen," [ADD LOCATION!], June *2015*.

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[94] See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents," 2015, Specimen 1B.

[95] Abdur-Rahman al-Marzuqi's tweets can be found at URL: https://justpaste.it/MarzuqiTakfirOfJN [accessed 2 August 2017].

[96] There are several examples of al-Qaida attacking other jihadi groups than the Islamic State thus illustrating that the internal enemy is considered a legitimate enemy.

[97] Hegghammer discusses the variation in motivations of foreign fighters when joining jihadi groups; see Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 1–15.

[98] Paul Cruickshank, "Al-Qaeda's New Course Examining Ayman Al-Zawahiri's Strategic Direction," *IHS Defense, Risk and Security Consulting* May (2012).

[99] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, 212–213.

[100] Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen video titled "Repulsion of the Transgressors", produced by NIM's al-Zallaqa Media Foundation, and was issued on *Telegram* on 26 May 2017.

[101] Abu Muhammed Al-'Adnani, "May Allah Be With You, O Oppressed State," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, September 2013.

[102] Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015).

[103] E.g. see Al-Muhajir, "Interview with Abu Sulayman Al-Muhajir."

[104] Author's interview with prominent al-Qaida member based in Syria, 22 May 2017.

The Spread of its Message: Studying the Prominence of al-Qaida Materials in UK Terrorism Investigations

by Donald Holbrook

Abstract

Al-Qaida emphasises its ability to communicate its core message to those who might be sympathetic towards the group and its aims. Yet we have little sense of how this relationship, between al-Qaida as messenger, and potential sympathisers as message recipients, unfolds, especially in the West. To shed light on this question, this article analyses evidential materials from police counterterrorism investigations in the UK, exploring the way and extent to which al-Qaida-related materials have featured. The analysis identifies al-Qaida as one of the more prominent groups responsible for content found in these investigations but emphasises the overall heterogeneity of the extremist Islamist media content that has been discovered. The analysis also illustrates the importance of English-language content for this particular audience and the ability of prominent ideologies, especially Anwar al-Awlaki, to retain popularity and influence beyond his grave.

Keywords: Al-Qaida, extremist movements, message impact, grassroots response, media, United Kingdom

Spreading al-Qaida's Message

A few weeks after Osama bin Laden was killed in his Abbottabad compound in northeast Pakistan on the 2 of May 2011, the al-Qaida organisation released a eulogy in his honour, delivered by Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Ladin's successor and former deputy. In it, Zawahiri highlighted one of the late *amir's* apparent achievements above all others: he had managed to incite the *ummah* to *jihad*, he argued, "and his message reached from East to West and all over the world."[1] Spreading this message, Zawahiri later reiterated, was the core objective of the group. "Al-Qaida is a mission [*risala*] before it is an organisation [*tanzim*] or a group [*jama'at*]", Zawahiri argued in his seventh 'interview' which As-Sahab published in May 2014.[2]

For al-Qaida to succeed, therefore, it would have to ensure that its message and mission would be welcomed by those seeking to embrace Islamist militancy, irrespective of their association with the core group itself. Any organisation that depends largely on nonmaterial incentives to mobilise support is inevitably reliant on its ability to convince others of the merits of its cause and method to achieve its objectives, especially when it operates within a crowded and competitive field. Bin Laden voiced similar concerns on the eve of his tenure as leader, writing to Abu Basir (aka Nasir al-Wuhayshi) in an undated letter: "It is in our interest to spread the jihadist ideology, especially among the youth and new generations in [competition] with the other groups and Islamic movements".[3]

Yet we have little sense of how this relationship, between ideologue and nascent militant, between messenger and recipient, unfolds. Given that this relationship is dependent not only on the substance of the message and the context in which it is given, but also on the circumstances of message recipients, which are likely to differ between individuals and cultures, a nuanced and qualitative perspective is needed to enhance our understanding. Audience interpretations of "message systems" [4] can serve to mediate or mitigate media effects, whereby a reader's interpretation of a text is not a simple reflection of the author's work.[5] Events and their conveyance do not impact audiences in unidirectional, straightforward or universal ways.[6] Those who, like al-Zawahiri, seek to shape a social movement thus have to provide interpretive schemata that offer "a language and cognitive tools" to make sense of such events and experiences.[7] This relationship therefore involves different actors, from leaders seeking to shape activism to potential activists themselves. In the context of al-Qaida and associated organisations, our understanding in this regard is relatively limited.

To this end, I examine thirteen concluded terrorism cases investigated by British counterterrorism law-enforcement agencies, involving a total of 48 individuals who were ultimately convicted for terrorism offences

or who died as they carried out acts of violence. My purpose is to explore the extent and way in which materials that can be associated with al-Qaida featured among the media articles that these subjects collected before and during their involvement in terrorist plots. I begin by unpacking these cases and explaining how they are constituted, especially with respect to published media that police uncovered during their investigations. I then analyse to what extent materials associated with al-Qaida featured within this collection of published media before examining the wider context in which these materials featured. The results of this enquiry highlight the influence of Anwar al-Awlaki among the subjects involved in the cases examined, and this dimension is therefore studied in a particular detail. In the conclusions, I expand upon these findings more broadly in relation to al-Qaida and Islamist inspired militancy in the United Kingdom.

The Cases

Each of the thirteen cases concerns an organised effort to carry out violence that, according to UK legislation, is defined as an act of terrorism.[8] I am thus concerned only with those who sought to participate in lethal terrorist violence, not someone involved in less serious facilitative, logistical or supportive roles such as propaganda distribution, financing, or involvement in terrorist training, that are also covered by terrorism legislation in the UK. These thirteen acts and attempted acts took place between 2004 and 2017; all concerned Islamist-inspired extremism. The 48 individuals involved operated either alone or as part of a network. In all investigations into these cases, police recovered media publications that can be defined as conveying "political, religious, racial or ideological" content (to use the language of the UK Terrorism Act 2000), that had been acquired prior to, and during, attack planning.[9] In total, 1,942 unique publications that fall within this category were identified in these cases, based on police searches of properties and digital devices. Whilst we cannot be sure that this includes *all* ideological publications that subjects involved in these plots chose to collect, we can be confident that the number represents a high percentage of these collections. Within this collection of close to two-thousand individual publications, 236 featured in more than one case.

Before I examine the extent to which material associated with al-Qaida could be identified within this dataset, three caveats are in order. The purpose of this study is not to offer any predictive assumptions regarding the relationship between media and participation in terrorism. We know that subjects in the cases under review collected these media publications, but we may be equally sure that scores of others expressed similar interest in comparable media content without seeking to participate in terrorism.[10] Second, the UK has experienced a high intensity of terrorist plots during the period under review. The cases examined here, therefore, represent a snapshot of a larger whole. Third, by exploring the extent to which UK terrorists collected al-Qaida material, I am not making assumptions regarding their consumption of this content or any notions of causality between this exposure and participation in terrorist acts.

Al-Qaida Materials in UK Terrorist Plots

The 1,942 publications consisted of audio (41%) video (18%) and written (41%) material that ranged from moderate religious or political content to extremist interpretations promoting violence (A list of these extremist titles that featured in more than one investigation is provided in the Appendix). Most of these materials were in English, with only ten publications (0.5%) written in Arabic, indicating that British terrorist subjects - at least as far as this collection is concerned - are primarily reliant on materials published in English or translated into English.

Whilst As-Sahab, al-Qaida's premier media wing, has ensured that many of its key publications have been translated or subtitled, this dependence on English-language content may well place al-Qaida at a disadvantage when it comes to disseminated messages from the core leadership. At the same time, of course, al-Qaida affiliates, especially al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, have introduced English-language publications, such as the *Inspire* magazine, aimed at sympathisers in the West. However, there is evidence suggesting the al-Qaida leadership was not unanimous in its support of such initiatives. Bin Laden, for instance, had been warning against the potentially "dangerous consequences" of individuals operating independently - beyond the remit

set out by the leadership.[11]

In total, 291 individual publications were identified as being produced or authored by networks or individuals who *became* associated with al-Qaid This figure includes materials by Anwar al-Awlaki, the popular Yemeni-American preacher, whose association with al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula was only solidified after he had produced the mainstay of his ideological output.[12] If Awlaki's 'pre-terroristic' content, though this may be a little hard to define, is excluded, the total number of al-Qaida related publications found in the cases under review drops to 98 individual publications. These include 17 involving Awlaki, including his audio rendition of Yusuf al-'Uyayri's book *The Constants on the Path of Jihad.* Other al-Qaida authors include bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Yahia al-Libi as well as materials originating from Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and As-Sahab. Figure 1 illustrates this distribution, based on the principal figure or organisation represented in each publication.[13]

Figure 1: Al-Qaida publications distributed by source

AQI = Al-Qaida in Iraq; AQIM = Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb; AQAP = Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula
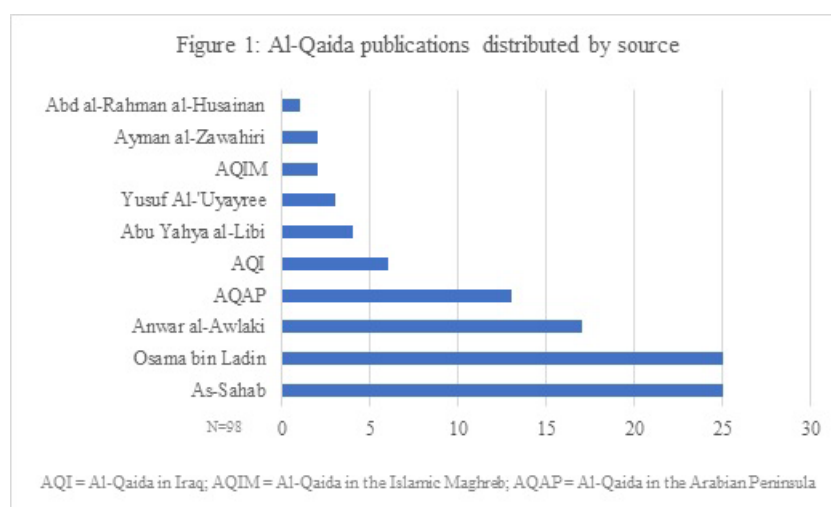
Within the entire dataset of close-to two-thousand individual publications, this collection, of course, is very small. If we focus only on those publications that contain endorsement of lethal violence (591 unique publications), the proportion of al-Qaida material rises to 17%. Fourteen of the 98 al-Qaida publications featured in more than one investigation, with materials by Anwar al-Awlaki being especially popular. In terms of temporal changes, materials from 'al-Qaida core' (i.e. bin Laden, Zawahiri, As-Sahab) dominated in cases from the period 2004-2008, whilst materials from al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, including the *Inspire* magazine which was first published in 2010, were more common in more recent cases. Awlaki's materials, as indicated above, however, seemed almost 'time-proof', featuring in old and new cases. Other ideological, especially strategic, output associated with al-Qaida, moreover, is curiously absent. There was no original material by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri [14], for instance, or a copy of Abu Bakr Naji's 'Management of Savagery', which has received substantial coverage in the analytical literature.

The Wider Context of Extremist Media

This relatively small concentration of original al-Qaida material in these UK terrorism investigations begs the obvious question, what other Islamist extremist content was found? As noted, just under 600 publications were identified as promoting lethal violence in support of religious or political causes, an intuitive benchmark of 'extremism'. The list of extremist materials uncovered in these plots consists of a relatively heterogeneous mixture of original English-language materials by provocateurs such as Awlaki, Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki (a Jamaican-born radical cleric who lived in the UK), Abu Hamza al-Masri, Omar Bakri Mohammed and others; material from foreign terrorist organisations, such as al-Qaida and the Islamic State organisation; and material by foreign ideologies such as Abdullah Azzam or Sayyid Qutb that had been translated and often repackaged in abridged versions by media entrepreneurs such as Babar Ahmad's 'Azzam Publications', the Birmingham-based 'Maktabah al-Ansaar', and the online publisher 'At-Tibyaan Publications'. Given the heterogeneity of this collection of extremist publications, therefore, al-Qaida did emerge as one of the more prominent *groups*. But

the point is that most publications could not be associated with any specific organisation that dominated over other content.

Aggregating publications that featured in multiple investigations can shed further light on the popularity of materials found. Table 1 lists, in descending order, publications that condoned lethal violence These were found in between four and six of the thirteen cases under examination.

Table 1: List of Most Popular 'Extremist' Titles		
Author	**Title**	**Publisher**
Anwar al-Awlaki	Mashari Al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq [12 lectures]	Dar Ibn Al Mubarak
Anwar al-Awlaki	The Life of Mohammed (The Medinan Period) [37 lectures]*	Awakening Media/Zenith Productions
Anwar al-Awlaki	The Hereafter/The Afterlife/Al-Achira [21 lectures]*	Al-Basheer
Anwar al-Awlaki	Lives of the Prophets [21 lectures]*	Al-Basheer Publications
Anwar al-Awlaki	The Life of Mohammed (Makkan Period) [16 lectures]*	n/a
Abdullah Azzam	Join the Caravan	Maktabah al Ansaar
Abdullah Azzam	Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman	Maktabah al Ansaar
Abi Zakaryya al Dimashqi al Dumyati, a.k.a. 'Ibn-Nuhaas' (d. 814 hijri) translated by Noor Yamani	The Book of Jihad or Mashari al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq wa Mutheer al-Gharaam ila Daar Assalaam	n/a
Abdullah Azzam	The Signs of Allah the Most Merciful Ar-Rahmaan in the Jihad of Afghanistan	Maktabah al-Ansaar
Anwar al-Awlaki	Allah is Preparing us for Victory	n/a
Abdullah Azzam	The Lofty Mountain	Azzam Publications (also Maktabah al Ansaar)
n/a	Contemporary Heroes of Islam (1): Khattab 1 and 2	waislamah.net
*only some parts endorsed violence		

At the top of this list is a title called 'Mashari Al-Ashwaq', sometimes marketed as 'The Book of Jihad', which is Awlaki's audio rendition of a book by Abi Zakaryya al Dimashqi al Dumyati, also known as 'Ibn Nuhaas', a seminal medieval scholar who wrote his book dedicated to the topic of jihad in the 14th Century. The book has since been revived and translated by different individuals, including Awlaki himself. A translation of the book by Noor Yamani also featured in several cases discussed here as shown in Table 1. Awlaki's audio lecture, based on the book, was published by Beirut-based Dar Ibn Al Mubarak in 2003. In his version, which is effectively a homage to the original work, Awlaki's recites his translation but adds his own interpretation of how these medieval tenets might play out today. In particular, Awlaki provides specific examples where he shows how believers can apply Nuhaas' ancient version of jihad, down to minute tactical details, in more contemporary settings, including the use of suicide bombings and modern weaponry.

As illustrated in Table 1, other audio lectures by Awlaki appear to be equally popular, namely his series on the

Life of Mohammed, the Lives of the Islamic Prophets and 'The Hereafter', which covers death and the afterlife. In these lectures, especially in his accounts of Mohammed and other prophets, Awlaki utilises the story form to present listeners with gripping accounts from the formative years of Islam, with the direct implication, of course, that this revered society should be re-established through means that include clandestine warfare.

The other prominent author who features in Table 1 is Abdullah Azzam, who is often described as Osama bin Laden's 'mentor'.[15] Azzam wrote several essays where he set out his vision regarding jihad, predominantly in the context of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, where participation in warfare, through combat and support, was seen as a defensive obligation incumbent on all believers. Four seminal treatises by Azzam are listed in Table 1: *Join the Caravan*, *Defence of the Muslim Lands*, *The Signs of Allah*, and *The Lofty Mountain*. Notably, though, these publications have all been translated and repackaged by UK-linked publishing networks that thrived in the early 2000s. These networks thus constitute important gatekeepers, translating and digitising the doctrine of 'classical jihadism'.[16] They also sometimes undertake a more creative role, doctoring, re-arranging or supplementing some of this original content. The version of Azzam's *Lofty Mountain*, which 'Azzam Publications' [17] published in 2003, for instance, contained a eulogy for a fighter killed in a US bombing raid on Tora Bora in 2001, thus connecting Azzam's original account of the Afghan jihad with more contemporary events.[18]

Most Islamist terrorists in the UK, as noted above, appear to rely on translations of scriptural or ideological discourse that was originally written in Arabic. Whilst Awlaki may have authored his own original content, his role as a gatekeeper to a narrative that UK-based subjects would otherwise struggle to reach is thus paramount. The same applies to obscure publishing initiatives such as those cited above. For more recent cases, English-language user-generated content which is often distributed on YouTube and similar sites and advertised on social media and networking platforms supplements existing material in English.

The Awlaki Factor

This brings us back to the question, to what extent has al-Qaida's message reached those seeking to participate in terrorism in the UK? The results from Table 1 are mixed. Both Azzam and Awlaki, of course, have clear links to al-Qaida. The former became instrumental in bin Laden's trajectory towards global Islamist militancy as he set up the organisational components upon which al-Qaida was built.[19] Awlaki, as mentioned, became one of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's most famous representative and sponsor of some of their most daring attempts to strike at the West.

Yet, his representation as 'al-Qaida-affiliated' is problematic for three reasons. First, as noted, he published most of his material before he became involved with al-Qaida or, indeed, terrorism in a direct way.

Second, some of the al-Qaida core leadership appears to have been ambivalent about him. Published letters from the Abbottabad compound, in particular, suggest that bin Laden was unsure about Awlaki's elevation within the ranks of AQAP. When Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the incumbent, put him forward as potential leader, bin Laden suggested instead that Wuhayshi should remain in that position, whilst asking for more information about Awlaki. In a letter addressed to Atiyatullah al-Liby and dated 27th August 2010, by which time Awlaki was a household name within jihadi circles with well-established links to AQAP, bin Laden asked for further evidence of his track record and his 'detailed vision' for the region, which bin Laden appeared to want to scrutinise and contrast with the visions of others.[20]

Third, in a rather crude effort to 'claim' popular and charismatic figureheads of jihad, the Islamic State organisation has suggested that it and their leaders constitute the proper heirs to bin Laden's and Awlaki's legacy and those of other fallen leaders they care to embrace.[21] As if to counter this charm offensive, Ayman al-Zawahiri, as bin Laden's successor as *amir* of al-Qaida, has also praised Awlaki as one of al-Qaida's fallen commanders in several of his statements.[22]

But the bottom line is that an assessment of al-Qaida's reach among sympathetic audiences within the UK

largely depends on the extent to which Awlaki can be presented as part of this fold. The two measurements of message resonance [23] considered here: the total number of individual publications associated with al-Qaida identified in the thirteen cases examined and the list of most common publications found across these investigations both point to the overwhelming influence of Awlaki.

Conclusions

These results, of course, come with the important caveat that they represent only a snapshot of a very dynamic realm. The media environment in which terrorists and potential terrorists operate at any given time is a moving target by definition. We have no assurances that particular events or circumstances, or different interpretations regarding their significance, remain static or *en vogue*. Datasets such as the one presented here can be skewed and shaped by the addition of new cases where individuals have, for whatever reason, expressed an interest in a completely different set of authors, publishers and resources from those included in the thirteen cases examined here. Nor are any assumptions being made about ways in which the subjects' collection of these ideological publications ultimately contributed to their decision to *mobilise*, to seek to participate in violence. Such considerations are beyond the scope of this article.

However, this study does help us to establish an empirically founded way in which to assess the relationship between al-Qaida as a terrorist organisation disseminating a particular message, on the one hand, and those recipients to whom that message is targeted, on the other.

Admittedly, potential sympathisers living in the UK hardly constitute a key target audience of al-Qaida, especially not of the core leadership, which has only delivered a handful of messages directed towards Muslims living in the West (though references to the UK, especially in relation to issues such as the Sykes-Picot agreement, are much more common). Yet it is important for students and practitioners in this field to understand what the relationship between messenger and recipient might look like.

In this regard, three findings from the current analysis stand out.

First, the majority of those seeking to become involved in terrorism in the UK rely on English-language content. This group, therefore, is not exposed to an unfiltered message from al-Qaida, but is instead dependent on intermediaries to act as gatekeepers to this content when no translations of original content are available or they have to rely on bespoke publications such as the *Inspire* magazine. This will inevitably shape the type of jihadi discourses that will reach British audiences in the future.

Second, authorities, authors and ideologues continue to inspire even when they are dead. This finding is consistent with Stenersen's analysis of extremist videos that featured in terrorism trials, especially in relation to the iconic status of the Saudi-born commander of Chechen militants, 'Ibn al-Khattab'.[24] Material by Awlaki is still popular even though he was killed in September 2011. Abdullah Azzam, killed decades earlier, also continues to resonate, albeit via more contemporary gatekeepers. Output from other al-Qaida leaders such as bin LadeLadenn or members of AQAP, therefore, may well continue to inspire in the future, perhaps in repackaged form or via user-generated content.

Third, materials from al-Qaida do not feature in isolation. This study suggests that subjects seeking to become involved in terrorism collect a broad repertoire of media publications conveying religious, political or ideological content from a variety of different sources. No single group, cluster or school appears to dominate, even when we concentrate on extremist materials alone. In fact, as far as established terrorist organisations are concerned, al-Qaida seems quite prominent. However, the point here is that the range of influencers is diverse.

Further analysis of current and future cases would be needed to establish whether the Islamic State group emerges as a more prominent organisation in terms of published media content recovered in terrorism investigations. However, overall, the diversity of sources within these collections appears to be a persistent feature.

This raises questions about how we conceptualise the 'local terrorist' and his/her association with established organisations like al-Qaida. The latter constitutes a structured entity which we have come to comprehend with increasing clarity through years of dedicated scholarship, declassified internal documents and a vast repertoire of public communications. The former, however, is a much more diffuse and opaque entity where we have far less research and empirical evidence to guide us. Yet, in order to understand the manifestation of al-Qaida and its future development at a local level, we need to explore the way in which AQ's message – a message that its leaders claim has achieved global reach - has been received by those who may seek to carry out acts of violence under AQ's flag.

Some of these individuals will undoubtedly have direct links with established organisational nodes that lead them along that path to violence, but even those individuals seek to interpret the world around them through a variety of different means. Whilst one analytical perspective will trace how al-Qaida as a group or organisation will evolve in the future, an equally important effort is needed to assess how its message and mission continues to be received within a competitive market place of ideas.

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Notes

[1] Al-Zawahiri, A. (2011) 'The Noble Knight Dismounted', published by As-Sahab (May) secured from https://archive.org/details/retha_001 [as of October 2016]. English transcript available in Holbrook, D. (Ed.) (2017) *Al-Qaeda 2.0: A Critical Reader*, Hurst, London.

[2] Al-Zawahiri, A. (2014) 'The Seventh Interview with Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri: Reality Between Pain and Hope', published by As-Sahab (May); URL: http://justpaste.it/fb61 [video], and URL: https://justpaste.it/lqaa [Arabic transcript], as of August 2017, English transcript available in : D. Holbrook (2017).

[3] Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2017) .'Letter to Abu Basir'; URL: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf [as of August 2017].

[4] Bryant, J. & Zillmann (2009) 'A retrospective and prospective look at media effects'; in: Robin L. Nabi, Mary Beth Oliver (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Media Processes and Effects*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 9-17.

[5] Holub, R. C. (2003) *Reception Theory*, Abington:Routledge, p. xiv.

[6] Tololyan, K. (2006) 'Cultural Narrative and the Motivation of the Terrorist'; in: Rapoport, D. (Ed.) *Critical Concepts in Political Science: Terrorism Volume IV: The Fourth or Religious Wave,* London: Routledge,p. 32.

[7] Wiktorowicz, Q. (2004) Introduction in Wiktorowicz (Ed.) *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Indiana University Press, p. 15.

[8] Part 1, Section 1, Terrorism Act 2000; URL:http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/contents [as of August 2017].

[9] UK Terrorism Act 2000, Part 1 (1); URL: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11 . Includes subsequent amendments.

[10] C.f. Glazzard, A. (2017) 'Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism', the Hague: ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter Terrorism, p. 11

[11] Lahoud, N. et al. (2012) 'Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?' Harmony Program, The Combating Terrorism Center, West Point; URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbottabad_WEB_v2.pdf [as of August 2017], p. 52.

[12] I should also note that Awlaki's extensive series of audio lectures that were split into multiple chapters and marketed as such were treated as separate publications. Awlaki's audio series titled 'The Hereafter', for instance, published by Al-Basheer, is divided into ten chapters and thus logged as ten independent entries.

[13] The *Inspire* magazine, published by AQAP's *Al-Malahem*, is grouped under that organisation's output. Otherwise a 'group' label

indicates generic output from that particular organisation, not a publication which exclusively carries a leadership statement.

[14] Even though his material was reproduced or referenced in the *Inspire* magazine.

[15] E.g. Post, J. M. (2002) 'Killing in the Name of God: Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda', Counterproliferation Paper No. 18, USAF Counterproliferation Center.

[16] Hegghammer, T. (2010) *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[17] Over which Babar Ahmad, a veteran of the Bosnian jihad in the 1990s and pioneer of a new generation of Islamist propaganda, presided.

[18] Azzam, A. (2003) *The Lofty Mountain*. London, Azzam Publications.

[19] Bergen, P. & Cruickshank (2011) 'Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 35:1, pp. 1-36.

[20] Combating Terrorism Center (no date) 'Letter from Usama bin Laden to Atiyatullah Al-Libi' [SOCOM-2012-0000003-HT]; URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Usama-Bin-Laden-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-Translation.pdf [as of August 2017], p. 2; Lahoud et al. (2012), p. 19.

[21] A feature article in the fourth edition of *Dabiq*, IS's English language magazine, referenced Awlaki, who had also been praised in IS-linked video output. The organisation has been more explicit in its references to bin Ladin's legacy, quoting from material presenting ISIL as the al-Qaida leader's true successor (in *Dabiq,* issue 4) and lamenting the chaos that followed his death, once al-Zawahiri took over (in *Dabiq* issue 10).

[22] Al-Zawahiri, A. (2012) 'Yemen: Between a Fugitive Puppet and his new Replacement', As-Sahab (15 May); al-Zawahiri (2012) 'To Our People in the Place of the Revelation and the Cradle of Islam', As-Sahab (18 May); As-Sahab (2014) 'Announcing the Establishment of the Organization for Qaeda Al-Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent' (3 September); al-Zawahiri (2015) 'The Islamic Spring' sixth instalment, published by As-Sahab (9 October).

[23] I am here referring to the ability of movement leaders as "signifying agents engaged in the social construction of meaning" to "articulate and disseminate frameworks of understanding that resonate with potential participants and broader publics to elicit collective action"; see Wiktorowicz, Q. (2004), p. 15.

[24] Stenersen, A. (2014) 'Gathering data through court cases: implications for understanding visual messaging'; in: Carol K. Winkler & Cori E. Dauber (Eds.) *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment*. United States Army War College, pp. 33-54.

Appendix: List of Extremist Titles Featuring in at least Two of the Fourteen Cases Examined

Author	Title	Media type	Publisher (if known)
Abdullah Azzam	The tawhid of action	Written material	At-Tibyan Publications
Anwar Al-Awlaki	Abu Bakr al Siddiq: His Life and Times [series]	Audio	Al-Basheer publications
n/a	Readings in Kashf-ush Shubu-haat (Removal of the Doubts) Publication in eleven parts on responding those Muslims who doubt fundamental components of Islam	Written material	Salafipublications.com
Khalid bin Abdur Rahman Al Husai-nan	How Can You Out-do the Scholars	Written material	Al Fajr Media (publisher) Dar Al-Murabiteen (transla-tion)

Anwar Al-Awlaki	Mashari Al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq/'The Book of Jihad' [series]	Audio	Dar Ibn Al Mubarak (Beirut) 2003
Anwar Al-Awlaki	Constants of Jihad/Constants on the Path of Jihad [series]	Audio	Islambase
Abi Zakaryya al Dimashqi al Dumyati, a.k.a. 'Ibn-Nuhaas' (d. 814 hijri) translated by Noor Yamani	The Book of Jihad or Mashari al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq wa Mutheer al-Gharaam ila Daar Assalaam	Written material	N/A
Abdullah Azzam	The Signs of Allah the Most Merciful Ar-Rahmaan in the Jihad of Afghanistan	Written material	Maktabah Al-Ansaar
Abu Hamza al-Masri, edited by Ibn Umar	The Khawaarij and Jihad	Written material	N/A
Mohammad 'Abdus Salam Faraj	Al-Jihad: The Absent Obligation	Written material	Maktabah Al Ansaar
Anwar Al-Awlaki	Allah is Preparing us for Victory	Multiple file types	N/A
Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi	This is our Aqidah	Written material	At-Tibyan Publications
Abdullah Azzam	The Lofty Mountain	Written material	Azzam Publications (also Maktabah al Ansaar)
Anwar Al-Awlaki	Lives of the Prophets [series]	Audio	Al-Basheer Publications
Anwar Al-Awlaki	The State of the Umma	Audio	N/A
Anwar Al-Awlaki	The Life of Mohammed (Makkan Period) [series]	Audio	Awakening Media
Anwar Al-Awlaki	The Life of Mohammed (The Medinan Period) [series]	Audio	Awakening Media
Anwar Al-Awlaki	The Hereafter/The Afterlife/Al-Achira [series]	Audio	Al-Basheer
Sayyid Qutb	Milestones (or Signposts on the Road)	Written material	N/A

Moulana Moham-med Masood Azhar	The Virtues of Jihad	Written material	N/A
Yusuf al-'Uyayri	The Islamic Ruling on the Permissibility of Self-Sacrificial Operations: Suicide or Martyrdom?	Written material	At-Tibyan Publications
As-Sahab	The wills of the martyrs of New York and Washington, aka 19 Martyrs	Video	As-Sahab
Azzam Publications/Babar Ahmad	In the Hearts of Green Birds, also known as Martyrs of Bosnia	Multiple file types	Azzam Publications/Recordings. Also appears linked to the El-Mudzahid Brigade in Bosnia-Herzegovina
Azzam Publications, Sawt Al-Quqaz	Russian Hell	Video	First Released in December 1999, originally available by mail order through Azzam publications. More recently there have been numerous online distributors
Azzam Publications/Babar Ahmad	Under the Shades of the Swords	Audio	Azzam Publications
Feiz Mohammed	The Last Day	Audio	N/A
Feiz Mohammed	The Grave	Audio	Sometimes distributed via Islambase
Feiz Mohammed	True Qualities of a Believer	Audio	N/A
Abdullah bin Mohammad	Valuable Collection for the Strategic Memorandum Series	Written material	Ansar Al-Mujahideen, English Forum translation of an Al-Ma'sada Publication
Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	Declaration of War	Audio	Islambase
Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	Natural Disasters	Audio	darulislam.info
n/a	Caravan of Martyrs	Audio	Maktabah al Ansaar
Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	Rejecting the Taghoot	Audio	N/A
Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	Seven Conditions of Shahadah	Audio	N/A

Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	Cancers in the Body of the Ummah	Audio	Given in the UK
Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	History Repeats itself	Audio	London
Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	Shirk in Perspective	Audio	N/A
Abdullah Azzam	Martyrs: the Building Blocks of Nations	Written material	Azzam Publications
Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	Peak of the Matter	Audio	N/A
Abdullah Faisal Al-Jamiki	Treachery from Within	Audio	Delivered in UK in August 1998
Esa al-Hindi	The Army of Medinah in Kashmir	Audio	Maktabah Al-Ansaar
Taysir Allouni	Interview with Osama bin LadenLaden by Taysir Allouni	Written material	10 October 2001, Al Jazeera. Also became available on Taliban-News, http://www.taliban-news.com
Omar Abdur Rahman	Confronting the Ruler	N/A	Reportedly given during trial for assassination of President Sadat. Distributed by Azzam Publications
waislamah.net	Contemporary Heroes of Islam (1): Khattab 1 and 2	Video	waislamah.net
n/a	Heroes of Islam: Abdullah bin Al Mubarak	audio	n/a
Abdul-Qadir Ibn Abdil-Aziz	Jihad and the Effects of Intention upon it	Written material	At-Tibyan Publications
multiple	Inspire issue 1	Written material	Summer 2010
Abdullah Azzam	Join the Caravan	Written material	Maktabah al Ansaar
Abdullah Azzam	Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman	Written material	Maktabah Al-Ansaar (and others)
Anwar Al-Awlaki	The Life of the Prophet Mohammed (Makkan Period), CD3: The Religious Situation in Pre-Islamic Arabia	Audio	Awakening Media

Munhammad bin Ahmad As-Salim/ Isa Al-Awshin	39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad	Written material	At-Tibyan
Husayn Ibn Mahmud	The Giant Man - Biography of Mullah Omar	Written material	At-Tibyan Publications

Islamic State and Technology – A Literature Review

by Truls Hallberg Tønnessen

Abstract

This article offers an overview of the literature on how the Islamic State has used different technologies, primarily within the fields of drone technology, CBRN and communication technology. The author argues that the primary strength of the Islamic State, and terrorist groups in general, is not in the acquisition and use of advanced technology, but the innovative and improvised use of less advanced, but easily accessible, technology. A gap identified in the existing research is the question of priority – why and under what circumstances would a terrorist group allocate some of its (usually) limited resources in order to develop or acquire new technological capabilities?

Keywords: Technology, Terrorism, Islamic State, CBRN, Drones, Internet.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to offer a brief overview of the literature on Islamic State (IS) and technology. The intention is to identify knowledge gaps within the literature and to make some preliminary observations on the Islamic State's use of specific technology.

Since it is somewhat difficult to separate the literature on technology and Islamic State from the more general literature on terrorism and technology, this article will, indirectly, also be a presentation of the larger literature on terrorism and technology. However, given the unprecedented scale of the Islamic State's territorial control, financial resources and the number of recruits, the Islamic State has, at least until its recent demise, been at the forefront of technological development among contemporary terrorist groups. In this overview, three fields of technology that have received most attention in the literature - drone technology, communication technology and CBRN – have been singled out. These fields are also some of the fields where the Islamic State has been most innovative. All of these technologies can be used as part of offensive operations.

One main argument made here is that while the general literature on terrorism and technology tends to focus on the most advanced and most lethal scenarios, the primary strength of terrorist groups is their innovative use of less advanced and easily accessible technology. The present study finds that, like most terrorist groups, the Islamic State has used some of this technology mainly for defensive purposes and when the group has used technology offensively, it has done so in a crude, improvised and "low-tech" manner. It is also argued that, although the Islamic State has been innovative in the use of technology and made technological improvements, this is mainly an effect of IS' ability and willingness to exploit new opportunities given by the rapid technological development and by the sheer size of the group. The primary gap in the literature identified in this review is the issue of priority – why and under what circumstances would a terrorist group allocate some of its (usually) limited resources in order to develop or acquire new technological capabilities?

General Observations on the Literature

The literature on terrorism and technology can generally be divided into two categories. On the one hand is what we may refer to as "what if" writings and scenario-oriented literature, looking mainly at which *capabilities* a non-state actor would require to engage in, for instance, a CBRN attack or in an act of cyber-terrorism, and the *probability* that a non-state actor would be able to acquire the resources and competence needed.[1] Given the (fortunate) rarity of incidents of CBRN attacks and acts of cyber-terrorism, this literature is often highly technical and theoretical.[2] This literature has at times been criticized for exaggerating the threat and the probability of highly advanced and potentially very lethal attacks.[3]

There has also been a tendency in some of this literature to conflate non-state actors with their limited resources

with states that have developed highly advanced technology.[4] For advanced technological fields, like CBRN and cyber, it is undoubtedly states, and not non-state actors that represent the greatest threat, if they choose to use it offensively. However, it cannot be ruled out that non-state actors could directly or indirectly be given access to advanced technologies and resources by states that, for instance, want to avoid attribution.[5] Thus, a major caveat of this literature review is that it has not looked at the literature on technology and state-sponsored terrorism.

Another type of literature looks at terrorist organisations' *motivation* to use certain technologies. For instance, some of this literature discusses a non-state actor's motivation and various incentives and disincentives for the use of CBRN.[6] This literature is often more empirical –either based on actual incidents or focusing on statements of intent from terrorist groups or key individuals.[7] However, as this article will illustrate, it is often not enough to look at terrorist groups' stated intent. Intent does not equal capability, certainly not in technologically more advanced fields.

Islamic State and CBRN

There has been no shortage of politicians and security analysts warning that Islamic State (or other terrorist organisations) may use various forms of CBRN weapons, even nuclear weapons, for an attack.[8] And there is no doubt that the motivation to use CBRN weapons indeed is present – in 2014 it was estimated that there have been 50 registered incidents where al-Qaida or its affiliates have attempted to acquire, produce or deploy CBRN weapons during the last two decades.[9] There have also been a handful of incidents in Europe where CBRN materials have been considered in the planning phase of a terrorist attack.[10] However, the low number of actual incidents including CBRN indicates that ambition fortunately has so far exceeded capabilities. Jihadists' lack of competence and lack of development within the field of CBRN has been confirmed by a 2015 study based on the discussions of CBRN weapons and various CBRN "recipes" posted on online jihadist forums.[11]

Symptomatically, terrorist groups have so far primarily used the least advanced form of CBRN – chemical weapons. The University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database (GTD) has registered 303 incidents of terrorist attacks including chemical weapons worldwide. In comparison, GTD has registered 32 incidents of biological terrorism worldwide, resulting in 9 fatalities, no incidents of nuclear terrorism, and 13 incidents of (attempted) radiological terrorism, resulting in no fatalities.[12] Of the al-Qaida affiliates, it is the Islamic State and its predecessors that have been regarded as the most successful in the development and use of chemical weapons.[13]. Al-Qaida's history of experimenting with, and using, chemical weapons goes back to the 1990s when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian founder of al-Qaida in Iraq, established a camp for foreign fighters in Herat, Afghanistan.[14] In 2007 the Islamic State of Iraq, as the group was known at the time, was responsible for a series of attacks that combined truck bombs with canisters of chlorine. Many died as a result of the attacks, but apparently not due to the chlorine, but due to the conventional explosion itself.[15]

Following the establishment of the Islamic State in 2014, there was a rapid increase in the group's use of chemical weapons. According to an estimate by IHS Conflict Monitoring, the Islamic State is believed to have been responsible for 71 incidents of chemical attacks between July 2014 and June 2017.[16]

There are also indications that there has been an improvement in the Islamic State's chemical capabilities since 2014. This development was the result of what may be referred to as a chemical weapons program, including some veterans from Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons program.[17] For instance, the Islamic State has been able to manufacture shells filled with chemical agents and successfully delivered them over a greater distance, using mortar grenades. Chlorine was still the most frequently used chemical, but IS has also succeeded in both manufacturing and weaponising mustard gas.[18] This is a worrisome development that should raise some concerns. However, so far few incidents attributed to IS have been reported where the chemicals alone have caused causalities. The impact of the Islamic State's use of chemical weapons has thus far primarily been psychological, not physical.

Taking into account the group's access to substantial financial resources, its vast pool of recruits, its territorial control and the group's long history of experimenting with chemical weapons, it is rather surprising that the

group's capabilities did not evolve more than they did. As pointed out by Geoffrey Chapman elsewhere in this Special Issue, what characterizes the Islamic State's use of chemical weapons is the scale of its use, not its technological sophistication.[19] So far, concerns that IS should acquire more weapons-grade and more advanced chemical weapons, such as sarin, from the stock-piles of the Syrian regime appear to have been unfounded. IS has primarily used crude and improvised chemical weapons and most reports point to the Syrian regime as the culprit behind sarin attacks in Syria.[20]

There have also been concerns that IS could succeed in weaponising other forms of CBRN materials than chemicals, such as radiological substances building a radiological dispersal device (RDD) or "dirty bomb". The Islamic State had access to various sources of radioactive material in Iraq, particularly in Mosul's hospitals and university institutes. This has led to concerns that the group could be able to develop an RDD.[21] However, experts have concluded that the radiological material IS had access to had limited utility for constructing a dirty bomb.[22] There have also been concerns voiced that the Islamic State could be able to buy some sort of nuclear device or materials on the black market.[23]

An article published in Islamic State's magazine *Dabiq* alluded to the fact that IS might be able to use its unprecedented access to financial resources to obtain a nuclear device from Pakistan and smuggle it to the United States and detonate it there. The author of the article admits that this might be a far-fetched scenario, but that the scenario nevertheless would be the "sum of all fears of Western intelligence agencies".[24] In addition, the possibility that a state in possession of nuclear weapons, like, for instance, Pakistan, should willingly sell a nuclear device to a non-state actor has been discredited.[25]

However, an incident in Belgium illustrates the typical "low-tech" and asymmetrical threat that IS, and other terrorist organizations, may represent. Members of the IS-linked attack cell that was responsible for the attacks in Paris November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016 had been spotted on several hours of video surveillance footage targeting a Belgian nuclear scientist working at a nuclear research center. One police theory is that the cell planned to abduct him and force him to provide them access to radiological materials.[26] The same cell reportedly also planned mixing certain animal excrements with explosives to construct a primitive "biological weapon."[27] Additionally, a Belgian recruit of Moroccan origin, who used to work at a nuclear power plant before travelling to Syria, illustrates the potential of insider threats.[28]

Islamic State and Drone Technology

The Islamic State has made their most technological progress in the field of drone technology.[29] One of the most comprehensive reports on terrorist groups' use of drones, published in 2016, identifies four groups with discernable "drone programs" – Hizballah, Hamas, Islamic State and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra). Tellingly, all four had territorial control to varying degrees and three of them have been involved in the ongoing conflict in Syria.[30] Hizballah and Hamas were pioneers when it came to exploiting the possibilities offered by drone technology, but the rapid development of the drone program of the Islamic State is striking. According to the report, it took approximately seven years from Hizballah demonstrating some interest in drone technology until the successful use of a drone as part of an operation, while the same trajectory took only about one year for the Islamic State.[31] This rapid development is even more striking, knowing that Hizballah received some support from Iran, while the Islamic State did not enjoy such state support.[32] A partial explanation is that the rise of the Islamic State coincided with a rapid development of the availability and commercialisation of drone technology.

The Islamic State primarily used commercially available drones that were modified for military use but also experimented with constructing simple surveillance drones 'in-house'. Conflict Armament Research has identified several IS-drone workshops, for instance in Ramadi and in Mosul, where IS modified and weaponized drones and also manufactured some from scratch.[33]

The Islamic State initially used drones for surveillance and for propaganda purposes, but there has been a rapid increase of weaponised drones. In September and October 2016 it was reported that the Islamic State

had managed to weaponise drones by attaching explosives that could be released when the drone hovered over an intended target.[34] In October 2016 two Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers were killed and two French Special Forces badly injured in what has been described as the first confirmed incident causing casualties following a terrorist organization's use of a weaponised drone. This incident also illustrates the unconventional and innovative offensive use of drones by the Islamic State. The drone in question was brought down to a landing without any casualties, but it had been rigged with explosives that blew up when the Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers were inspecting the drone. [35]

There was a rapid increase in reports on the Islamic State's use of weaponised drones after the group announced the establishment of a separate drone unit in January 2017. According to a publication by the IS-affiliated al-Yaqin foundation, the Islamic State's drones succeeded in killing 39 persons and destroying 43 vehicles in February 2017 alone.[36] Thes numbers are probably exaggerations ,but there has been a steady uptick of deadly drone attacks. In September 2017, media reported that a dozen Iraqi soldiers had been killed by Islamic State drones.[37]

This rapid development seems to have been the result of a concentrated effort by IS to develop a drone program. The existence of such a drone program was confirmed by the discovery of the so-called "drone papers" in Mosul in 2016. Most of the documents found were produced in 2015; – these papers indicated that IS had, at least to some extent, developed a streamlined and bureaucratised program for development and weaponisation of drones. Several of the documents pertaining to acquisition of drone parts were signed by the Aviation section (*qism al-tayaran*) of the group's Committee of Military Manufacturing and Development (*Haiʾa al-tatwir w al-tasniʿ al-ʿaskari*). The existence of a specific committee for military manufacturing and development illustrates that this was something the group prioritised.[38] A 2017 report, based on information obtained from several local sources based in Syria, illustrates the extent of the group's drone program. The report identified separate centers for training, weaponisation, modification and maintenance, as well as the existence of a center for storage and distribution. Each of these centers had its own director, and all were based in Raqqa. The overall leader (or emir) of the Islamic State's drone program was identified to be a Muhammad Islam, a European citizen of Malaysian descent who holds a degree in information technology from a British university.[39]

Although the Islamic State has made rapid improvements in the use and weaponisation of drones, it can be argued that drone technology in itself has worked against the Islamic State since many of its top leaders have been killed by the technologically much more advanced U.S drones. For instance, by March 2016 it was estimated that 90 senior and mid-level IS leaders had been killed by drone strikes.[40] This supports the general observation that technology, especially more advanced technology, often works to the disadvantage rather than the advantage for non-state actors.

In addition, there are a number of anti-drone measures that might reduce the threat from non-state actors' use of drones. For instance, through use of geo-fencing, DJI, the producer of the most popular commercial drones, has prevented its models from flying in parts of IS-controlled areas in northern Syria and Iraq.[41] The U.S-led Coalition Forces in Iraq have also used several anti-drone tools against the drones of the Islamic State, such as the anti-drone rifle Battelle DroneDefener and one called Dronebuster.[42] This illustrates that although non-state actors start using more advanced technology, their opponents still stay ahead of the curve because states are more capable of rapid technological development than non-state actors are. However, the rapid commercialisation of drone technology has contributed to reducing this gap - a development likely to continue.[43]

Islamic State and the Internet

The literature on Islamic State and the Internet falls mainly in two categories. The first category is literature focusing on how the group has taken advantage of the opportunities provided by the Internet and especially by social media, for instance in the fields of recruitment and dissemination of propaganda.[44] A large part of this literature focuses on the actual content of the propaganda and not on the Islamic State's use of internet technology per se.[45] The second category is of a more technical nature and focuses on the online infrastructure of the Islamic State - such as which platforms they use, how they disseminate their propaganda and how they

maintain an online presence despite counter-measures against it.[46]

These two categories also correspond with two different categories in the literature on counter-terrorism online. One type of literature focuses on how to respond and counter the propaganda from the Islamic State, through, for instance, counter-narratives.[47] Another category focuses more on the technical and judicial aspects of preventing the Islamic State and similar groups from using the Internet for propaganda and recruitment purposes.[48]

This is not a new development – the Internet has been central for the propaganda and recruitment strategy of most terrorist groups for a number of years. However, as with the their use of drones, the rise of the Islamic State coincided with a rapid technological advance in the form of the development and popularisation of a vast array of apps and platforms the Islamic State could exploit.[49] Especially important was the popularisation of apps that provided end-to-end encryption, such as Telegram and WhatsApp .[50] The proliferation of encrypted apps has made it easier and safer for members and sympathisers of the Islamic State to communicate with each other and to meet potential recruits online. Especially worrying is the new phenomenon of so-called remote-controlled plots and virtual entrepreneurs grooming and micro-managing potential attackers through various encrypted social media platforms.[51] Encrypted apps have been reportedly used immediately before or during attacks in Europe where handlers abroad communicate with a remotely-controlled operative.[52]

The online community of sympathisers has also contributed to the technological advances of the Islamic State (and similar groups) through posting instruction manuals and how-to-tips online, for instance, on how to increase the range of drones or how to communicate securely.[53] In February 2016 a Telegram channel for "Islamic State Scientists & Engineers" was launched. The channel was only open to those who had pledged allegiance to the Caliph and who had a technical degree such as engineering, aeronautics, physics and biology. The stated intent behind the channel was to gather a group of qualified people who could do research in order to support "the military industry in the Islamic State."[54]

The Islamic State was of course far from the only terrorist group capable to take advantage of the opportunities provided by new communications technology. Yet, as with the Islamic State's attacks with chemical weapons, the group distinguishes itself mainly through the scale and volume of its use of Internet and social media. The extent of IS' territorial control and the sheer number of attacks committed by the group, provided it with a large reservoir of battle footage and pictures that could be turned into slick productions that gained worldwide distribution. Like its predecessor al-Qaida in Iraq, the Islamic State has exploited the new technology to receive worldwide attention by broadcasting brutal executions. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, regarded by the Islamic State as its historical founder, gained worldwide notoriety in 2004 when he was seen beheading the U.S hostage Nicholas Berg in the first video issued by his group on the Internet. This was years before the rise of social media; the video was released on the jihadi web forum that was the main platform for disseminating jihadi material at the time. The movie did, however, gain attention far beyond the jihadi forums - the search string "Nick Berg" was the second most popular Google search for May 2004, second only to "American Idol".[55]

Islamic State has not only used the Internet to distribute propaganda, but also for more offensive purposes, mainly through its so-called "Cyber Caliphate Army" (*jaysh al-khilafa al-iliktruni*).[56] However, this "Army" has primarily been engaged in what has been referred to as cyber vandalism and hacktivism. So far the general assessment is that the Islamic State capabilities in the realm of cyber are low and unsophisticated.[57] It has also been claimed that some of the activities of the Cyber Caliphate originated from Russia.[58] Moreover, there have been reports that Islamic State members and/or supporters have used virtual currencies such as Bitcoin, but so far the evidence is mainly anecdotal.[59] The Islamic State has also been accused of using the Internet for raising money, for instance, through fake eBay transactions.[60]

To sum up, the most innovative use of the Internet by the Islamic State is that they have been using encryption not only in order to spread propaganda but also for offensive purposes by remotely directing and coaching operatives immediately before and during ongoing terrorist operations.

Innovation in Zones of Ongoing Armed Conflict

Although both capabilities and intention are crucial factors for estimating the potential technological threat from a non-state actor, the perhaps most important factor is the question of *priority.* For instance, if the Islamic State and its predecessor have been experimenting to develop and use chemical weapons since 1999, with few enemy casualties, it can hardly be said to have been a "success" from the viewpoint of the terrorists - the more so when compared to the staggering number of casualties these groups have been responsible for through other and less technological advanced modi operandi.

Thus, given that there exists technologically less advanced and less resource-intensive modi operandi that have proven to be more effective in terms of creating deaths and destruction, the question raises: why and under what circumstances would a non-state actor decide to allocate a large amount of its (usually limited) resources to develop more advanced technology? This question is not properly addressed in the literature, but a promising avenue of research that might help to answer such a question is by studying the internal decision-making processes and the internal organisation of terrorist groups. For instance, how do terrorist groups manage their resources? How does a group that frequently loses resourceful professionals and key leaders secure organisational learning and transfer knowledge within the organisation? How are terrorist groups set up for processes such as innovation, adaption and training?[61] It has been pointed out that due to the lack of sources that there has been a paucity of studies on the internal decision-making of terrorist groups or the background of its recruits.[62] However, due to the increasing availability of internal documents and lists of members from the Islamic State, it is now possible to gain a better insight into the internal processes of IS.[63]

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide in-depth analysis of these questions. This review has, however, illustrated that one favorable condition for non-state actors acquiring and using more advanced technology is territorial control. For instance, all of the insurgent groups with discernable drone programs had territorial control and three out of four were involved in the conflict in Syria. Previous studies of terrorist innovation have also found that territorial control and operating in an armed conflict zone offering frequent possibilities to test innovations often are drivers for technological progress.[64]

In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State's territorial control has also enabled the group to experiment with less advanced technology in a DIY-way. According to internal documents, the Islamic State had a separate Research and Development Division (*Qism al-buhuth w al-tatwir*). This division experimented, for instance, with producing remote-control car bombs, a robot operated by a solar-panel that was intended to function as a decoy, an automatic steering system for artillery weapons, etc.[65] Sky News was provided with several hours of unedited videos by a Syrian rebel group, showing documentation of what is referred to as an Islamic State "jihad university" in Raqqa. The video shows how the Islamic State is experimenting with developing a driverless car bomb.[66] The Islamic State has also constructed a fleet of armored cars, with a high DIY improvised "Mad Max" factor.[67] Insurgent groups operating in Syria have also been experimenting with various forms of remotely-controlled and tele-operated weapons.[68]

Conclusion: "Low-Tech Terrorism"?

This review of the Islamic State's use of technology has found that what distinguishes the group's use of technology from other non-state actors is primarily its ability to exploit the opportunities offered by commercial technology development as well as the extent of its use of technology. This is primarily an effect of the unprecedented size of the Islamic State. Another explanation is that the rise of the Islamic State partly coincided with a rapid technological development within the fields of drone and communication technology. In that sense, the Islamic State was uniquely poised to exploit this, given its size and the degree of its territorial control.

Another observation is that terrorist groups, including the Islamic State, mainly use technology for defensive and not offensive operations. As an illustration, a large share of the technological innovation and concern from Islamic State and al-Qaida has been within the field of operational security and how to defend and protect the organisation from the technology used against them. For instance, until recently most of the publications from

al-Qaida were concerned with how to protect themselves from U.S. drones rather than focusing on how to use drones themselves.[69] The Islamic State and its supporters online have also spent considerable resources and energy on how to maintain their presence on Twitter and other social media platforms and how to communicate securely, sharing information on digital security and encryption.[70]

This review has illustrated that even in cases when the Islamic State used more advanced technology, such as drones, or attempted to use CBRN weapons, the group has done so in an improvised, crude and DIY manner. Even a terrorist group like the Islamic State, with its unprecedented access to resources, is incomparable in strength to a real state. The group's primary asset is its innovative use of already existing technologies and modi operandi, like booby-trapped drones. This is also supported by previous research that has found that the primary originality and innovation of terrorists has historically been to creatively modify or combine pre-existing and relatively "simple" modi operandi.[71]

This underlines the difficulties for a non-state actor to acquire and use more advanced technology. However, it may also indicate that to acquire advanced technology is not a priority for most terrorist groups. The primary knowledge gap identified by this literature review is precisely the question of prioritisation – why and under what circumstances would a terrorist group decide to use some of its limited resources in order to acquire new technological capabilities? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to gain a more in-depth insight into internal factors such as various groups' internal decision-making and what role technology and innovation plays in the strategic thinking of the groups' leaders.

Finally, what are the implications for use of technology in terrorist attacks in areas outside the conflict theater, e.g. in Europe? While there has been some technological innovation in conflict areas like Iraq and Syria, recent studies of the modus operandi of jihadi terrorism in Europe indicate that terrorists have become *less* technologically advanced – using relatively "low-tech" means such as knives, firearms and rented vehicles as weapons.[72] This is also something that has been recommended both by the Islamic State and by al-Qaida in their respective online publications.[73] Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) hailed the perpetrator who on 22 March 2017 drove a car into pedestrians on London's Westminster Bridge for employing "the art of the possible" and urged other lone wolves to do the same.[74]

This has led some observers to refer to a trend of "low-tech terrorism" where terrorists "routinely transform everyday tools into low-tech weapons or attack vehicles—whether cars, trucks, scooters, or kitchen knives".[75] This is probably an adaption to the growth of security measures in Europe, but it also illustrates and supports previous studies concluding that terrorists tend to be pragmatic and conservative in terms of their uses of technology and their modus operandi.[76]

In terms of technological innovation, this implies that terrorist groups in the West will primarily use relatively simple, but easily accessible, commercially available technology that could potentially be transformed into a weapon. For instance, one potential scenario is to steer a swarm of drones towards a crowd, using the drone blades themselves to inflict damage on the crowd or to use drones as part of a coordinated attack.[77] In 2017 it was reported that the Islamic State had achieved a swarm-level capacity of drone use. [78] We have also seen that various encrypted apps have enabled handlers based in a conflict area to remotely assist and guide attackers in Europe – something that is likely to continue.

In the immediate future, there are also other technological developments that can be exploited by the Islamic State or other terrorist organizations, like 3D printing. This allows terrorists to produce parts to a drone for instance, or even 3D printed firearms.[79] There have so far not been any incidents of 3D printed firearms among terrorists registered, but there have been instances of 3D printing used by criminals and drug-cartels.[80] In the longer term, the rapid technological development and increasing commercialisation of new technologies may lead to terrorism taking unexpected turns.

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Islamic State and Al-Nusra: Exploring Determinants of Chemical Weapons Usage Patterns

by Geoffrey Chapman

Abstract

This article seeks to examine the determinants of use and non-use of chemical weapons between two typologically similar non-state actors. By comparing the differing patterns of chemical weapons usage exhibited by the Islamic State and Al-Nusra against commonly offered variables for drivers of non-state actor CBRN usage, it will be determined that they both share the ability to conduct basic chemical weapons attacks and have the same retaliatory and theological justifications to do so. However, the essential difference between the two groups that provides an explanation for the difference in chemical weapons usage can be found in the constraints (or lack thereof) imposed by their respective strategies. The formation of these approaches by their precursor organisations combined with their prior CBRN behaviour will provide further evidence to this conclusion.

Keywords: CBRN, Chemical Weapons, Al-Nusra, Islamic State, Chlorine

Introduction

Within the ongoing conflict in Syria and its spill over into Iraq, chemical weapons (CW) have become a salient point of international reaction. While much of the focus of the international community has been concerned with the response to the Assad regime's use of CW, Islamic State (IS) has also been a prolific user of CW. Between June 2017 and the first recorded instance of IS using CW in July 2014, IHS Conflict Monitoring has logged 71 instances of CW use attributed to IS.[1] This 'relatively routine' use of CW by a non-state actor is unprecedented – the Tamil Tigers used chlorine once and Aum Shinrikyo, despite producing its own sarin, only conducted 10 CW attacks.[2] Fortunately, most of IS' CW attacks have involved low level agents, either chlorine or (the relatively impotent) mustard gas; while they can cause panic and create significant numbers of casualties, there have been few fatalities.[3] Nevertheless, this frequent use of CW is in stark contrast to previous Al-Qaida (AQ) actions: while AQ core explored CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear) options, they were never featured in an AQ core attack.[4] It will be argued that this shift towards the frequent use of CW by IS represents a long running strategic difference between AQ and IS.[5] To allow for a controlled comparison, this article will compare the use of CW by IS to its lack of use by AQ's Syrian affiliate, Al-Nusra. As much of the literature on non-state actor's use of CBRN focuses on the type of the group involved (e.g. religious cults, ethno-nationalists, etc.), this article will highlight factors that, in this case, caused two ostensibly similar groups to develop differences in CW usage.[6]

Given the politicised nature of CW within the Syrian context, statements relating to the attribution of CW attacks are controversial; however, there is a lack of evidence proving that Al-Nusra have been using CW.[7] There was an incident in Turkey in 2013 where it was initially reported that Al-Nusra operatives had been arrested with 2.5 kg of sarin in their possession, but Turkish government statements later claimed that the seized chemicals were antifreeze.[8] While one of the detainees was eventually convicted in absentia for membership of Al-Nusra, further details remain unclear.[9] Videos have emerged of rebels supposedly using CW, but their authenticity and origin is highly dubious.[10] Additionally, the Assad regime has frequently accused Al-Nusra of being responsible for CW incidents, although these have yet to be evidenced by an international body.[11] In the case of Talmenes on the 21st April 2014, the Joint Investigative Mechanism found the Assad regime responsible, despite its attempt to blame Al-Nusra.[12] In contrast to IS, where a repeated and well documented pattern of usage can be observed, there is insufficient evidence to claim that Al-Nusra have been using CW.[13] Rather than assessing Al-Nusra's potential acquisition of advanced CW, the apparent distinct difference in usage between Al-Nusra and IS will be analysed.

A further point of contention would be the dimensions of the relationship between Al-Nusra and AQ core. As

Al-Nusra's initial founders were long term members of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), tasked with founding a Syrian branch in 2011, Al-Nusra's relationship with AQ has clearly evolved over time.[14] Al-Nusra's relative success as it shifted from terrorism to insurgency led to disagreements between Al-Nusra and ISI over the demarcation of authority; by 2013 this had created a schism between the two groups.[15] This power struggle with ISI led Al-Nusra to align with AQ. In 2013, Al-Nusra integrated "at least two dozen senior al-Qaida leaders" into its leadership, thereby solidifying AQ core's influence over the organisation as its regional affiliate. [16] While the 'toxicity' of the AQ 'brand' has since led Al-Nusra to publicly distance itself from AQ in the intervening period and undergo a name change, analyst Charles Lister advices that "any potential decision to break ties from Al-Qaida should be read more as a politically smart maneuver", rather than a genuine split.[17]

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the shifts in the ongoing relationship between AQ and Al-Nusra, what is pertinent to the following analysis is that Al-Nusra have thus far conformed to a gradualist strategy in line with al-Zawahiri's 'General Guidelines for Jihad', rather than the uncompromising antagonism of IS.[18] How this strategy will develop as Al-Nusra becomes increasingly dominant within the Syrian rebel cause is yet to be seen; a departure from its previous approach can be seen with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's antagonism towards Ahrar al-Sham.[19]

The shifting nature of Al-Nusra's strategy indicates a further limitation of this study when used to extrapolate future CBRN behaviour, especially in different operational contexts. While IS have proven their willingness to use CW both locally and abroad, it will be argued that Al-Nusra have thus far deliberately restricted their terroristic activities for strategic reasons. If Al-Nusra, other AQ franchises, or AQ core itself redoubled their efforts to conduct attacks in the West, they would be less constrained by the need to convince local Sunni populations of the righteousness of their cause. Nevertheless, as effective CW use is dependent on know-how, it is unlikely that external operations cells will use CW without prior experience or direction. [20]

A final limitation of this article that dictates the employment of this wider comparative approach is the lack of communication from within each organisation explaining their approaches towards the employment of CBRN. While both IS and AQ core have communicated their desire for CBRN weapons, available discussion on how or if they would be used is even more limited; for AQ, this is seemingly because they have never had a CBRN weapon that they deemed operationally viable.[21] For IS and its precursor organisations, it is more complicated; despite chlorine attacks that occurred in Baghdad in 2006-2007 being commonly attributed to AQI and IS currently using CW, none of these actions have been publicly announced.[22] IS' propaganda magazines only fleetingly mention CW, and then only in the context of Assad's use and in a negative light.[23] Charles Lister quotes a lone IS militant who stated on his personal blog that IS have been using CW, but given IS' record for communicating its extreme brutality openly, this relative silence is a surprising omission.[24]

Similarities

In terms of contrasting why two ostensibly similar Salafist Jihadist organisations have demonstrated different patterns of CW use, the split between IS and Al-Nusra lends itself towards a controlled comparison. When it comes to practical limitations for inhibiting CW usage, both groups have had the opportunity to conduct basic CW attacks.[25] As both Al-Nusra and IS have had control over territory they are free to operate with relative impunity compared to a cell based terrorist group in a hostile state. Control over territory has also meant easy access to chlorine which is used ubiquitously for sanitation. In December 2012, Al-Nusra captured the SYSACCO plant near Aleppo and reportedly removed 200 tonnes of chlorine.[26] Similarly, IS allegedly appropriated chlorine from water treatment facilities in territory it held.[27] Furthermore, little technical knowledge is required to weaponize chlorine in its most basic form; although inefficient, chlorine canisters can be combined with conventional IEDs for an improvised dispersal mechanism.[28] Although this crude usage is unlikely to significantly enhance the lethality of an IED, it stands that a limited CW capacity has been available to both IS and Al-Nusra.

While IS has gone on to manufacture its own "makeshift [CW] projectiles and mortar rounds" and use mustard gas, possibly either scavenged from the Muthanna facility or produced themselves, access to a more advanced

CW capability was not a driver for IS' initial usage of CW.[29] Whereas expertise has been highlighted as a driving factor for non-state actors' use in the CBRN literature, IS used chlorine before mustard in 2014 and had been planning CW use in Baghdad in 2013.[30] Although the incorporation of know-how from foreign recruited members and former Baathist scientists may have helped IS improve their CW capability, access to advanced materials or expertise is not a sufficient explanation for the use of CW for either group, but may have been perpetuating IS use by improving its tactical utility.[31] Nevertheless, IS' precursor organisations' preoccupation with using CW, both in 2013 and 2006-2007 when they were attempting to acquire it under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, demonstrates a longstanding interest in CW that predates their now unprecedented access to former Baathist expertise.[32]

In terms of potential justifications for use of CW, both Al-Nusra and IS have reportedly had chlorine and sarin used against them by the Assad regime. This has included IS having chlorine used against them at Der-Ezzor in 2014 and sarin allegedly used on villages under their control in December 2016.[33] For Al-Nusra, chlorine was reportedly repeatedly used against villages they occupied in the Hama plain in 2014 and then sarin was used against Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017.[34] However, no connection emerges between use of CW on the two groups and a response in kind. In their present incarnation, IS was plotting use of CW in Iraq 2013 and used chlorine IEDs in 2014, before CW was used against them in Syria.[35] On the other hand, Al-Nusra has explicitly retaliated against the Assad regime for the use of sarin on Ghouta. Al-Nusra executed hostages, launched bombings and conducted conventional attacks but there was no apparent use of CW in return during its "eye for an eye" campaign.[36] With IS starting to use CW in Iraq and Al-Nusra responding to CW with conventional means, retaliation or even a permissive environment generated by wider CW use is clearly not a driving factor behind CW usage by IS or Al-Nusra.

As Salafist Jihadist organisations, both Al-Nusra and IS can find theological justification for the use of CW through the use of the same fatwas. While Al-Nusra have never publicly communicated a desire for CBRN and therefore have never needed to provide a reasoning themselves, they could draw on prior AQ statements issued either by Bin Laden, al-Awlaki or Zawahiri that provide a justification for mass casualty terrorism.[37] Although IS have stated that they would hypothetically use a nuclear device on the US, they could additionally cite Nasir al-Fahd's 2003 fatwa on the use of CBRN, especially given his defection to IS in 2015.[38] IS could also draw upon the practices of their ideological progenitor, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had said he would use CBRN weapons if he had them.[39] Therefore, for either Al-Nusra of IS, their ideology imposes no direct limitations on the use of mass casualty terrorism or CBRN use.

Essential Difference

Rather than an ideological conflict as such, the core doctrinal difference that has led to fighting between Al-Nusra and IS is the prioritisation with which the caliphate is founded. While both Bin Laden, Zawahiri and senior Al-Nusra members believed in "the pursuit of a caliphate," this was the end goal of their struggle.[40] On the other hand, Zarqawi, AQI in 2006-2007 and then al-Baghdadi in 2014 all sought to found the caliphate at the earliest practical opportunity.[41] In 2014, the foundation of the caliphate had practical benefits within the enflamed power struggle between Al-Nusra and Al-Qaida on the one side and the then Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on the other.[42] The implication of founding a caliphate is that all jihadists should pledge their *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) to the caliph rather than Zawahiri; not doing so is a clear signal of expressing its illegitimacy and therefore declaring yourself its enemy.[43] Al-Tamimi has argued that "[IS'] fundamental problem in dealing with other rebel factions… [is because it] sees itself not merely as a "group"… but as a "state" that has the prerogative to rule over all others… [and therefore] adopts a particularly brutal approach to dealing with other rebel factions."[44]

This uncompromising stance is further reflected both in IS' (and its previous incarnation's) attitude towards what it perceives as heresy and religious bad practice. In this regard, IS' approach to salafi-jihadism has been described as "absolutely uncompromising," even compared to fellow jihadists.[45] IS is willing to attack perceived deviant Sunni Muslims under its takfiri doctrine and seeks to immediately overthrow secular authority in favour of the harsh application of its interpretation of Sharia law.[46] IS have a long running history of practicing extreme

violence towards Shia Muslims and other religious minorities; not only is this ideologically justified within their framework, but attacking Shia Muslims served the purpose within Zarqawi's original strategy of igniting a sectarian conflict in Iraq.[47] Brutal violence in the form of mass casualty terrorism and beheadings were therefore instrumental in this pursuit.

The use of CW therefore fits well within IS' strategy that seeks to leverage maximum violence. While the use of crude CW may not produce as many casualties as conventional options, previous CW attacks have been noted for their ability to impart "a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity."[48] This is aptly demonstrated by AQI's chlorine campaign in 2006-2007; as punishment for Sunni tribes' attempts at expelling AQI from the area in the 'Anbar Awakening', AQI launched a series of reprisal attacks.[49] While the majority of AQI's actions consisted of increasingly lethal shootings and conventional bombings, their 19 chlorine enhanced vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices acted as supplementary terror weapons.[50] As the chlorine itself only inflicted injuries, Zanders claims that their use was "designed more to augment [AQI's]…fearsome reputation in order to subdue a population."[51]

While this tactic was abandoned in 2007, either for its inefficiency or simply as AQI was expelled from Anbar, ISI resumed the use of CW in July 2014.[52] This situates the resumption of CW attacks in the middle of ISIL's rapid rise to prominence in the summer of 2014. With territory to collect material from, ISIL had every incentive to attempt to use chlorine to inspire further fear; CW use could potentially inspire fresh routs, which had been the source of ISIL's success in their military campaign to that point.[53] Although ISI's success in using CW in this regard is difficult to quantify, their use of CW for its "psychological impact" has been noted.[54] While IS has not explicitly communicated its rationale for CW use, Novenario has revealed through content analysis of IS' propaganda magazines that they placed a heavy emphasis on intimidation of their opposition during this period.[55]

As IS has declared its unending hostility towards both kafir and takfiri alike, it has little to lose diplomatically from using CW.[56] As IS operates outside of international norms and institutions, there are few costs that the international community could impose above armed intervention, which IS initially welcomed.[57] The only barrier one could infer inhibiting its open communication over its CW use would be an avoidance of offending its potential recruits, given the status of CW within the Syrian conflict.[58]

While IS' chemical weapons capability increased between 2014 to 2017, the frequency with which it now uses CW is rapidly in decline.[59] The pocketing and then loss of Mosul, combined with coalition action against IS' CW sites appears to have stymied IS' CW deployment and development.[60] As IS' territorial holdings decline, there have been repeated warnings over the possibility of external CW terrorism.[61] Such scenarios have already manifested with a failed chlorine bombing in Indonesia in 2015 and an IS cell being dismantled in Morocco while in possession of an improvised CW cache.[62] In July 2017, Australian authorities disrupted an IS cell reportedly planning to deploy an improvised hydrogen sulphide dispersal device.[63] Notably, the alleged perpetrators were receiving both targeting and technical direction from IS handlers in Syria, although they remained "a long way from having a functional device" at the point of their arrests.[64]

If IS' abiding strategic approach can be characterised by the use of intimidation, Al-Nusra's can be summarised as a "strategy of gradualism" wherein both their revolutionary allies and the population under their control are slowly introduced to their brand of Salafi Islam.[65] This approach is in line with Abu Musab Al-Suri's jihadist theorisations which "prioritizes popular support above all other objectives."[66] After shifting from primarily terroristic tactics in 2012, Al-Nusra capitalised upon its influence which it had gained through its battlefield prowess to provide civil services to rebel-controlled territory.[67] The relative "efficiency and non-corrupt nature" of its administration provided further influence to the organisation.[68] This created a virtuous cycle, whereby their administration increased popularity, which attracted more recruits which, in turn, bolstered their military capabilities and influence yet further.[69] The success of this diplomatic and civil approach can be seen by how it leveraged popular support to bolster condemnation for both its designation as a terrorist organisation by the US in 2012 and then again against an airstrike conducted against its fledgling external operations Khorasan cell.[70] On the other hand, Al-Nusra's continuing military ability was demonstrated

through its coordination of rebel effort to capture Idlib in 2015.[71]

Because of this local prioritisation and moves towards consolidating popular support, CBRN usage would be detrimental to this doctrine. Al-Nusra's leader, Jolani reportedly received direct instructions from Zawahiri to cease planning attacks on the West and to continue to "better integrate" his movement into the Syrian opposition. [72] Al-Nusra has since sought to both legitimise itself by disavowing AQ in order to potentially receive external assistance while also further ingraining itself within the Syrian revolution to provide protection from foreign intervention.[73] Mass casualty attacks outside of the region or attempts to use CBRN would jeopardise this approach. Both courses of action could potentially provide the pretext for greater armed intervention against the group, especially for CW use, given its highly politicised context within the Syrian Civil War.[74]

Much as with IS and its precursor organisation's longstanding interest in CW being aligned with their strategy, Al-Nusra's non-incorporation of CW reflects longstanding trends within AQ's doctrine. While "al-Qaida's leadership decided to pursue WMD primarily as a deterrent" in the 1990s under the directorship of Zawahiri, western intervention in the Middle East "changed the reality of the region."[75] Zawahiri initially sought to justify the use of WMD after 9/11, but no use has been forthcoming.[76] This reflected that only a basic CW capability was available to AQ and its use was not deemed operationally viable or even desirable; Zawahiri allegedly cancelled a plot that would have seen a crude hydrogen cyanide device used on the New York subway in order to obtain something "better".[77]

AQ core's shift towards a gradualist approach to jihad coincides with, and was likely spurred by, the failure of AQI to successfully capitalise on the American occupation of Iraq.[78] As AQI's violence in Iraq worsened, Zawahiri wrote a letter to Zarqawi asking him to refrain from his more brutal practices towards Shia Muslims. Notably, Zawahiri's letter was couched in terms of pragmatism rather than religious justification.[79] This was again reiterated in 2013 when Zawahiri issued his 'General Guidelines for Jihad' which emphasised that while attacking the West would remain their "foremost duty", "[their] struggle is a long one, and Jihad is in need of safe bases."[80] Therefore, Zawahiri advised avoiding conflict with local regimes unless necessary and the combined employment of operational restraint and propaganda to sway local Sunni populations.[81] Due to the necessity of co-opting local conflicts within the wider struggle against the "western Zionist-Crusader alliance," it can be inferred that CBRN weapons would play little immediate role as they would invite premature armed intervention and dissuade the local population from cooperating; as a result it is unsurprising that they are not mentioned within this framework. It is therefore notable that "Jabhat al-Nusra…has emerged as… [the] first successful test case" of AQ's gradualist approach, notably in the absence of CBRN threats or use, in sharp contrast to IS.[82] Therefore, the difference in CW usage patterns between IS and al-Nusra is best explained by "strategic constraints" inherent within their differing doctrines rather than an aversion to CW or environmental factors.[83]

Ongoing Concern

While the potential for continuing use of CW by IS in Syria and elsewhere is clear, Al-Nusra's strategic restraint is not perpetually sustainable. As it has come to dominate the remains of the Syrian opposition, its relative strength allows it to be assertive as seen through its recent aggression towards Ahrar al-Sham.[84] If Al-Nusra's influence continues to grow, it may feel comfortable in dropping its pretence of cooperation and engaging in terrorism abroad while it has the opportunity. As Al-Nusra has no discernible ideological qualms against using CBRN, it may engage in CW terrorism as part of this effort. Whether Al-Nusra would engage in terrorism abroad is uncertain, given that Zawahiri now rebukes the group for its ongoing attachment to "regionalism" and its attempts to "[deceive] America, which cannot be deceived as they wish to deceive it" by portraying themselves as local revolutionaries.[85] On the other hand, the recent defections of several opposition elements out of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham coalition and the indecisive outcome of its September Hama offensive indicate a negative outlook to Al-Nusra's position within the Syrian conflict.[86] If this trend continues and it were to become the focus of government offensives, desperate circumstances may prompt Al-Nusra CW usage in Syria.

While IS as an organisation is broadly in decline, a further concern stemming from their use of CW is that it

could disseminate its knowledge regarding its CW developments, thereby further enabling future proliferation and use. Until now, available jihadist guidance on the manufacture of CW has remained crude and has not advanced significantly from the "Mubtakar" device.[87] This potential hazard was clearly highlighted by the efforts of an IS "controller" to direct the Australian cell disrupted in July 2017 to use CW in mass casualty terrorism.[88] If training materials on improvised CW devices were further refined and distributed, IS could have a pronounced and continuing impact on jihadi CBRN terrorism.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has sought to demonstrate that the differing pattern of CW usage between IS and Al-Nusra is inadequately explained by several commonly offered drivers of non-state actor CBRN use. Instead, the driving factor behind why two similarly motivated groups exhibit differences in CW use is best explained by a doctrinal difference that has far reaching strategic implications. For IS, the desire to found the Caliphate at the earliest practical opportunity and the need to stoke sectarian conflict has driven them to embrace a brutal strategy within which CW has clear utility. Conversely, Al-Nusra embraced a gradualist strategy that has been forwarded by core AQ. As a result, it has sought to co-opt the Syrian opposition by achieving popular acclaim through non-corrupt administration and battlefield success. Terrorist attacks on foreign targets and the use of CW would endanger this effort. However, as Al-Nusra comes to dominate the remnants of the Syrian opposition, this restrain may not hold. From this perspective, "[the] use of chemical weapons" should not be viewed as "just one more area where al Zarqawi's followers have surpassed their brethren in Al-Qaida," but rather as the manifestation of differing strategies which have each enjoyed success within their own respective frameworks.[89]

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Notes

[1] Columb Strack, "Islamic State's chemical weapons capability degraded", *IHS.com*, (2017) URL:http://blog.ihs.com/islamic-state%E2%80%99s-chemical-weapons-capability-degraded-v2

[2] Carole N House, "The Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Terrorism Threat from the Islamic State." *Military Review* (2016). p.74. For Aum Shinrikyo, see: Monterey Institute, "Chronology of Aum Shinrikyo's CBW activities", (2001) URL: https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/aum_chrn.pdf - they also conducted 7 additional biological attacks. For Tamil Tigers, see: Bruce Hoffman, "The first non-state use of a chemical weapon in warfare: the Tamil Tigers' assault on East Kiran." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* Vol. 20, pp. 3-4 (2009).

[3] Columb Strack, op. cit..

[4] Rolf Mowatt-Larssen and Graham T. Allison. *Al Qaeda Weapons of Mass Destruction threat: hype or reality?*. Boston: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, (2010) p.8. However, cells and individuals inspired by AQ have repeatedly attempted to use CW. See René Pita, "Assessing al-Qaeda's chemical threat." *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* Vol. 20, 3 (2007), pp. 492-490.

[5] While al-Nusra have since changed their name from to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and are now the leading element of the Tahrir al-Sham coalition, they will be referred to as Al-Nusra in this article for the sake of clarity.

[6] See: Jonathan Tucker, "Toxic Terror", MIT Press: London, (2000), pp. 9-14, Kate Ivanova and Todd Sandler; "CBRN Attack Perpetrators: An Empirical Study", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 3, 4, (2007), Victor H. Asal, Gary A. Ackerman, and R. Karl Rethemeyer. "Connections can be toxic: Terrorist organizational factors and the pursuit of CBRN weapons." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* Vol. 35, 3 (2012); Kate Ivanova and Todd Sandler. "CBRN incidents: Political regimes, perpetrators, and targets." *Terrorism*

and Political Violence, Vol. 18, 3 (2006); James Forest, "Framework for Analyzing the Future Threat of WMD Terrorism." *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 54 (2012).

[7] Michelle Bentley, 'Strategic taboos: chemical weapons and US foreign policy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, 5, pp.1047-1048.

[8] NTI, "No Chemical Arms Seized from Syrian Militants, Turkish Envoy Says", (2013) URL: http://nti.org/27271GSN .

[9] Scott Lucas, "Syria Feature: 1 Convicted, 5 Acquitted in "Sarin" Case in Turkey", EA Worldview, (2015), URL: http://eaworldview.com/2015/12/syria-feature-1-convicted-5-acquitted-in-sarin-case-in-turkey/ . For further analysis, see: Dan Kaszeta "Examining the Turkish Sarin "Recipe"" *Bellingcat*, (2015), URL: https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2015/10/28/turkishsarin/ .

[10] Eliot Higgins, "Kurdish Sources Deny Any Knowledge of Videos Showing Liwa al-Islam Launching The August 21st Sarin Attack", *Brown Moses*, (2013), URL: https://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/kurdish-sources-deny-any-knowledge-of.html .

[11] Laura Smith-Spark, "Assad claims Syria chemical attack was 'fabrication', in face of evidence", *CNN*, (2017); URL: http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/13/middleeast/syria-bashar-assad-interview/index.html ; see: OPCW FFM, S/2017/45; URL: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1701193.pdf and OPCW FFM, S/1318/2015/Rev.1; URL: http://www.the-trench.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/OPCW-FFM-20151217-Syria-request-Rev1.pdf for the FFM failing to find sufficient evidence for evidence for government accusations. While one government soldier tested positive for sarin exposure in Jobar, the UN Secretary Generals investigation could not verify the incident. - UN SecGens investigation, "United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic", 2013, p.19; URL: https://unoda-web.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/report.pdf .

[12] OPCW-UN JIM, S/2016/738, p.13; URL: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2016_738.pdf .

[13] See OPCW-UN JIM, S/2016/738, p.14 and Columb Strack, op.cit. .

[14] Charles Lister, "Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra", *Brookings,* (2016), p.9; URL: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/iwr_20160728_profiling_nusra.pdf .

[15] Ibid., p.12-13.

[16] Ibid., p.14.

[17]bIbid., p.7 & p.20.

[18] Ibid., p.5.

[19] Gregory Waters, "Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's gamble: the failure of blood", *Open Democracy*, (2017); URL: https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/gregory-waters/hayattahriralsham-syria-idlib-turkey-AhraralSham-FSA .

[20] Jonathan Tucker, "Toxic Terror", pp. 8-9.

[21] "The Perfect Storm," *Dabiq* 9, p.77, Rolf Mowatt-Larssen and Graham T. Allison. *Al Qaeda Weapons of Mass Destruction threat: hype or reality?*, p. 21.

[22] For Zarqawi's denial, see: Sammy Salama & Lydia Hansell, "Does Intent equal Capability? Al-Qaeda and Weapons of Mass Destruction", *The Nonproliferation Review*, 12:3 (2005), p.628. For 2006-7 chlorine use, see - Mohammed Hafez and Maria Rasmussen. "Terrorist Innovations in Weapons of Mass Effect, Phase II." Monterey Naval Postgraduate School. (2012); URL: https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=709612 .

[23] See "the Call to Hijrah", *Dabiq,* 3, p.35 and "the Failed Crusade", *Dabiq,* 4, p.40 .

[24] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency, New York:* Oxford University Press *(2015),* pp.379-380.

[25] John Parachini, "Putting WMD terrorism into perspective." *Washington Quarterly* 26.4 (2003), pp.43-44.

[26] Syrian Free Press, "Bashar al-Jaafari: "Al-Nusra Front is still carrying out operations in the area of UNDOF" (2014); URL: https://goo.gl/RKXuso .

[27] Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Sameer N. Yacoub, "Kerry says reports IS used chemical weapons 'extremely serious'", *The Times of Israel,* (2014); URL: http://www.timesofisrael.com/kerry-says-reports-is-used-chemical-weapons-extremely-serious/ .

[28] Mohammed Hafez and Maria Rasmussen. "Terrorist Innovations in Weapons of Mass Effect, Phase II", p.19.

[29] The source of IS mustard gas is disputed; see Jonathan Spyer, "Meria Special Report: Did ISIS Use Chemical Weapons Against the Kurds In Kobani?", Rubin Center, (2014); URL: http://www.rubincenter.org/2014/10/meria-special-report-did-isis-use-chemical-

weapons-against-the-kurds-in-kobani-warning-graphic-content/ as opposed to Dominik Lemanski, "Isis 'making and using' mustard gas in Iraq and Syria", *The Times,* (2015); URL: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-making-and-using-mustard-gas-in-iraq-and-syria-kvfpgfnz7sc .

[30] See Kate Ivanova and Todd Sandler; "CBRN Attack Perpetrators: An Empirical Study", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3:4, (2007) p.274; *BBC,* "Iraq uncovers al-Qaeda 'chemical weapons plot'" (2013); URL: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22742201 and Loveday Morris, "Islamic State militants allegedly used chlorine gas against Iraqi security forces", *Washington Post*, (2014); URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-militants-allegedly-used-chlorine-gas-against-iraqi-security-forces/2014/10/23/c865c943-1c93-4ac0-a7ed-033218f15cbb_story.html .

[31] NATO, "Could ISIL go nuclear?", (2015); URL: http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/ISIL/ISIL-Nuclear-Chemical-Threat-Iraq-Syria/EN/index.htm .

[32] Chris Quillen, "The Islamic State's Evolving Chemical Arsenal", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 39,11, (2016), p.1019.

[33] SOHR, "Regime forces use Chlorine gas to stop ISIS advances in Der-Ezzor military airport", (2014); URL: http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=7693 and Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, "International concern over claims of chemical weapon attack in Syria*"*, *The Guardian*, (2016), URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/13/international-concern-over-claims-of-chemical-weapon-attack-in-syria - further details about this incident are lacking due to the impossibility of conducting an international investigation within IS territory.

[34] OPCW FFM, S/1230/2014, p.23 and OPCW FFM, S/1510/2017, p.1.

[35] Loveday Morris, "Islamic State militants allegedly used chlorine gas against Iraqi security forces", *Washington Post,* (2014); URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-militants-allegedly-used-chlorine-gas-against-iraqi-security-forces/2014/10/23/c865c943-1c93-4ac0-a7ed-033218f15cbb_story.html ; *BBC,* "Iraq uncovers al-Qaeda 'chemical weapons plot'" (2013) URL: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22742201 .

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Al-Qaida's Complex Balancing Act in Syria

by Charles Lister

Abstract

Over the years, al-Qaida has become an increasingly decentralized movement in which its geographically dispersed affiliates have assumed increasing levels of autonomy over their tactical and strategic decision-making. At the outset of the Arab Spring, al-Qaida was also undergoing a process of strategic rethinking, in which more locally-sensitive and nationally grounded methods of operating were being encouraged as more effective paths towards durable jihadi projects. The Arab Spring itself also presented al-Qaida and its affiliates with opportunities to tie themselves more deeply into a collective sense of change across the Middle East. It was in Syria that this evolved level of thinking found itself most efficiently realized, as Jabhat al-Nusra sought to implement a modus operandi that was based on integrating and embedding itself into the Syrian revolutionary milieu through a combination of cooperation and [short-term] pragmatism. Jabhat al-Nusra's embrace of this new model of jihad brought it substantial benefits, but as time passed, it also posed new challenges. By embracing localism so wholeheartedly over al-Qaida's traditional internationalist agenda, Jabhat al-Nusra struggled to sustain the trust of its members who expected a truly fundamentalist face to eventually emerge. Moreover, despite its strong localist focus, too many Syrians still distrusted the group because of its continued links to a globalist jihadist movement. Jabhat al-Nusra therefore sought to differentiate itself from ISIS and was also forced to distance itself from al-Qaida, which set in motion a series of events that challenged the group's successors' - Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) - internal unity and external credibility. It therefore appears that although HTS in 2017 maintains a potentially protectable base in northwestern Syria, the challenges that its unique strategy presented forced it to act in ways that undermined much of the sustainability progress it had made in previous years. Whether the group's long game strategy of controlled pragmatism could be said to have been a success is therefore an open question.

Keywords: Al-Qaida; Jihad; Syria; Iraq; Afghanistan; Yemen; Pakistan; Terrorism

Introduction

Al-Qaida has been evolving and adapting to changing circumstances ever since its formation in the late-1980s. Initially an elite, cellular organisation that embedded itself within safe environments from which to plot spectacular terrorist attacks, al-Qaida transitioned into a global movement following the September 11, 2001 attacks, in part due to the loss of its Afghan safe-haven but also to take advantage of its growing name recognition. That strategy of affiliation – acquiring loyalist militant wings across the Islamic world – made up for al-Qaida's loss of power in South Asia after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, but it also presented what had been a centrally-led organisation with substantial challenges of command and control. In the years that followed, al-Qaida transitioned into a geographically dispersed movement whose central leadership sought to sustain overarching authority over its affiliates despite being under heavy pressure from U.S. drones along the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Throughout this transitional period, al-Qaida's affiliate model resulted in an extent of decentralization, whereby some affiliates embraced their own local leadership's styles and evolved into what their respective areas of operation demanded. In Iraq, for example, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his successors led Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and then the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) down a path of steady differentiation from al-Qaida's core model and into a strategically distinct jihadi movement. The especially brutal tactics employed by AQI and the ISI in order to spark a debilitating sectarian conflict that it hoped would pave a path towards a viable and durable Islamic State project was in marked differentiation from al-Qaida's strategic thinking. Similar, though less strategically impactful devolution and decentralization was visible in Somalia, with Al-Shabab's tendency towards factionalism cand splits between its localist and internationalist wings; and in North Africa, where al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) benefitted from its role in running criminal smuggling networks and later effectively broke up into several rival factions.

Although Osama Bin Laden clearly sought to exert his leadership over al-Qaida's various affiliates, the trend of decentralisation was clear. The unmitigated violence meted out in Iraq by AQI and the failure of its 2006 Islamic State project proved to have been a particularly damaging development for the al-Qaida brand. It was therefore natural that from 2010, al-Qaida's regional leaderships, especially those in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, had begun to strategise about more effective methods of operating, so as to more effectively and sustainably further al-Qaida's jihadist project. AQIM leader Abu Musab Abdul Wadud (Abdulmalek Droukdel) for example, described the Malian people as babies in a letter to his commanders in 2012, in an attempt to justify a more gradualist and sensitive approach to winning hearts and minds:

"The current baby is in its first days, crawling on its knees, and has not yet stood on its two legs… If we really want it to stand on its own two feet in this world full of enemies waiting to pounce, we must ease its burden, take it by the hand, help it and support it until it stands… One of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed with which you applied Sharia… our previous experience proved that applying Sharia this way… will lead to people rejecting our religion and engender hatred towards the mujahideen".[1]

Thanks to documents captured from Abbottabad, it is now also known that Bin Laden himself was acutely aware and concerned with the ailing nature of al-Qaida's image and was considering renaming his movement in attempt to rebrand.[2] This marketing strategy that focused so centrally on image was an issue operationalised in Yemen by AQAP, which had rebranded itself as Ansar al-Sharia in 2011 in an attempt to soften its image to communities it sought to control and govern.[3]

As with al-Qaida's evolution from a centrally-led organisation in 2001 to a semi-decentralised movement through the 2000s, this new strategic thinking focused on self-presentation and the long-term sustainability of local jihad efforts was not in and of itself new – it was a response to the new and challenging circumstances that al-Qaida faced in the late-2000s. Throughout its now 30-year history, al-Qaida's fate has met with surges of growth and success and troughs of contraction and frailty – all resulting from, and dependent upon, external pressures and developments and al-Qaida's capacity to respond effectively to them.

After facing several years of intensive pressure, Bin Laden's death in May 2011 represented a potentially existential blow to al-Qaida's central leadership and to its ability to influence affiliate operations across the world. However, the onset of the Arab Spring presented the world's only global jihadist movement with a golden opportunity. The eruption of popular protest in search of political revolution and the resulting widespread sense of coming change promised instability and with that, the chance to introduce al-Qaida's vision for Islamic rule onto a greater audience. Moreover, an al-Qaida whose top-level strategic thinking was evolving and whose affiliates appeared to be becoming increasingly aware of their local dynamics was potentially well placed to exploit the opportunities presented to it.

This article focuses on how an element of strategic rethinking within some of al-Qaida's highest ranks saw itself realised in Syria from 2011 onwards, as its affiliate there sought to prioritise alliance-building, localism and controlled pragmatism in order to build a more durable base of operations embedded within a nationally-limited revolutionary movement. The following sections will assess five key aspects of this evolved modus operandi and how it brought with it substantial advantages but also considerable challenges.

Jabhat al-Nusra's Strategy in Syria

Al-Qaida's role within the Syrian crisis has displayed a constant and complex adaptation to changing dynamics and, like its global status, it too has experienced highs and lows over time. Whereas al-Qaida's attempts in Yemen and Mali between 2011-2012 to implement more locally-sensitive and sustainable jihadi projects failed for being too short-lived, efforts undertaken by Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria began to demonstrate success in late-2012. By focusing resources on harnessing local drivers and dynamics and by consciously seeking to embed itself into an explicitly *Syrian* revolutionary struggle against the Assad regime, Jabhat al-Nusra was attempting to break al-Qaida's negative image associated with brutality and self-interest and to present itself instead as its name suggested: a support front.[4]

Although al-Qaida's performance amid the Syrian crisis could, on the whole, be said to have been a success, it has not all been smooth sailing and its status as the chief driver of that Syria-based success has blurred over time. By December 2017 in fact, al-Qaida itself appeared to have severed itself from its one-time Syrian affiliate altogether, after a prolonged and public falling out over the group's repeated rebrands and its breaking of allegiance. Nevertheless, five facets of Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy in Syria are worthy of highlighting for the apparent advantages they brought to al-Qaida's project in Syria, but also for the complications they introduced as the crisis protracted and evolved:

1. Localism:

On the whole, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor factions – Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) and now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – have pursued local objectives within local dynamics and constraints. The avoidance of transnational goals or rhetoric, hyper violence, or ultra-strict penal codes all contributed towards deepening Jabhat al-Nusra's deep roots in the Syrian crisis and within its indigenous revolutionary movement. The predominance of *localism* within Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy gave al-Qaida a better chance to sustain a long-term and prominent role in Syria, by building trust and interdependent relationships with portions of Syria's local opposition.[5] However, the emphasis on localism and the embrace of self-restraint, or controlled pragmatism over a prolonged period of time also stirred tensions within Jabhat al-Nusra itself, as the group's most extremist wings questioned the legitimacy of what they perceived as the ceding of continuous concessions (including in terms of Sharia enforcement) to a largely nationalist cause. Moreover, even despite the intensive focus on localism, Jabhat al-Nusra did not succeed in winning over the Syrian masses to the extent that had been hoped, which further tested the sustainability of the long-game approach, both internally and externally.[6] As tensions grew at the group's highest levels, conflicting tactics began to emerge from within Jabhat al-Nusra cells at local levels, with some remaining "pragmatic" and others reverting to AQI-style ultra-fundamentalism.

2. Differentiation from ISIS:

A core foundation of Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy from mid-2012 onwards was a desire to differentiate itself from the jihadist movements it emanated from: particularly the ISI. Syrians were no strangers to the ISI's ultra-violence and desire for savage sectarian conflict and from its first days as an acknowledged actor, Jabhat al-Nusra kept its ISI affiliation secret in an attempt to avoid any negative reputational repercussions. The group's early predilection for spectacular urban suicide bombings, however, did little to hide the likelihood that its roots lay next-door in Iraq. Nevertheless, the emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra's long game strategy of localism and controlled pragmatism from mid-2012 onwards was a clear point of strategic differentiation from the ISI and was the key catalyst for the group's eventual break from the ISI in mid-2013. Although the strategic and tactical distinction made between the ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra benefitted the group's position in Syria to a certain extent, ISIS's subsequent violent expansion in Syria, its dramatic gains in Iraq, its proclamation of a Caliphate and then its growth into a transnational jihadi movement rivalling al-Qaida resulted in losses in the scale and durability of Jabhat al-Nusra's efforts in Syria. Although the rise of ISIS did present Jabhat al-Nusra with the opportunity to further differentiate itself, it heightened the suspicions of some within Syria's opposition who now had a reason to fear 'the jihadists within.' It also catalysed an intensification of international attention on the dangers of jihadist militancy emanating from Syria and the Levant region, which extended to al-Qaida's direct and indirect predominance in Syria's northwest.

3. Al-Qaida Relations:

Jabhat al-Nusra's relationship with al-Qaida and its central leadership has been consistently complex. From 2011 until April 2013, its affiliation to al-Qaida was blurred by the ISI's ambiguous affiliation and loyalty to al-Qaida. When Jabhat al-Nusra broke away from ISIS in April 2013, its leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani announced his re-pledging of allegiance to al-Qaida. Therein began a period of open affiliation with the global jihadist movement that lasted until July 2016, when the group claimed to have rebranded and cut *external* ties to al-Qaida.

The emphasis on *external* ties was purposeful, as Jabhat al-Nusra's rebranding to JFS was intended explicitly

for a Syrian audience, which needed to be convinced that foreign or international jihadist agendas would not interfere with their local revolution.[7] This did not necessarily mean and it was not intended to suggest that Jabhat al-Nusra (and JFS) was becoming any more moderate. Despite the claim to have cut ties to al-Qaida *outside* Syria, the jihadist movement had already established a de facto wing of its global central leadership *inside* Syria, headed up by global deputy leader Abu al-Khayr al-Masri.[8] Abu al-Khayr had given his blessing to the JFS rebrand, but al-Qaida's overall leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had not – because he could not be reached swiftly enough.[9] Moreover, some JFS members chose to maintain their individual oaths of allegiance to Al-Qaeda, while remaining members of JFS.

The relationship between this semi-independent wing of al-Qaida's core leadership in Syria and the Syrian dynamic was especially interesting, as the pull of local drivers and expectations did appear – on the whole – to influence and constrain the nature of what were otherwise committed transnational jihadists. That overall leader Zawahiri ended up taking a divergent position to his Syria-based deputy Abu al-Khayr al-Masri was significant in and of itself, as was the sheer communications gap between Zawahiri and those in Syria.

As it happened, what had been a locally-driven decision to rebrand and proclaim a breaking of ties to al-Qaida proved to be a deeply controversial move that sparked a very public series of critiques from core al-Qaida ideologues and Nusra figures who refused to go along with the changes. Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi in Jordan proved especially vocal in his condemnation through 2017, as did Nusra's former number two, Sami al-Oraydi. Both and others clearly understood the JFS rebrand to have been illegitimate and to have catalyzed a "break" from al-Qaida. Oraydi specified that once the news had reached him, Zawahiri himself sent a letter to Syria ordering for a reversal of the decision to break away, which he labelled "a sin" and an "act of disobedience."[10] For his part, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri reversed his permission when he discovered that Zawahiri's other immediate deputies, Sayf al-Adel and Abu Mohammed al-Masri, were opposed to any breaking of ties.

Jolani's decision to force the rebrand through a contentious vote within Jabhat al-Nusra's shura council was a gamble, as it was based entirely on the assumption that doing so would be perceived as a sufficiently significant concession to Syria's opposition movements for them to agree to a major Jabhat al-Nusra objective: a mass merger, or 'uniting of the ranks'. That unity then failed to come about, in large part because al-Qaida's brand was negative enough that the persistent fear of its role in driving JFS actions negated the desire amongst armed opposition groups to combine forces.[11] Jolani's failed gamble and Zawahiri's anger at the rebrand itself stirred up further internal discontent, as committed al-Qaida loyalists who had opposed the JFS rebrand attempted to use it as further evidence of Jolani's failings and disloyalty.

Having evolved again in early-2017 into the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) umbrella, it is safe to say that al-Qaida no longer maintains a formal relationship of loyalty to an affiliate in Syria. HTS appears to have paved its own path in northwestern Syria, albeit not necessarily one any more moderate, but merely still locally-focused. Statements by Zawahiri in April and September 2017 calling upon jihadists in Syria to avoid pursuing nationalist agendas and divisive decisions underlined the extent to which al-Qaida's perception of HTS was in sharp contrast to its support to Nusra before mid-2016.[12] A further Zawahiri statement in late-November 2017 effectively sealed the break, with Al-Qaeda's leader declaring his total rejection of the initial JFS rebrand and accusing Jabhat al-Nusra of betraying its oath of allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Even the revelation by some former Nusra officials that the JFS rebrand was in fact intended to conceal a continued relationship with Al-Qaeda was rendered meaningless by the clear state of animosity between the global jihadist movement and its one-time Syrian affiliate.

4. Military vs. Politics:

Given its emphasis upon localism and embedding itself within local dynamics, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successors have utilised their military superiority on the battlefield as the principal source of influence, leverage and support within the *Syrian* opposition community. From mid-2012, Jabhat al-Nusra invested in building alliances with opposition factions across the ideological and geographical spectrums and exploiting its military impact in order to build opposition dependence upon Jabhat al-Nusra's role within their operations. This was the implementation of *jihad al-tamkin* - the methodical acquisition and consolidation of territorial gains,

through which one then wins hearts and minds and secures long-term presence.[13] As military affairs almost always played *the* driving role in the Syrian crisis, this placed Jabhat al-Nusra in a position of prime influence in determining the trajectory of conflict dynamics, in controlling or constraining the decisions of its opposition partners, and in undermining external efforts to negotiate ceasefires or other forms of stability.

Despite its virtually unmatched man-for-man military power within the anti-Assad movement, Jabhat al-Nusra's battlefield influence was not always a match for determined international efforts to strong-arm opposition actors into ceasing fire, attending peace negotiations, or even meeting with the enemy (Assad regime, Russia and Iran). When the tide definitively turned in the Assad regime's favour after the opposition's loss of Aleppo in late-2016, politics assumed a dramatically more significant status of importance within Syria's opposition. The Russian-Turkish-Iranian-led military talks in Astana; Turkey's geopolitical hedging and prioritisation of its struggle against the Kurdish PKK; and the U.S. pivot away from supporting an anti-Assad movement all contributed towards a dynamic in which Jabhat al-Nusra (by then named JFS, then HTS) was suddenly playing second fiddle in shaping opposition behaviour. With its position of prime influence under threat and with the prospect of international attention bearing down on 'al-Qaida in Syria' increasing, JFS lashed out pre-emptively to neutralise potential threats and to consolidate its territorial holdings. The subsequent formation of HTS and successive attacks on other rival opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, underlined how externally-driven developments could force al-Qaida-linked groups like HTS and indeed, groups opposed to al-Qaida, to adapt their behaviours in ways that directly contradicted, and undermined their original modus operandi.

5. Elite to Mass Movement:

As part of Jabhat al-Nusra's long-game strategy in Syria, the group sought in its first phase to operate as an elite movement whose 'support' to the Syrian revolution was motivated by its need to be turned in the right, Islamic direction. Just as AQIM's leader had written of the need to treat the Malian people as infants, so too did Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership seek to befriend, raise, educate and then foster a population in Syria that would accommodate and then protect a new jihadist vanguard within their midst. This 'elite' phase of operations lasted until late-2015, when it had become clear that in certain strategic areas of Syria – in the northwest, in particular – Jabhat al-Nusra had become *the* dominant military actor and that its role within the revolutionary struggle was, theoretically, irreversible and sufficiently popular.

This spelled the need for Jabhat al-Nusra to transition into a mass movement [14] – hence the repeated efforts to negotiate a 'uniting of the ranks' through 2016 and to prove to Syrians that Jabhat al-Nusra was qualitatively different to the negatively perceived ISI and al-Qaida. As previously mentioned, that brand management took the form of changing names, proclaiming a cutting of external ties to al-Qaida, and taking smaller Islamist factions under its expanding umbrella. Just as playing around with its al-Qaida affiliation sparked internal tensions, a determined move to expand into a mass movement and to draw in a broader scope of members also proved to be a controversial goal for the group's most hardline wings. Moderating rhetoric and the integration of explicitly non-jihadist factions into JFS and HTS was perceived by some 'hawks' as a slippery slope of eroding, or diluting Jabhat al-Nusra's original purity yet further.[15] By mid-2017, that had consolidated the covert formation of a separate al-Qaida loyalist wing in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib, which although not hostile to HTS, was opposed to its present nature and image.[16] That wing was, according to multiple well-placed sources, given the name Ansar al-Furqan on October 9, 2017.

From Jabhat al-Nusra to HTS: Success or Failure?

Despite facing a series of challenges and obstacles along the way, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor groups, JFS and HTS, appear to have ridden their various storms and emerged in a position of comparative advantage – at least when it comes to the intra-opposition dynamic. Ultimately however, no jihadi group will ever be capable of controlling or blocking changes and threats initiated by external actors outside of its immediate realm of influence. Chiefly, terrorist and other asymmetric actors face the challenge of either constantly remaining one or more steps ahead of their adversaries, or being capable of rapidly adapting to changing circumstances quickly enough as to avoid damaging consequences. HTS appears thus far to have accomplished this.

Though they have also suffered a number of damaging losses, Jabhat al-Nusra, JFS and HTS have largely succeeded in establishing a base of operations potentially protectable from internal and external threats. Whether or not that amounts in its entirety to a victory remains to be seen. Beyond HTS though, the impact upon al-Qaida also remains to be seen, principally because HTS's relationship of allegiance to al-Qaida is ambiguous at best and the status of al-Qaida and its capacity to exert meaningful day-to-day influence over its geographically-dispersed affiliates is unclear. While the 66-year-old Zawahiri appears to be an ever-distant leader, whose statements and video addresses spark little in the way of motivation or twenty-first century zeal, Osama Bin Laden's son Hamza demonstrates an energy and ideological drive more suited to the al-Qaida of today, especially one operating amid a decline in the power of its sole rival, ISIS.

Notwithstanding these issues, the fact that changing conditions and a heightening sense of external threat forced JFS to lash out against its rivals and expand into HTS in early-2017 spelled the de facto ending of Jabhat al-Nusra's long-game strategy and the initiation of a new, more self-assertive project more akin to typical al-Qaida behaviour. It also shored up a more durable protective blanket around the truly committed al-Qaida operatives who had taken up position in Idlib province strictly to do al-Qaida's bidding, not that of Jabhat al-Nusra, JFS or HTS.

Although that appeared likely to have strengthened al-Qaida's hand and to have re-firmed up its relationship with HTS – particularly as HTS constituent group Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki defected as a result of HTS's attacks on Ahrar al-Sham, thereby empowering the truly jihadist elements within the HTS umbrella – the jihadi group's newfound position of dominance also introduced new, potentially more significant threats, including a continued decline in HTS's popular credibility. The prospect of Turkey's limited intervention into Idlib in October 2017, for example, prompted Jolani himself to seek out negotiations to prevent any threat to his group. That demonstrated weakness, not strength.

Since the Assad regime's capture of Aleppo in December 2016, the potential for the crosshairs turning to Idlib has gradually increased. The steady rise to pre-eminence of HTS has furthered that potential threat, as signaled by a statement issued by U.S. Special Envoy to Syria Michael Ratney in early-August 2017, in which it was stressed that HTS "hegemony" in northern Syria put the area "in big danger." In what was clearly a veiled threat and a reference to Russia, Ratney then proceeded to assert that "it would be difficult for the United States to convince the international parties not to take the necessary military measures."[17] Russia had long imposed a de facto veto over the Assad regime's designs and desire for an Idlib offensive, but the rise to dominance of HTS in much of the province had the potential to erode that veto's political considerations.

The nature of HTS's rise – through premeditated violence against long-time partners – also further undermined the group's reputation within remaining elements of the opposition. HTS thus found itself expanded and consolidated as an unrivalled armed actor operating within an environment of increasingly suspicious and potentially hostile communities and armed groups, many of which had become more existentially dependent on foreign government relations than ever before. Again, that dynamic of dominance through aggression but being surrounded by potential threats directly empowered the more extreme tendencies within the HTS-al-Qaida nexus, and weakened those whose advocacy for sustaining a softer approach now looked outdated.

Accordingly, the story of Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaida's evolution in Syria can be said to have been one of constant adaptation, in which committed jihadists sought to distinguish themselves from the negativity of their past, in order to set-up a durable project more capable of outlasting rivals and outplaying enemies. Adaptation and opportunism was not limited to the group's engagement with others, as the implementation of a more long-game approach that emphasized the local over the transnational; the mass over the elite; and the pragmatic over the fundamentalist; meant that managing and balancing internal group dynamics became just as important, if not more so. By no means should Jabhat al-Nusra be said to have 'succeeded' in this respect, but the group's mere survival and subsequent expansion into JFS and then HTS means it has until now outmaneuvered its competition – both local and international. Terrorist groups do not necessarily have to win; they merely need to survive to be considered a continued threat and the threat posed by HTS in Syria is both significant and complex.

Policy Recommendations

From a policy perspective, one key lesson looking back at Jabhat al-Nusra's six years of operations in Syria is that the criteria for assessing threats posed by terrorist movements should not be so strictly limited to their intent to attack the West, or even to attack Western targets locally. Jabhat al-Nusra's implementation of a markedly different modus operandi on behalf of al-Qaida put into place a different and arguably just as significant threat: the potential transformation of elitist al-Qaida fundamentalism into a closer-to-populist, revolutionary mass movement. That Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor movements have been widely accused of receiving some level of government-coordinated financial and strategic support further underlines the threat that a new and more embedded mode of al-Qaida operation poses to U.S. and Western influence in the Middle East and Islamic world. Although the evolutionary path from Jabhat al-Nusra-to-JFS-to-HTS necessitated more aggressive and divisive measures in 2016-2017, which themselves eroded away some of the trust gained in previous years, the regional and international community's recent distancing from the opposition potentially threatens to leave HTS as the only remaining 'hope' for the anti-Assad movement. That ought to be a scenario avoided at all costs.

Notwithstanding that concerning scenario, changing power balances *inside* Syria and shifting geopolitical priorities *outside* Syria have seen the Assad regime and its two principal backers, Iran and Russia, assume a position of supremacy vis-à-vis the opposition. That state of affairs now appears to be irreversible and as such, it has become more important than ever to acknowledge the interrelation between the fate of al-Qaida's efforts in Syria and the fate of the anti-Assad armed movement. That the international community appears to be ceding victory to the pro-Assad coalition does not necessarily mean that the tens of thousands of armed men fighting the regime will embrace the changed positions of their external patrons. Though some, or even many, may consider abiding by externally-imposed ceasefires and de-escalation zones, some or even many will not, and that presents an opportunity that is now virtually exclusive to HTS.

While Western political leaders continue to insist that Bashar al-Assad has no place in Syria's future, their Syria strategies are pursuing nothing at all to further that policy statement. Instead of cutting off the anti-Assad opposition at the neck altogether, forcing it to submit to long-term ceasefires widely perceived as tantamount to a long-drawn out surrender or to redirect their resources to an exclusively anti-ISIS fight away from their home areas, the U.S. and partner states should, at a minimum, seek to protect, consolidate and support opposition areas, which they have had a stake in creating. Even if Syria policy is to be guided by counter-terrorism concerns, it must first be acknowledged that the terrorist threats emanating from, and festering within, Syria are *symptoms* of the crisis, and not the cause. Treating symptoms while leaving the prime root cause – Assad and his regime's brutality – to remain securely in place does nothing to secure a durable victory against terrorism or extremism.

While new political realities preclude taking direct action against the Assad regime, the international community retains a responsibility to ensure the protection of those it supported politically and militarily and to work towards guaranteeing at minimum, the devolution of Assad's authority, through decentralisation, for example. Closing a blind eye to any pro-Assad plans to conduct a brutal campaign on Idlib, or to methodically eat away at remaining strategic areas of opposition control, will not guarantee Western interests and will benefit HTS and al-Qaida more than any other actor. This is HTS's insurance blanket. Though any concerted operation on Idlib or another opposition area of Syria would be more likely to succeed than fail, the operation itself would nonetheless empower the narrative protected by the likes of HTS – so the group may suffer immediate-term losses, but the cause for its survival would be strengthened. That is precisely why HTS should continue to be assessed as a symptom of other dynamics, which themselves need treating first, or in tandem with HTS itself. At its core, undermining HTS is about out-competing it and its reason for being, rather than merely fighting it on the battlefield.

Al-Qaida's fate internationally and in affiliate zones like Syria has waxed and waned over time, but it remains unavoidably true that a group like HTS needs only to survive, to remain a relevant and potentially future potent threat. That Jabhat al-Nusra set JFS and HTS on a path towards being larger movements embedded within a cause other than transnational jihadism makes HTS's survival that much harder to undermine. The only possible solution to countering HTS's apparent strong hand is rooted in the areas in which the jihadist

group operates. HTS's self-interested actions and aggression against core components of Syrians' revolution has discernibly compromised the long-term durability of Jabhat al-Nusra's original project, but no comparable competitor with a more nationalistic agenda exists to balance or subvert HTS anytime soon. Fostering such a force appears to be the only option available that *might* promise a durable erosion of HTS's influence in Syria.

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Notes

[1] Rukmini Callimachi, "In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto," Associated Press, February 14, 2013

[2] "Bin Laden mulled al Qaeda name change," Associated Press, June 24, 2011; "Osama Bin Laden wanted to change al-Qaeda's name for marketing reasons," The Daily Telegraph, June 24, 2011

[3] Aaron Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al-Sharia," Foreign Policy, September 21, 2012.

[4] Charles Lister, The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.67

[5] Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in Syria Fuels al-Qa'ida's Evolution," CTC Sentinel, September 7, 2016

[6] Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate," Middle East Institute, May 18, 2017

[7] Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad"

[8] Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria," Foreign Policy, May 4, 2016

[9] Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate"; Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," Jihadica, March 29, 2017; Cole Bunzel, "Abandoning al-Qaida: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Sami al-Uraydi," Jihadica, May 12, 2017 .

[10] Tore Hamming, "What we learned from Sami al-Uraydi's testimony concerning Abu Abdullah al-Shami," Jihadica, October 24, 2017

[11] Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate".

[12] Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri warns against 'nationalist' agenda in Syria," Long War Journal, April 23, 2017; see also Aymenn al-Tamimi's article elsewhere in this Special Issue.

[13] Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad", op.cit..

[14] Ibid.

[15] Cole Bunzel, "Abandoning al-Qaida: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Sami al-'Uraydi," Jihadica, May 12, 2017

[16]   Charles   Lister,   "Al-Qaeda's   Turning   Against   its   Syrian   Affiliate".

[17] Suleiman al-Khalidi, "U.S. says 'grave' consequences if Syria's al Qaeda dominates Idlib province," Reuters, August 2, 2017.

Success for al-Qaida in Syria?

by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi

Abstract

This article considers how far one can describe al-Qaida's experiences in Syria as a success. A common line of analysis has been that al-Qaida has been playing a more successful long-term game in Syria as opposed to its more aggressive rival, the Islamic State. This article examines that argument more closely through exploring the nature of the relationship between al-Qaida and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the latest successor initiative to the original Syrian al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. The author considers the viability of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's project and the future of al-Qaida in Syria, reaching a negative long-term prognosis.

Introduction

One of the most common concepts to describe al-Qaida's presence in Syria has been that of 'playing the long game.'[1] That is, whereas its rival the Islamic State focused on quickly defeating other Syrian insurgent groups and opponents, establishing a state project and imposing the harshest aspects of Islamic law (i.e. the *hudud* punishments for serious crimes), al-Qaida has chosen to embed deeply within the insurgency fighting the Assad regime. Thus, al-Qaida affiliates and al-Qaida-linked groups have generally proven themselves to be valuable military partners for other factions, while not working to impose all aspects of Islamic law immediately on the populations in their zones of control and influence, but rather working to condition the locals to accept their imposition eventually.

The main group considered to represent this approach has been Jabhat al-Nusra, also known by the fuller name of Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (translated: "the support front for the people of al-Sham"). Similarly-aligned groups ideologically, such as the Turkestan Islamic Party primarily consisting of Uyghurs from East Turkestan in China, have also used the slogan of *nusra li-Ahl al-Sham*. However, the focus here will be on Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor organizations, being much larger entities than the likes of the Turkestan Islamic Party.

Publicly announced in January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra initially made its mark with high profile bomb attacks but soon became established as an important military actor in the insurgency. Its global jihadist orientation was clear in the distribution of its content on jihadi forums. However, no specific affiliation or links were publicly declared. This was in keeping with the approach of other jihadi groups that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring, such as the Ansar al-Shari'a movements in Yemen, Libya and Tunisia.[2] It was only an audio message in April 2013 by Islamic State of Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who had helped set up Jabhat al-Nusra and wanted to subsume it unilaterally under his group, that prompted Jabhat al-Nusra's leader to declare an affiliation with al-Qaida. This was likely in the hope that al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri would rule in his favour in the dispute with Baghdadi.

However, the declaration of the al-Qaida affiliation did not generally lead to Jabhat al-Nusra's isolation from the broader insurgency, as many groups continued to cooperate with it on the battlefield. In the end, with the expansion of Baghdadi's Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra took the side of the insurgency against ISIS in the broader infighting that erupted across the north and east in early 2014, while al-Qaida central issued a formal statement denying that ISIS had any links with it. Al-Qaida's turn against ISIS reinforced a widespread line of defense of Jabhat al-Nusra as a vital military partner and part of the broader insurgency. This was so even as Jabhat al-Nusra lost its most valuable assets in the east of Syria to ISIS by summer 2014 and occasionally targeted groups for elimination, most notably the Western-backed Syrian Revolutionaries Front in Idlib province in October-November 2014. Indeed, in early 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra came together with the Salafi group Ahrar al-Sham to set up and lead the Jaysh al-Fatah alliance that drove out the regime from almost all towns in Idlib, including the provincial capital itself.

Hence, despite some severe bumps, Syria's al-Qaida affiliate had successfully affirmed its status by 2015-2016 as a leading actor in the insurgency, prompting warnings that the group could pose a bigger long-term threat to the United States than the Islamic State.[3] Today, warnings of a major al-Qaida threat emanating from Syria continue to be repeated, with U.S. diplomat Brett McGurk characterizing Idlib province, the main epicenter of the insurgency today and dominated by the Jabhat al-Nusra successor group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, as the "largest al-Qaida safe haven since 9/11."[4] In an opinion article for the *Daily Beast*, Charles Lister argued that "al Qaeda stands to benefit the most" from continued instability in Syria deriving from Assad's remaining in power [5], highlighting that "al Qaeda has embedded itself deeply within the anti-Assad movement, attaching its fate to that of the indigenous revolution."[6]

How justified are these fears of an al-Qaida threat emanating from Syria for the long-term? This article explores this question more closely by examining two issues. First, it is necessary to explore the nature of al-Qaida's relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor organisations, firstly embodied in Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and then Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Second, this article looks at the current direction of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's project, its future viability that is connected to the wider fate of Syria's insurgency, and what that fate means for al-Qaida in Syria.

The Break from al-Qaida: The Plan All Along?

While Jabhat al-Nusra was able to form military alliances and joint administrations with many other insurgent actors, its explicit al-Qaida affiliation posed a problem for the often discussed aspiration of unity among the various factions. Understandably, other groups feared that a real merger with Jabhat al-Nusra would lead to being internationally blacklisted as terrorists, targeted in US airstrikes and losing support from foreign state patrons. For instance, in early 2016, talks for a merger between Jabhat al-Nusra and other factions - in particular Ahrar al-Sham - were raised, only for the idea to be rejected on the grounds of Jabhat al-Nusra's al-Qaida affiliation.

Ayman al-Zawahiri was clearly aware of the discussions, as illustrated in his speech "Go forth to al-Sham," released in May 2016 but recorded in February/March of that year (the time lag existing on account of the logistics of communication channels with the outside world).[7] In his speech, he portrayed the jihad in Syria as representing the best hope of the *ummah* for establishing an Islamic government, and emphasized that this jihad needed to be defended. On the issue of al-Qaida affiliation, Zawahiri appeared to be ambiguous: while he stressed that al-Qaida itself did not seek to rule and would go with the hypothetical Islamic government that goes above organisational ties, he also said that he did not think that international powers would be content simply with an end to Jabhat al-Nusra's ties with al-Qaida, but would rather seek to humiliate it further. [8]

Fresh impetus was given to the notion of breaking ties with al-Qaida when reports emerged around the beginning of July 2016 regarding proposals for a joint U.S.-Russia campaign to target Jabhat al-Nusra. On July 28, Jabhat al-Nusra was officially rebranded as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham ("Conquest of al-Sham Front"), declared to have no affiliation with any "external entity." The occasion of the announcement was the first time in which Jabhat al-Nusra's leader Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani revealed his face publicly, and stated that the change came in accordance with the "general guidelines and directives" of al-Qaida's leadership. Hours before the actual announcement, Jabhat al-Nusra's media wing al-Manara al-Bayda had released an audio message by Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, identified for the first time as Zawahiri's deputy. In this message, he was urging for the necessary steps to be taken to protect the jihad in Syria and strive for unity above organisational ties, replaying an excerpt from an old Zawahiri speech released in January 2014, which stated that unity should come above party affiliation.[9]

The media presentation by Jabhat al-Nusra on that day suggested a move coordinated with Zawahiri. For instance, the particular wording regarding affiliation implied that there could still be ties with al-Qaida figures who had come to Syria (e.g. Abu al-Khayr al-Masri), rather than a true break with al-Qaida. In addition, Jowlani stated in his announcement that Zawahiri and the al-Qaida leadership would continue to be an exemplar to follow. Some jihadi media outlets contributed to this impression,

with the pro al-Qaida outlet al-Fustaat posting some days before the announcement that "Jabhat al-Nusra will soon sever ties with al-Qaida with the permission of Sh. Ayman al-Zawahiri."[10]

Compelling as this interpretation of a stroke of al-Qaida genius and guidance might seem, one to which this author also subscribed, it faces two problems. First, the short-term impetus for the rebranding, and the actual rebranding, occurred within the timeframe of approximately one month. Yet as noted with the Zawahiri audio recording released in May of that year but actually produced 2-3 months earlier, there is a considerable delay in the communication channels between Zawahiri and the outside world. While it is clear that Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, being based in Syria himself, gave permission for the rebranding and shift in affiliation, it seems implausible that the matter could have been relayed to Zawahiri and a response relayed back within the time-space of one month.

Second, there was by no means unanimous backing within the Jabhat al-Nusra leadership for the rebranding. For instance, the Jordanians Imad al-Toubasi (Abu Julaybib) and Bilal Khuraisat (Abu Khadija al-Shari'i) both refused to join Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.[11] Both men clearly rejected the idea of breaking ties with al-Qaida and the oath of allegiance to Zawahiri, and feared that the ideological project would be compromised by merging with more 'moderate' factions; the fear of 'dilution', it should be noted, is implied in Zawahiri's speech released in May 2016. If the rebranding had been approved and guided by Zawahiri, why would these men have refused to join the new entity? Surely they would have been aware of Zawahiri's supposed role in the whole matter?

When one takes into account these 'purist' concerns about the rebranding, another interpretation emerges behind the initial wording of not being affiliated to an "external entity": that is, that this phrasing was an attempt to address the 'purist' concerns, and reassure them that the rebranded entity would still remain an al-Qaida project in its ideological essence. Subsequent pronouncements moved away from this technical-sounding language likely in the realisation that the 'purists' could not be won over. In any case, these hardliners could not muster sufficient support to cause a serious split within the organisation, on account of the disagreement.

The rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham should not be seen as something that was in the works by al-Qaida all along. Rather, it was a response to a particular set of circumstances that probably threatened to fracture the group. There had likely been efforts going on for several months to push for a new non-al-Qaida-affiliated entity by the likes of Saleh al-Hamawi, a founding member of Jabhat al-Nusra who was expelled in summer 2015 for his criticisms of what he saw as the group's lack of pragmatism, but who still retained a network of supporters in the group. The threat of an American-Russian campaign to target Jabhat al-Nusra seemed to give those efforts additional force in July 2016, thus prompting Jowlani to have serious consultations with Abu al-Khayr al-Masri and the leadership on the issue of the al-Qaida affiliation.

Following the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, one of the goals was to renew merger talks with other factions, in particular Ahrar al-Sham. Now that the al-Qaida affiliation was dropped, one could say that the ball was in the court of Ahrar al-Sham and other factions to merge. As was widely expected at the time by analysts, the shift to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham failed to give rise to new mergers. The outside world considered Jabhat Fatah al-Sham to be a mere front for al-Qaida, and so any mergers with the group would again risk seeing other factions blacklisted and losing outside support. Thus, the mainstream Ahrar al-Sham leadership, with its close ties to Turkey, refused to merge with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, even as the pressure to merge intensified with the regime's recapture of Aleppo city in its entirety in December 2016, a major blow to the insurgency that gave rise to a sense of a wider crisis. Among those pushing for a merger with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was a hardline faction within Ahrar al-Sham led by Hashim al-Sheikh, who formed his own Jaysh al-Ahrar subgroup in Ahrar al-Sham, and groups that had developed close working relationships with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, such as the Islamist and opportunistic Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, which once received CIA support through an operations room in Turkey that was cut off in 2015. The end of CIA's support was due to the group's criminal activities (e.g. kidnapping Italians in 2014) and a close working relationship developed with Jabhat al-Nusra.

Only a round of infighting helped bring about actual mergers though, as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, perceiving

a conspiracy to isolate it but likely also wishing to seize control of some key supply routes, began by launching an attack on Jaysh al-Mujahideen, a CIA-backed group that had a presence in the west Aleppo countryside. The round of infighting in west Aleppo countryside and Idlib led several smaller, more 'moderate' groups to seek protection in Ahrar al-Sham by merging under its banner. On January 28, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham came together with Hashim al-Sheikh, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, the jihadist Jabhat Ansar al-Din and two other groups to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, just two days after the declaration of the merger of some factions under Ahrar al-Sham and probably a reaction to it. Within Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Hashim al-Sheikh was designated the overall leader, while Jowlani became the military commander.

No evidence shows that Zawahiri had any role in the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. As with the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, the speed at which the merger took place suggests that there would not have been enough time to consult with him on the matter. Following the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the Jordanian jurist and former Jabhat al-Nusra member Sami al-Oraidi resigned from the new entity. Oraidi had initially served as a religious official for Jabhat al-Nusra in the south of Syria before becoming the general Shari'i official for the organization. In October 2013, he outlined Jabhat al-Nusra's ideological outlook in an interview with the group's media wing.[12]

Oraidi likely stayed in Jabhat Fatah al-Sham - where he served as a member of the Shari'i council and the Shura council - for idealist reasons of unity among jihadists in contrast to the more vocal initial critics. With Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, however, he evidently did not feel compelled to stay silent. On February 10, 2017, the Telegram channel "Fans of Dr. Sami al-Oraidi" relayed the following statements by him:

"Among the reasons for the waste of the fruit of jihad is the delay of the counsel of the 'ulama and the people of benevolence. Delaying the statement beyond the time of need is not permissible. Among the greatest disobedience is disobedience to the mother group; after it raised them as children, they disobeyed it when one of them began to learn how to speak.…What the experiences in the fields of jihad have established is that if alliances are not based on Shari'i foundations and restrictions with people who have in them the quality of sacrifice and steadfastness, the harm of these alliances is greater than their benefit."[13]

Although there is no mention of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham by name, it is clear, given the context of his resignation, that he is talking about the group, and the supposed disobedience of the parent organization al-Qaida. Oraidi continued this line of sub-tweeting-style criticism of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, writing a small treatise on the subject of the pledge of allegiance (bay'a) in jihadi groups.[14] The work features quotations from a variety of jihadi personalities, such as al-Qaida's Atiyatullah al-Libi and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, in order to emphasize the need to fulfill one's pledge in giving the bay'a and not rebel against one's amirs and establish new groups. Atiyatullah al-Libi, for instance, is quoted as saying: "The establishment of new groups is not permitted except with a considered Shari'i justification that the jurists decide is a Shari'i justification." As Oraidi concludes, the bay'a can only be dissolved by "legitimate means and for legitimate reasons," meaning that there must be a clear affirmation of the dissolution by the "general amir of the group." Again, no reference is made to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham by name, but the implication is that the breaking of the allegiance to al-Qaida was not done with the appropriate consultation of its general amir Zawahiri.

In October 2017, Oraidi began to become explicit in his criticisms [15], responding to leaked comments made by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham official Abu Abdullah al-Shami (Abd al-Rahim Attoun) regarding Zawahiri's speech "We shall fight you till there is no more persecution" released early that month.[16] In that speech, Zawahiri implicitly criticizes the breaking of ties with al-Qaida, warning that the Syrian jihad risks going to waste on "political games and ruses." Besides issuing a standard call to unity, Zawahiri outlined his view of the nature of an oath of an allegiance: "binding in its nature, its violation forbidden." While he does not explicitly reference Nusra's successors by name, the implication is that the breaking of ties constituted a violation of that oath of allegiance.

In his own criticisms, Oraidi offers more of the backstory to the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, saying that he had kept silent on the matters (i.e. not explicitly referring to them) for reasons

such as "the interest of the field." According to him, for example, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri had no knowledge of the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham except through the media. More importantly, Oraidi says that "some time after the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, the first message came from Dr. Zawahiri," in which he rejected the project and demanded a return to the prior status-quo. Oraidi further claims that Zawahiri had described what had happened as a "violation and act of rebellion." The separation of any branch of al-Qaida requires the correct consultation in the organization, and Oraidi claims that Abu al-Khayr al-Masri thus retracted his endorsement of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, accepting Zawahiri's argument that it was not within his competencies to approve it.

On balance, therefore, the evidence suggests that the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and then Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham was not coordinated with Zawahiri. While one could see in Jabhat Fatah al-Sham an initial attempt to appease 'purists' and the idea of preserving al-Qaida's project while embedding the group even more deeply in the insurgency, the central leadership's rejection of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and the incorporation of some non-jihadist elements into the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham merger means that the breaking of ties can no longer be viewed as a mere media game. Rather, it has become a very serious point of contention.

Strategic Divergence and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Administrative Expansion

Besides the issue of breaking ties, there is also a rift in the approach to the war on the ground. In April 2017, Zawahiri issued an audio message that reflected a strategic divergence between him and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham regarding the situation in Syria.[17] Entitled "al-Sham will submit to none besides God," the message contrasted with the message released in May 2016 that portrayed the Syrian jihad as the best hope of the ummah. In this message, Zawahiri, alluding to the major setbacks suffered by the insurgency, emphasized that "victory comes with patience, ease with hardship, deliverance with affliction." As part of this message, Zawahiri offered three specific points of advice. First, there must be "critical reassessment and correction of mistakes." Second, the focus should be on guerrilla warfare rather than holding territory. Finally, the jihad in Syria must not be turned into a nationalist cause, but rather should be a jihad of the entire ummah, aiming to implement the rule of God.

The second piece of advice in particular illustrates Zawahiri's realistic understanding of the overall direction of the Syrian civil war and the trend against the insurgency. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, however, has clearly not been following this approach suggested by Zawahiri. On the contrary, it has sought to expand its administrative capabilities. In part, this approach reflects a desire to become the face of Syria's insurgency with which outside powers must deal while insisting that the 'revolution' against the regime continues. Thus, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham seeks to dominate over all other administrative projects of other factions in what remains of insurgent-held territory in the epicenter of the northwest. For example, on May 11, the group announced the establishment of a new foundation to monitor the market of currency exchange and financial transfers.[18] On July 29, after inflicting major defeats on the Salafi group Ahrar al-Sham, which was forced out of the provincial capital of Idlib and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing between Idlib and Turkey, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's electricity administration (the General Foundation for Electricity) subsumed Ahrar al-Sham's electricity administration (the Electricity Foundation).[19]

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's services wing is currently called the Civil Administration for Services, a successor to Jabhat al-Nusra's Public Administration for Services. Statements issued by the administration also reflect the administrative expansion particularly since the defeats inflicted on Ahrar al-Sham. For instance, the administration has issued a statement to establish a directorate for antiquities and museums, and another forbidding the ratification of contracts for mobile and Internet networks without approval of the administration.[20]

At the same time, this administrative expansion comes at an additional cost besides the strategic divergence from Zawahiri. The international community tends to regard Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in the same way as it regarded Jabhat Fatah al-Sham: that is, an al-Qaida front project. Therefore, the permeation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham into civil life in Idlib province risks jeopardizing the work of aid organizations in the area and flow of goods across the border from Turkey, for fears of abetting the growing rule of what is considered to be a terrorist organization.

In turn, isolation and pariah status for Idlib are a threat to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham financially. Thus, on July 30, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham issued a statement that addressed the issue of operation of humanitarian organisations amid its major gains against other factions in Idlib province, declaring that "we affirm the importance of the continuation of humanitarian work in the liberated areas, for what it brings from supporting and helping our people."[21] As part of this affirmation, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham asserted that "we will work to entrench the principle of the neutrality and independence of the humanitarian organisations, and we will push for this principle."

In this regard, an approach towards civil society has been adopted in at least some areas of its control that resembles the methods of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula when it controlled the important Yemeni port city of Mukalla.[22] Specifically, there is the issue of civilian local councils in areas controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and the Jabal al-Summaq area of north Idlib provides a useful case study . An originally Druze area controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra since the end of 2014, it has remained under the control of the group's successors to this day. Conversions to Sunni Islam were imposed on the local population at the beginning of 2015, in accordance with the jihadist view that the Druze are disbelievers who fall outside the framework of beliefs that can be tolerated. This policy has never been changed: a useful indicator for the question of whether the dropping of the al-Qaida affiliation has actually constituted a shift away from jihadist ideology itself.

In any event, while the Jabal al-Summaq area was controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra and its successors, services were actually being provided by civilian local councils. However, following the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the new organisation made clear its intention to force the local councils to become affiliated with its services administration. Otherwise, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham would form new councils to replace them. In Kaftin, one of the largest villages in Jabal al-Summaq [23], the local council, which was ultimately tied to the main opposition-in-exile, rejected becoming affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and so Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham set up a new local council to replace it, sidelining the old local council. Yet according to Abd al-Majeed Sharif, who headed the old local council, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham "compelled the provincial council to register it [the new local council] with them or confer with them."[24]

The provincial council here refers to the Free Idlib Provincial Council that is tied to the main opposition-in-exile. In other words, while the new local council is actually affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, it appears to have been registered in the name of the Free Idlib Provincial Council. This point is supported by documents obtained by this author from a resident of Kaftin featuring water and cleaning bills from this new local council for July 2017 (see Appendix). Notably, the top of the documents reads "Free Idlib Province," a reference to the Free Idlib Provincial Council. This corroborates the testimony of Abd al-Majeed Sharif, who added "our provincial council is now doing everything the Jabha [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham] wants in compliance."[25] This *modus operandi* is undoubtedly intended to ensure that aid organizations work with the local council in Kaftin, which provides services to the population, subject to fees that constitute a source of income for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

For comparison, a document emerged from May 2017 in which the head of a local council pledged to affiliate the council with the Hama division of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's services administration.[26] At the same time, the document specified that some relations with the Free Idlib Provincial Council could still be maintained such as in provision of relief and services support. This document lends further credence to Abd al-Majeed Sharif's interpretation.

The desire to expand and unify administrative capabilities while facing potential problems of international stigmatization and subversion efforts continues to prove a challenge for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. As of the time of writing, the group appears to have had a hand in the formation of a "Salvation Government"[27] to rival the wider interim government linked to the main opposition-in-exile. This rival government notably declared in its covenant that "Islamic Shari'a" should be the sole source of legislation and that "it is necessary to preserve the identity of the Syrian Muslim people," much to the approval of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham officials like the Egyptian Abu Fatah al-Farghali.[28]

Conclusion: The Future

In sum, it can be seen that the relationship between al-Qaida and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is more complicated than the latter being a simple front group for the former. Although the media circus on the day of the rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham gave the impression of a move coordinated with Zawahiri, the evidence that has since emerged does not support that idea. The al-Qaida loyalists, despite their complaints, do not seem to be numerous or influential enough to form a real rival faction to compete with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which has barred the formation of new factions in the north anyway.[29] There is also the problem of strategic divergence between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Zawahiri. While the concerns about Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham supposedly being tainted with Syrian nationalism and the jihadist ideology being compromised seem to be overblown, particularly as more obviously non-jihadist elements such as Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki have defected, there is a clear contrast between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's governance project and Zawahiri's advice to pursue guerrilla warfare.

Yet the viability of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's project in the long run is in doubt. Whatever the complexities of the group's relationship with al-Qaida, the external perception of the organisation as an al-Qaida front is important to bear in mind when considering how the outside world regards Idlib province. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham may insist that it can maintain the apparent independence of civil society in its areas of control, but outside donors are increasingly likely to regard that as a mere ruse and pull out of aid efforts.

The Assad regime, meanwhile, will not leave Idlib province in insurgent hands indefinitely. While the insurgency cannot defeat the regime, an insurgent-held Idlib province remains a serious nuisance to cause disturbances in Hama and Latakia provinces. As of the time of writing, the priority of the regime and its allies is to secure the eastern areas from the Islamic State, partly to reclaim vital resources such as oil but also to block US-backed actors from maximizing their influence in the area. Thus, a serious regime offensive to retake all of Idlib, which would not be an easy affair, is not imminent. But an offensive of some sort is ultimately to be expected. The scale of that campaign depends in part on how far Turkey decides to expand its intervention into northwest Syria. So far, Turkey has in fact cooperated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in western Aleppo countryside to deploy monitors to block any westward expansion by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces pocket in Afrin. Indeed, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is publicly portraying the Turkish intervention as something that is limited.[30] There are also suggestions Turkey is trying to play a long-game against Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, initially cooperating with it over a shared aim while also working to undermine it from within by less confrontational methods like assassinations of officials and encouraging defections in the rank-and-file.[31]

Whatever scenario does play out, the long-term outlook is bleak for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham as a governance project. As is the case with the contracting Islamic State, the logical outcome is resorting to guerrilla tactics. In this regard though, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham seems less well placed than the Islamic State, which has had far more lucrative financial resources to exploit for a long time since expelling Jabhat al-Nusra from eastern Syria in 2014.

The pursuit of guerrilla warfare in the end may help heal the rift between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the al-Qaida loyalists, who do not necessarily see Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham as an outright enemy in the way they view the Islamic State but rather as merely being severely misguided. However, the future picture hardly tells of a success story. The organisation and the al-Qaida presence in Syria more broadly are unlikely to die out completely, but the scenario is one of an insurgency operating in largely depopulated terrain of relatively small size, not exactly comparable to the larger safe havens enjoyed by al-Qaida in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime.

It may be argued that the problems al-Qaida has faced in Syria do not matter as only a few al-Qaida members are required to plot attacks against the West. However, these individuals are vulnerable to targeted counter-terrorism strikes. As for actual attacks conducted in the West at present, it is the Islamic State rather than al-Qaida claiming a higher success rate, whether through merely inspiring individuals or by communicating with sleeper operatives.

It is often tempting to impute strategic brilliance to one's enemy when it is not warranted.

The evolution of Jabhat al-Nusra over time into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is a case-in-point.

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Appendix: Documents from Kaftin for Water and Cleaning Services
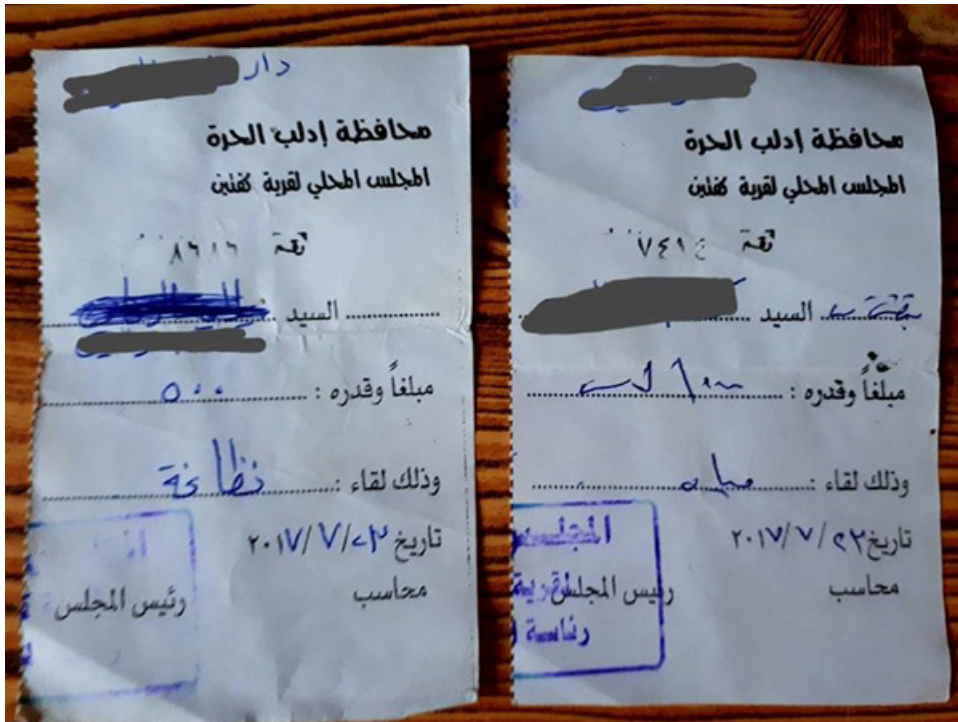
Notes

[1] E.g. Charles Lister, "al-Qa'ida plays a long game in Syria," CTC Sentinel, September 11, 2015; URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-plays-a-long-game-in-syria .

[2] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "al-Qa'ida uncoupling: Jabhat al-Nusra's rebranding as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham," CTC Sentinel, August 22, 2016; URL:https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-uncoupling-jabhat-al-nusras-rebranding-as-jabhat-fateh-al-sham .

[3] E.g. Pamela Engel, "Al Qaeda is revealing its long game in Syria," Business Insider, March 23, 2016; URL: http://uk.businessinsider.com/al-qaeda-nusra-front-goals-in-syria-2016-3?r=US&IR=T .

[4] "Assessing the Trump Administration's Counterterrorism Policy," Middle East Institute, July 27, 2017; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgzqabDYK7I&t=3986s .

[5] Charles Lister, "How the Russians Suckered Trump in Syria, and Iran Comes Out the Big Winner," July 12, 2017; URL: http://www.thedailybeast.com/how-the-russians-suckered-trump-in-syria-and-iran-comes-out-the-big-winner .

[6] Ibid.

[7] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "al-Qa'ida uncoupling."

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] "Jabhat Fatah al-Sham: Un-troubling defections," al-Modon, August 26, 2016; URL: http://www.almodon.com/arabworld/20 16/8/26/%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85- %D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1- %D9%85%D9%82%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A9 .

[12] "Our Manhaj and our Aqeeda: interview with Sami al-Oraidi," al-Manara al-Bayda, October 21, 2013; URL: https://archive.org/ details/Moqabla .

[13] Collected and saved at URL: https://justpaste.it/oraidi10feb2017 .

[14] "Responding to those asking about the ruling of fulfilling the pledge of allegiance to the groups striving to implement the ruling of the law of the Lord of the Worlds," Sami al-Oraidi, March 29, 2017; URL: http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ ijabat-al-sailin.pdf .

[15] Sami al-Oraidi, "For God and then for history," October 2017.

[16] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "We shall fight you until there is no more persecution," al-Sahab Media, October 2017; URL: https://azelin. files.wordpress.com/2017/10/dr-ayman-al-zcca3awacc84hiricc84-22we-shall-fight-you-until-there-is-no-more-persecution22-en. pdf .

[17] "al-Sham will submit to none besides God," al-Sahab Media, April 2017; URL: https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/dr- ayman-al-zcca3awacc84hiricc84-22al-shacc84m-will-submit-to-none-except-god22.pdf .

[18] Copy of the statement can be accessed at URL: https://justpaste.it/htsfinancialadminmay11 .

[19] Copy of the document can be accessed at URL: https://justpaste.it/htsahrarelec29jul .

[20] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Service Documents": Specimens N and O.

[21] "Commenting on the statement issued by Syrian organizations and committees concerning the recent developments," Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, July 30, 2017; URL: https://justpaste.it/hts30jul2017 .

[22] Michael Horton, "The Hadramawt: AQAP and the Battle for Yemen's Wealthiest Governorate," Jamestown, July 10, 2015; URL: https://jamestown.org/program/the-hadramawt-aqap-and-the-battle-for-yemens-wealthiest-governorate/.

[23] A distinction is drawn between villages of Jabal al-Summaq on the plain (e.g. Kaftin) and those further up on the mountain. A body called "The United Mountain Council" was set up for local council services for the villages further up on the mountain. It appears to have been more compliant with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's demands than the Kaftin local council, despite an official claim to be independent. The United Mountain Council declared support for the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-supervised "Civil Administration Initiative in the Liberated Areas" in August 2017, see URL: https://justpaste.it/majlismuwahhidaug2017. Cf. "Launching of the Civil Administration Initiative in the Liberated Areas," SMART News, August 24, 2017; URL: https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/239 183/%D8%A5%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7 %D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%82-%D8%A 7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8 .

[24] Conversation, August 15, 2017.

[25] Ibid.

[26] "Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Service Documents," Specimen P.

[27] The announcement of this government was reported on by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's 'Iba News Agency, November 5, 2017; URL: https://justpaste.it/hts5nov2017e .

[28] Abu Fath al-Farghali on his Telegram channel, November 2, 2017; URL: https://justpaste.it/abufathfarghalinov2 .

[29] Statement issued July 27, 2017. Copy can be found at URL: https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/890903185044406277 .

[30] Sam Heller, "Tahrir al-Sham official on Turkey's intervention to implement Astana: 'That's not the reality,'" Sam Heller/Abu al-Jamajem, October 15, 2017; URL: https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2017/10/15/tahrir-al-sham-official-on-turkeys-intervention- to-implement-astana-thats-not-the-reality/ .

[31] Charles Lister, "Turkey's Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding the Long Game in Syria," War on the Rocks, October 31, 2017; URL: https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/turkeys-idlib-incursion-and-the-hts-question-understanding-the- long-game-in-syria/ .

The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

by Sam Heller

Abstract

This article lays out the key events leading up to, and the strategic thinking behind, the 2017 emergence of Syrian insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the Body for the Liberation of the Levant), the latest iteration of Syria's former al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusrah. To frame that strategic logic, it employs political scientist Peter Krause's Movement Structure Theory, which posits that national movements led by a single hegemonic group tend to be more successful. For definitional reasons, Krause's theory likely does not have predictive utility in the case of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is to some extent transnational and thus governed by different motivations and rules. Still, Krause's theory nonetheless provides a useful lexicon to describe the insurgency in Syria's north-west and the rationale for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's hegemonic dominance of that insurgency as the group has itself articulated it. The article also briefly evaluates Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's apparent prospects, as of November 2017, and their implications for the broader applicability of Krause's theory.

Keywords: Al-Qaida, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusrah, Syria, Idlib, Political Science

Introduction

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has, as of November 2017, consolidated its hold over the geographic core of the Syrian insurgency against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In July 2017, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – the latest iteration of former Syrian al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusrah – defeated its only serious rival, Ahrar al-Sham, for factional dominance in Syria's insurgent-held north-west, centered on Idlib province. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has since moved to solidify its military dominance in the north-west and to organise governance and economic life in the insurgent enclave under its tutelage.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is a semi-clandestine organisation, and the process that led to its formation is the product of intra-insurgent discussions and dynamics that are, for outsiders, not fully transparent or understandable. But public statements by the group's leadership, firsthand accounts of the closed-door negotiations that produced it, and other documentary evidence indicate that, as a project, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was more than a simple play for factional dominance and narrow, private gains. Rather, what is now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's leadership made a case for insurgent unification in terms of the survival and strategic success of Syria's revolutionary movement. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was justified in terms of rationalizing Syria's splintered north-western insurgency and strengthening its position politically *vis-à-vis* opposition state backers and foreign powers.

The apparent thinking behind Hayat Tahrir al-Sham actually has parallels in comparative political science. In fact, it closely tracks the findings of Boston College's Peter Krause in his 2017 book *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win*.[1] Krause posits what he terms "Movement Structure Theory," which categorizes national liberation movements in terms of the relative distribution of power among the movement's groups. He finds that "hegemonic" movements, with a single significant group, tend to be more successful. Group hegemony puts a stop to the inter-group jostling and dysfunction that bedevils more fragmented or multipolar movements, allowing the movement to more effectively pursue strategic goals and to link violence to politics in negotiations, including with outside backers.

This article posits that Krause's Movement Structure Theory is a useful framework for understanding the emergence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the thinking behind it. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's new hegemony in Syria's insurgent-held north-west also provides a useful test of the broader applicability of Krause's theory, which, for various definitional reasons, may not fully apply to Syria's north-western insurgency or predict its success. In other circumstances, the forced unification of Syria's north-western opposition under a single hegemonic faction could be expected to improve the insurgency's effectiveness and bargaining position internationally. Yet the fact that this insurgent hegemon, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is generally considered a transnational jihadist

organisation means it sits outside Krause's theory, and suggests Syria's insurgency is unlikely to realize the expected gains of single-faction hegemony. Krause's theory is thus helpful in explaining Hayat Tahrir al-Sham but, in this instance, does not have obvious predictive application.

This article first relates the phased formation of a merged, Jabhat al-Nusrah-led body and eventually Hayat Tahrir al-Sham over 2016 and 2017. It then provides a brief overview of Krause's Movement Structure Theory. It explores how Krause's theory explains the rationale for Jabhat al-Nusrah/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's takeover of the north-western insurgency as that rationale was articulated by figures inside and close to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. It then evaluates the apparent prospects, as of November 2017, of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and their implications for the broader applicability of Krause's theory.

The Origins of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

The origins of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the Body for the Liberation of the Levant), as a strategic idea, seem to date back to early to mid-2016. Jabhat al-Nusrah (Jabhat al-Nusrah li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahidi al-Sham fi-Sahat al-Jihad, the Front to Support the People of Syria from Syria's Mujahideen on the Battlefields of Jihad) had already begun to eliminate problematic, threatening rivals in northern Syria as early as late 2014, when it concentrated its forces in the country's north-west and began what some termed "the Emirate Campaign."[2] But it was a series of internationally sponsored ceasefires ("cessations of hostilities") beginning in February 2016[3] that seems to have really catalyzed Jabhat al-Nusrah's effort to consolidate the northern insurgency.

From early on, Jabhat al-Nusrah had embedded itself in the broader Syrian insurgency. Since 2014, however, it had pursued a consciously separate, hardline political project in Syria's north,[4] even as it continued to collaborate militarily with factions such as Ahrar al-Sham (Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah, the Islamic Movement of the Freemen of al-Sham), an Islamist faction with roots in transnational jihadism that had adopted a specifically Syrian focus.[5] Jabhat al-Nusrah's unwillingness to compromise politically – in particular, its stubborn refusal to renounce its allegiance to al-Qaida – had scuttled talks over factional unification as late as January 2016. "[Other factions] didn't offer any justification other than breaking the link with al-Qaida, and [they] didn't lay down any [other] condition," said Hussam al-Atrash, deputy head of Aleppo insurgent faction Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki (the Nour al-Din al-Zinki Movement, or just Nour al-Din al-Zinki) and a participant in various rounds of merger negotiations. "It was as if Nusrah had agreed to break the link that day, everyone would have agreed – the Free [Syrian Army] and Islamists among them."[6]

Then, in July 2016, reports emerged of a nascent U.S.-Russian agreement to jointly target Jabhat al-Nusrah.[7] The targeting mechanism was an attempt to salvage Syria's faltering cessation of hostilities by solving for the Syrian opposition's "marbling" with Jabhat al-Nusrah, something that had helped undermine previous ceasefires.[8]

Jabhat al-Nusrah quickly responded. On 28 July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusrah chief Abu Muhammad al-Jolani – now the military head of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, but seen widely as the group's effective overall leader – announced the group was dissolving itself and forming "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham" (The Front for the Conquest of the Levant). Jabhat Fateh al-Sham was a new body "with no relation with any external party," Jolani said, thus implying the group had broken its formal organisational link with al-Qaida.[9] According to Jolani, the new group's prime objectives included "working on unification with the factions to unify the ranks of the mujahideen, and to enable us to liberate the land of Syria from the rule of tyrants and eliminate the regime and its allies." This suddenly urgent need to unify – facilitated now by the break with al-Qaida – was stressed by other Jabhat Fateh al-Sham figures[10] and found at least some takers, including prominent hardliners inside Ahrar al-Sham.[11]

Still, talks again stalled, initially because of disputes between Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham over preeminence and leadership within any merged body.[12] Both Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham were seen within the opposition as necessary for any meaningful unification.[13] Talks resumed after the fall of Aleppo to the Assad regime in December 2016, which crystallized a sense within the Syrian opposition that the opposition was, in fact, losing and had to undertake some dramatic strategic shift.[14] Among jihadists,

it also convinced them that the nationalist factions whose defenses inside Aleppo had collapsed were mostly worthless and, what's more, were willing to turn on their jihadist allies.[15] Meanwhile, the United States had stepped up airstrikes against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham targets,[16] and Turkey was both diverting rebel manpower from the north-west to its own "Operation Euphrates Shield" in the northern Aleppo countryside and pushing northern factions to attend peace talks in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, an initiative Jabhat Fateh al-Sham saw as a threat.[17]

Ultimately, Jolani reached an agreement with Ahrar al-Sham head Ali al-Omar (Abu Ammar Taftanaz), according to which Omar would assume overall leadership of the merged faction and Jolani would serve as military commander.[18] But Omar stalled after a key bloc within Ahrar al-Sham objected strenuously to joining with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, in public and private,[19] thanks in part to what critics said was pressure from foreign backers and fear of designation as a terrorist organization.[20] Smaller nationalist factions had separately agreed on a looser alliance-merger with Ahrar al-Sham.[21] When they appealed the merger with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Jolani refused to zero out the already negotiated agreement and talks collapsed.[22] Despite public lobbying from hardline clerics,[23] Ahrar al-Sham backed out of the agreement.[24]

Matters then came to a head in January 2017. Protests across the north-west demanded the factions unify,[25] U.S. airstrikes against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham escalated to an unprecedented degree[26] and representatives of foreign-backed northern rebel factions went to Astana for talks on January 23 and 24.[27] Jabhat Fateh al-Sham responded by moving on those factions inside the north-west, sending convoys to surround one faction's base after another, forcing them to surrender and yield their weapons stocks.[28]

As its campaign against the "Astana factions" was ongoing, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham issued a statement making clear it was both attempting to frustrate Astana talks and railroad through a merger. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham rejected the Astana factions' ability to credibly speak on behalf of the opposition and complained about others' unwillingness to merge with it, when, the group claimed, it represented "two-thirds of the [opposition's] military power." Jabhat Fateh al-Sham demanded "practical, sincere measures" towards "establishing a Sunni entity that is unified, militarily and politically, based on a religious-legal foundation, possesses the decision-[making power] to make peace and war, and that protects our people and their religion and sanctities."[29]

On January 28, 2017, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham founded that "Sunni entity" when it joined with factions including Nour al-Din al-Zinki; a powerful defected section of Ahrar al-Sham that included former Ahrar al-Sham head Hashem al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber Maskanah); and other smaller groups. Together they announced the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, under the nominal leadership of Sheikh. They called on others to join, "so this project might be a nucleus that brings together the revolution's capabilities, preserves its path, and realizes its hoped-for goals."[30] They disregarded a last-minute merger appeal by Ahrar al-Sham the day before, on January 27.[31]

Meanwhile, the "Astana factions" that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham had attacked joined Ahrar al-Sham for protection,[32] swelling Ahrar al-Sham's numbers[33] but not necessarily its real strength opposite Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.[34]

In an introductory video, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham said its establishment was "a step towards saving the battlefield from military and political tensions that had erupted between the factions."[35] Nonetheless, those tensions persisted amid a months-long standoff between Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. A "de-escalation" agreement reached in Astana mostly halted clashes between opposition rebels and the Assad regime,[36] and so Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham instead turned inwards and began competing for legitimacy and social control. Their rival service institutions wrestled for control of the north-west's electrical grid, going so far as to sabotage key electrical infrastructure.[37] Ahrar al-Sham also attempted to outbid Hayat Tahrir al-Sham for symbolic leadership of north-western Syria's revolutionary opposition, adopting the revolutionary tricolor flag alongside its own Islamic banner and even proposing unity and administrative projects from which Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's leadership would be excluded.[38]

After months of veiled and explicit warnings between Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and positioning by the latter to preempt a floated Turkish intervention into north-west Syria,[39] in July 2017 a local clash[40]

escalated into a province-wide confrontation between the two factions. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham successfully isolated Ahrar al-Sham's strongest elements in southern Idlib and the neighboring Hama province and concentrated its most mobile, effective forces in an assault on Ahrar al-Sham's stronghold in northern Idlib. [41] In a matter of days, Ahrar al-Sham had collapsed, and its leadership agreed to a settlement that amounted to effective surrender.[42]

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham exhibited some splits and internal dissent as it advanced on Ahrar al-Sham – including the collective defection of Nour al-Din al-Zinki – but it held together enough to successfully rout its rival.[43] In the aftermath, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham issued a statement optimistically titled "The Revolution Continues," in which it justified its "bold steps to unify [the Syrian revolution's] internal ranks and its external vision" and called for a "civil administration" to manage insurgent-held areas.[44] Nour al-Din al-Zinki quickly voiced its public support for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's initiative.[45]

Krause's Movement Structure Theory

The evident rationale behind Hayat Tahrir al-Sham nicely corresponds to Peter Krause's Movement Structure Theory of national movements. Despite some definitional questions about the extent to which Krause's theory technically applies to Syria's north-western insurgency, and to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in particular, the theory is nonetheless extremely useful in explaining both Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its insurgent context.[46]

Krause conceptualises national liberation movements not in terms of the absolute number of component groups or factions, but rather the number of significant groups, where a significant group is "either the strongest group in the movement or another strong group that has the capability to realistically challenge the strongest group for leadership in the foreseeable future."[47]

Krause distinguishes mainly "between movements with one significant group" – "hegemonic" movements – "and those with two or more, or, in other words, between movements that contain a competitive and those that contain a non-competitive internal environment."[48] An internally competitive, bi- or multipolar movement can be either "fragmented" or "united," wherein the former is more purely anarchic and the latter entails a non-hierarchical, less cohesive alliance that joins otherwise independent groups.[49] But in any internally competitive case, groups vie for leadership and dominance of the movement so they might accrue to themselves the private goods of movement victory.[50] They divert resources towards an intra-movement "war of position" and engage in infighting and other destructive behaviors.[51] Internally competitive movements can less credibly translate military force into useful political positioning.[52] Intra-movement competition also provides openings for outside state sponsors to turn groups to their own ends:

> "The multiple significant groups in the movement also mean that there is a buyer's market for foreign influence because potential state sponsors have more outlets to insert themselves and can play one group off the others to get the best deal for themselves, but the worst one for the movement. The aim of these foreign sponsors is generally to manipulate groups to their own ends; they rarely prize movement independence. The multiple significant groups competing with each other and tying themselves to foreign entities makes it unlikely that the movement will have a cohesive strategy."[53]

Krause finds that "united and fragmented movements are likely to have far fewer movement resources devoted to strategic success and so are less likely than hegemonic movements to emerge victorious."[54]

Group hegemony solves such dysfunctions. In a hegemonic movement, not only is there a single leading group in the movement's group hierarchy, but there exist no significant challengers to that hegemonic leader.[55] With single-group hegemony, it is unrealistic for weaker subordinate groups to wage intra-movement "wars of position" for movement dominance. Non-significant subordinate groups are less likely to engage in distracting,

counterproductive competitive behaviors and instead will bandwagon with the hegemon.[56] Collectively, the movement is more likely to pursue a "war of movement" against the state in service of "strategic" goals – overall victory – instead of "club" or "private" goods.[57] Moreover, the movement is more likely to have an effective, coherent strategy that allows it to more clearly signal to external audiences and to be able to credibly link force to its bargaining position in any negotiations. Group hegemony also provides only a single viable outlet for would-be state sponsors to invest in the movement, and their support can be used more productively.[58]

Krause's theory appears not to encompass, technically, Syria's north-western insurgency and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. It is premised on "national movements,"[59] and Krause himself raises the question of how and whether it applies to non-national movements.[60] The national versus transnational character of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is debatable but, both in terms of the group's transnational, pan-Islamist outlook and ambitions and its non-Syrian membership, it seems not to fit in Krause's "national" frame. That also raises questions about the "national" character of a north-western insurgency that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has taken control and has seeming implications for the predictive utility of Krause's theory for movement success (more on which below).

Nonetheless, Krause's theory appears to have descriptive value in terms of understanding and explaining the north-western insurgency's intra-movement dynamics and articulating Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's thinking on how to ensure the insurgency's survival.

The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

The leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham viewed this sort of factional hegemony as necessary to win a strategic victory for the Syrian insurgency – or, at a minimum, to avert capitulation and strategic defeat.

Syria's northern insurgency could have been described previously as either "fragmented" or "united," per Krause's frame. As a divided, internally competitive movement, it was failing – losing ground on the battlefield and being drawn into progressively more disadvantageous negotiations.

Within the north-west's insurgent field, there were two significant actors that aspired to dominance and hegemony: Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusrah. The relative power of each group was difficult to assess, in part because many of their most valuable resources and strengths – for example, Jabhat al-Nusrah's influence on other technically independent factions, or any secret oaths of allegiance – were invisible. In retrospect, it seems possible to dispute how significant Ahrar al-Sham really was, and whether it was a serious contender for dominance. There is a risk of tautology in this respect – there exist none of the absolute, independent measures of group power and significance on which Krause relied in his work,[61] so there is a danger of working backward from events and inferring group significance based on outcomes. Still, before and after January 2017, Ahrar al-Sham was at least widely perceived by Syrians and outsiders to be a genuinely significant, plausible counterweight to its jihadist rival.[62] And the two factions' public competition for insurgent leadership and attempts at one-upmanship conform to Krause's theorisation of a multipolar movement. The late possibility that Ahrar al-Sham may have been a vessel for Turkish intervention against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – whether that was a real possibility, or just a product of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's paranoia – was an extreme example of the sort of division and internal dysfunction characteristic of a non-hegemonic insurgent system, in which an interested outside power might support and partner with one movement faction against another.

From mid-2016 onwards, Jabhat al-Nusrah/Fateh al-Sham's leadership appears to have developed a fairly consistent critique of Syria's fragmented northern insurgent scene, and a single prescriptive answer to how to resolve its incoherence. Discussing the northern insurgency's factional dysfunction, an informed source within Hayat Tahrir al-Sham said:

> "So the [rebellion's] political position was divided, as was the economy, and the information that preserves security was lost among the factions. Services were split up. Likewise, the religious-legal authority for each faction was different from the other's. So an administrative official turned into a religious-legal

official, because of this factional spirit and this parity that prevailed. We saw, in that complicated state through which we were proceeding, that [we] weren't going to preserve the revolution's gains, much less bring down the regime. We were saying this before the fall of Aleppo. And the fall of Aleppo proved what we had been saying. These factions were fragile, just imaginary numbers taking wages in times of ease; the day of the battle, you couldn't find them. And what's more, they might be conspiring against you. So the fall of Aleppo was a pivotal date. What came after it couldn't be like what came before. There were meetings about mergers for more than six months, and the results were frustrating. What Fateh al-Sham did after that was because of its inability to fix the revolutionary reality peacefully. So it did it with pressure and force. Even though these options were bitter, difficult, and undesirable for Fateh al-Sham."[63]

From Jabhat Fateh al-Sham/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's July 2016 break with al-Qaida until its July 2017 defeat of Ahrar al-Sham, the group's leadership insisted on unified, hegemonic order and rejected a united but multipolar movement structure. To the extent that it initially attempted to unite the insurgency's main factions consensually, the objective was to create a unitary hegemonic leader, not another united alliance of peer groups.

In Jolani's first (September 2016) interview after Jabhat al-Nusrah's break with al-Qaida and the announcement of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, he argued, "Today the battlefield has huge energy – militarily, in human terms, arms, and so on. It needs to be organised and ordered, and these energies need to be joined in one vessel." What's more, he identified a "political impetus" for factional unification, saying that Syrians needed a unified representative entity whose divided parts could not be used and manipulated by outside powers. "These projects that come from abroad come on the basis that [Syria's] interior is divided into a number of trends, factions, schools, approaches, and so on."[64]

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and then Hayat Tahrir al-Sham consistently advanced a similar argument, that this unifying step was necessary both to ensure the Syrian opposition's unitary and effective leadership and to give it the backbone to resist international pressures for concessions. The group's leadership made this case across audiences and fora. It did so in public addresses like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham head Hashem al-Sheikh's inaugural video address[65] and Jolani's first address as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's military commander.[66] Religious official Abdurrahim Attoun's (Abu Abdullah al-Shami) rebuttal to Issam al-Barqawi's (Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi) critiques made the same points, in a message aimed squarely at insiders of the international jihadist movement. [67] And Hayat Tahrir al-Sham hit the same notes when making the case for its project to other Syrians on the ground, inside the country. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is premised on "unifying political decision-making, and unifying military decision-making," said veteran Syrian Islamist Rami al-Dallati in February 2017, after he met with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's leadership. "I mean, it's not reasonable for these factions to keep going to meetings as twenty different factions."[68]

Fighting between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham in July 2017 only became clearly decisive – not just another round of limited skirmishes – after Hayat Tahrir al-Sham rejected an early mediation initiative by hardline clerics and declared it would not stop at anything less than hegemonic unification. It dismissed the clerics' initiative as "like those that preceded it," which "can no longer stand, against the intensity of the challenge the battlefield is enduring today, which we cannot face so long as we are divided and fragmented." "The real initiative," Hayat Tahrir al-Sham said, was one that created a single, authoritative body with the power to make peace and war, that could spare the opposition from "international powers' manipulation on the one hand, and, on the other, from infighting and strife that only serves the interest of this criminal regime and its allies."[69]

These themes were echoed in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's triumphal July 23 statement, "The Revolution Continues," after its victory over Ahrar al-Sham.[70] What's more, in addition to the group's public statements, this is what Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's leaders were apparently saying in private before and after its liquidation of Ahrar al-Sham, including in purported radio chatter between its commanders[71] and in a Friday sermon by Sheikh. [72] "The battlefield can no longer bear two groups, and it can no longer bear lots of heads," senior Hayat Tahrir al-Sham figure Myassar al-Jubouri (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani) radioed to a local commander ahead of the

campaign on Ahrar al-Sham.[73] By some accounts, this logic was actually part of how Hayat Tahrir al-Sham indoctrinated and mobilized its troops to fight Ahrar al-Sham. According to one Syrian news site, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham subjected its mobile strike force to months of training and preparation "in parallel with [an effort to] convince [the group's] members of the necessity of taking [sole] possession of the battlefield, of the danger Ahrar posed to their project, and that Ahrar would take action against the Hayah."[74]

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's rivals and enemies accused it of "al-taghallub"[75] – the illegitimate seizure of power by force – a charge that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham vigorously denied.[76] Instead, it did what was necessary to safeguard the movement's survival and further its strategic aims. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham had resolved that a united movement structure had decisively failed and that only hegemonic dominance could possibly promise success and victory. "Sometimes a patient is dear to you, and you love him, but at some point you're forced to shock him so he comes back to life," said the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham source.[77]

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Hegemonic Prospects

Whether Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's gamble pays off remains to be seen. In fact, it may be difficult to judge one way or another, as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's ultimate goals are currently unclear.

The group did what was necessary to keep alive the prospects of victory – but at this point, what is victory to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham? Jabhat al-Nusrah originally espoused Syria-centric goals of toppling the regime and instituting the rule of Islam.[78] By virtue of its allegiance to al-Qaida, however, the group necessarily situated those aims in a context of transnational jihad. In his first interview, Jolani himself said that Jabhat al-Nusrah was a product of global pan-Islamist militancy, even as he later denied plans to launch terror attacks outside Syria.[79] This internationalisation of the Syrian struggle was one of the key early distinctions between Jabhat al-Nusrah and Ahrar al-Sham, whose aims were explicitly limited to Syria.[80]

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham remains rhetorically committed to toppling the Assad regime and installing Islamic rule, but also, more realistically, to preserving the Syrian revolution's gains to date and protecting Syria's Sunnis. [81] Jabhat al-Nusrah/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's strategy over 2016 and 2017 appears to have been largely reactive, adjusting to external threats including possible joint U.S.-Russian targeting of the group, Astana talks, and a mooted Turkish intervention. Now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's current course seems mostly defensive, an attempt to defend the group and its north-west Syria domain. The group's relationship to global jihad is unclear. It openly welcomes foreign militants in its ranks. Its apparent divorce from al-Qaida ostensibly decouples it from al-Qaida's universal war, but strategic differences with al-Qaida's leadership do not necessarily mean Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has revised or moderated its ideology, and the group's real planning and intentions are unknowable.

To whatever end, the group appears to have fairly effectively subordinated other armed factions inside Syria's insurgent north-west. They are now satellites of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – per Krause's frame, nonsignificant. [82] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has also seized the insurgent north's key economic resources and revenue centers, including its electrical grid – it absorbed Ahrar al-Sham's electrical services body[83] – and crossings for internal trade with regime and Kurdish areas.[84] It has taken hold of religious bodies and courts,[85] and it has proceeded with unifying the north-west's civil governance and services bodies as part of its "civil administration" project, now a "Salvation Government" named by the "General Syrian Conference."[86] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's dominance should, in theory, allow it to more efficiently administer these areas, allocate resources, and avoid the sorts of power struggles and infighting that had diverted the insurgency from its fight against the Assad regime.

Hegemony may also give Jolani and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham a freer hand politically. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's critics on the jihadist right alleged after January 2017 that the group had been attempting to open channels to regional states,[87] a charge that its leadership appeared to confirm at the time.[88] As of November 2017, those attempts at external outreach have had some evident success.

The U.S. government has repeatedly stressed that it views Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as an expansion of a designated terrorist organization that will be a continuing target of U.S. counter-terrorism operations.[89] The Turkish government, on the other hand, has effectively done an about-face. With its July 2017 power play, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham likely frustrated a Turkish or Turkish-backed intervention in the north-west that might have displaced it. In the immediate aftermath, Turkish officials said that extremist groups – that is, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – now controlled Syria's north-western interior and promised that border trade will be curtailed.[90] Over the next several months, expectations mounted that Turkey would back opposition rebels in a cross-border attack on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.[91] But when Turkish forces entered Syria's insurgent north-west in October 2017 to establish a "de-escalation zone," they seemingly did so in coordination with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and under the group's auspices.[92] Since then, Turkey has restored full humanitarian and commercial access through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.[93] Turkish official media have also emphasized the return of safe, normal life in the north-west and given favorable coverage to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-backed "Salvation Government."[94] Turkey has apparently acceded to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's dominance in the north-west and is treating the group as a political reality, if only to avoid an uncontrolled collapse of the region and a new refugee influx into Turkey.[95]

It is at this point that some of the definitional questions related to Krause's thesis become particularly salient. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has blurred the line between its dual national and transnational characters. For example, in its first statement after defeating Ahrar al-Sham, the group stressed, "We were and are part of the Syrian revolution."[96] Meanwhile, one of its founding principles was a refusal to bargain over the status of jihadist foreign fighters, whom it continues to harbor in its ranks.[97] The real orientation of the group seems impossible to know from the outside. In any case, however, what is likely more important in predictive terms than the group's objective character is the international community's continued insistence that it is an extension of a proscribed terrorist organisation.[98]

Krause's theory seems to successfully describe the internal group dynamics of Syria's north-western insurgency, even when the hegemonic group – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – is non-national, or at least perceived as such. Yet the theory may not usefully predict movement outcomes in a case where a national movement has been commandeered by a transnational jihadist organisation. The al-Qaida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham may be so distinct from other Syrian armed groups and so politically toxic that Krause's theory does not hold.

Krause poses a four-tiered ordinal scale for national movement success, in which:

> "The achievement of a new state whose territory is controlled by the movement and recognized as such by the United Nations or League of Nations is coded as 'total success.' Gaining semi-sovereign control of territory for the future state with proto-state institutions that are recognized by the enemy state that previously controlled the territory is coded as 'moderate success.' Recognition as a legitimate national movement by the United Nations or League of Nations, or agreeing to increased power-sharing in joint institutions is coded as 'limited success.' A lack of such gains in territory, institutions, or recognition is coded as 'failure.'"[99]

It is unclear what Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has achieved, by this metric. The group has obliged Turkey to deal with it and, at least implicitly, recognise it. But it is unlikely to ever earn the recognition of either the Assad regime or the broader international community. Nor is that something in which the group is presumably interested – as a jihadist group, it does not recognise the legitimacy of the international community's states and institutions. A political relationship with Turkey has clear practical utility in ensuring the group and the movement's survival, but it is unclear how much the group wants or needs some broader normalisation. Krause's progression of success and effectiveness may not hold in the case of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or jihadist-led movements generally.

In this instance, the set of comparable cases may not include the Zionist movement and the Algerian national movement, which Krause examined. The relevant parallel may actually be with Algeria's 1991-2002 Islamist insurgency and Iraq's post-2003 insurgencies, in which Algeria's Islamic Fighting Group and, in Iraq, the various iterations of Islamic State imposed hegemonic unipolarity over local insurgencies. It neither of these instances did hegemony lead to movement success.[100] This suggests the need for an expansion or a modification of

Krause's theory that grapples with the outcomes of Islamist and transnational jihadist insurgencies and suggests how they can succeed, if at all.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Syria's north-western insurgency, then, might serve as a test case of the broader applicability of Krause's Movement Structure Theory and of what could be termed "jihadist exceptionalism." Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's hegemonic project appears to have been aimed not just at factional dominance and self-preservation, but at ensuring the strategic victory of Syria's revolutionary movement. What happens next will tell us how jihadist that hegemon can be and still achieve hegemonic success.

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Notes

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[4] "Tafrigh al-Liqa al-Souti al-Awwal ma' al-Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Jolani (Transcript of First Audio Interview with Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Jolani)," *Research Services Group*, November 5, 2014; URL: http://www.rsgleb.org/article.php?id=638&cid=11&catidval=0.

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[6] Hussam al-Atrash, collected tweets (titled "The Mergers") from Twitter account @hosamatrash (since suspended), *JustPaste.it*, January 30, 2017; URL: https://justpaste.it/12ybv. Atrash's "The Mergers" is useful in part because it serves as a defense and justification of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as a project, as well as of Nour al-Din al-Zinki's participation in it. Since Nour al-Din al-Zinki's July 2017 split with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Atrash has adopted a position that is much more critical of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. See also Hussam al-Shaf'i (Abu Ammar al-Shami), collected tweets from Twitter account @Qasioun99 (since removed), *JustPaste.it,* January 30, 2017 URL: https://justpaste.it/qxoq. For an account of the negotiations that is unfriendly to Jabhat al-Nusrah, see Muzamjer al-Sham (@saleelalmajd1), "Taghridat Muzamjer al-Sham @saleelalmajd1 bi-Unwan #Mubadirat_Dirar (Muzamjer al-Sham's Tweets Titled #Initiative_of_Harm)," *JustPaste.it,* January 27, 2016; URL: https://justpaste.it/qxi8.

[7] Josh Rogin, "Obama's Syria plan teams up American and Russian forces," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2017; URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/obamas-syria-plan-teams-up-american-and-russian-forces/2016/07/13/8d7777cc-4935-11e6-acbc-4d4870a079da_story.html?utm_term=.4eb6ef17e03d.

[8] Karen DeYoung, "U.S., Russia reach deal on cease-fire in Syria," *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016; URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-foreign-minister-lavrov-says-he-was-thinking-of-calling-it-a-day-on-syria-talks-with-the-united-states/2016/09/09/f37ca320-75ff-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html?utm_term=.307cc00e06cd.

[9] "New video message from Jabhat Fataḥ al-Shām's Abū Muḥammad al-Jawlānī: 'Announcing Its Formation,'" Jihadology, July 28, 2016; URL: http://jihadology.net/2016/07/28/new-video-message-from-jabhat-fata%E1%B8%A5-al-shams-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-announcing-its-formation/; Sam Heller, "Al Qaeda Quits Syria in Name Only," *The Century Foundation*, July 29, 2017; URL: https://tcf.org/content/commentary/al-qaeda-quits-syria-name/.

[10] "Syrian Rebel Group On Ending The Siege In Aleppo," *YouTube*, user "Sky News," August 18, 2016; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG7VOuGYEF0.

[11] For example, see Abu Salah Tahhan (@Abo_Saleh_4), *Twitter,* July 30, 2016; URL: https://twitter.com/Abo_Saleh_4/status/759277867918295040.

[12] Atrash, "The Mergers."

[13] See, for example, Syrian journalist Moussa al-Omar's comment in his December 29, 2016, video message: "Any merger, guys, any unification whose core isn't two factions – the first faction, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, 16,000 fighters, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, 7,000 fighters – unless its core is this pillar on the right, and this pillar on the left, it's a 'WhatsApp' alliance or merger. It doesn't have effective power on the ground." Moussa al-Omar, *Facebook,* December 29, 2016; URL: https://www.facebook.com/alomarMousa/videos/652485564960153.

[14] Sam Heller, "Aleppo's Bitter Lessons," *The Century Foundation*, January 27, 2017; URL: https://tcf.org/content/report/aleppos-bitter-lessons/.

[15] Ibid.; informed source inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham who spoke on condition of anonymity, author's interview, messaging app, August 2017.

[16] For example, "Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Strike against Al-Qaeda Leader," *U.S. Department of Defense,* October 3, 2016; URL: https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/962767/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-on-strike-against-al-qaeda-lea/; "Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Strike against Al-Qaeda Leader," *U.S. Department of Defense,* November 22, 2016; URL:https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1011551/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-on-strike-against-al-qaeda-lea/.

[17]Aron Lund, "Staring Into Syria's Diplomatic Fog," *The Century Foundation,* January 6, 2017; URL: https://tcf.org/content/commentary/staring-syrias-diplomatic-fog/.

[18] Hussam al-Shaf'i (@hsam_sh), *Twitter*, January 1, 2017, Twitter account removed but tweets archived by author; Atrash, "The Mergers."

[19] "Da'iyyah Sa'oudi Muqrib min Fateh al-Sham Yush'il Ghadab Qiyyadat Ahrar al-Sham (Saudi Preacher Close to Fateh al-Sham Sparks Anger of Ahrar al-Sham Leadership*),"* al-Dorar, December 27, 2016 ; URL: http://eldorar.com/node/107098; Hussam Tarsha (@Hosam_Tarsha), *Twitter*, December 27, 2016; URL: https://twitter.com/Hosam_Tarsha/status/813500551258370048.

[20] "Da'iyyah Sa'oudi Muqrib min Fateh al-Sham Yush'il Ghadab Qiyyadat Ahrar al-Sham,*"* al-Dorar; Atrash, "The Mergers."

[21] Atrash, "The Mergers."

[22] "Daqaiq ma' al-Sheikh Hussam Abu Bakr haul Mashawurat al-Indimaj bein al-Fasail alati Shahad Ba'ad Majriyyatiha (Minutes with Sheikh Hussam Abu Bakr Regarding Merger Discussions Between the Factions, Some of Which He Witnessed)," *YouTube*, user "Abu al-Majd al-Shami," January 2, 2017 ; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-lrG3VNXWI; Aqil Hussein, "'Majlis Qiyadat al-Thourah' al-Souriyyah… Ka-Badil li-Mashari' al-Indimaj (Syrian 'Revolutionary Command Council'…. As an Alternative to Merger Projects)," *al-Mudun*, December 28, 2016; URL: https://goo.gl/PMWSK7.

[23] "Fatwa li-Shakhsiyyat Souriyyah wa-Masriyyah wa-Sa'oudiyyah bi-Khusous Indimaj al-Fasail Tush'il Jadalan Kabiran (Fatwa by Syrian, Egyptian, and Saudi Figures Regarding Factional Merger Ignites Serious Controversy)," *al-Dorar*, December 31, 2017 ; URL: http://eldorar.com/node/107280.

[24] Atrash, "The Mergers."

[25] "Muzahirat Sha'biyyah fi Addat Manatiq Souriyyah Tutalib bil-Tawahhud wa-Tunaddid bi-Khurouqat al-Nizam lil-Hudnah (Popular Protests in Numerous Parts of Syria Demand Unity and Condemn Regime's Ceasefire Violations)," *Miraah Souriyyah al-Ikhbari*, January 13, 2017; URL: https://goo.gl/seRUvm.

[26] Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Airstrike Kills More Than 100 Qaeda Fighters in Syria," *New York Times*, January 20, 2017; URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/world/middleeast/us-airstrike-al-qaeda-syria.html.

[27] Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "First Day of Syria Peace Talks Quickly Descends Into Quarreling," *New York Times*, January 23, 2017; URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/world/middleeast/syria-astana-talks-russia-turkey.html.

[28] Sam Heller, "Syria's Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission," *The Century Foundation*, March 1, 2017; URL: https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syrias-former-al-qaeda-affiliate-leading-rebels-suicide-mission/.

[29] "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham Tusdir Awwal Ta'liq mundhu al-Qital ma' Jeish al-Mujahideen wa-Tad'ou li-Kayyan Sunni (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham Issues Its First Comment Since Fighting with Jeish al-Mujahideen, Calls for Sunni Entity)," *al-Dorar,* January 24, 2017; URL: http://eldorar.com/node/108181; Sam Heller, "Syria's Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission."

[30] "Takidan Lima Nasharathu al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah… Addat Fasail Abraziha Fateh al-Sham wal-Zinki Yu'linun al-Indimaj

(Confirming What al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah Published: Several Factions, Most Prominently Fateh al-Sham and al-Zinki, Announce [Their] Merger),” *al-Dorar,* January 28, 2017; URL: http://eldorar.com/node/108316. Nominally independent hardline clerics also followed and joined the newly announced group. See “Al-Muheisini Yunhi ‘Istiqlaliyyatuh’ wa-Yandhamm li-Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Muhesini Ends His ‘Independence’ and Joins Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*),” al-Dorar,* January 28, 2017; URL: http://eldorar.com/node/108320.

[31] Harakat Ahrar al-Sham (@AhrarAl_Sham), *Twitter*, January 27, 2017 ; URL: https://twitter.com/AhrarAl_Sham/status/825016262317244421.

[32] Lt. Col. Abu Bakr (@bbakr70), *Twitter*, January 26, 2017 ; URL: https://twitter.com/BBakr70/status/824413496859365376; Harakat Ahrar al-Sham (@AhrarAl_Sham), *Twitter,* January 26, 2017 ; URL: https://twitter.com/AhrarAl_Sham/status/824503397273468928.

[33] Harakat Ahrar al-Sham (@AhrarAl-Sham), *Twitter*, February 5, 2017; URL: https://twitter.com/AhrarAl_Sham/status/828328507528851462.

[34] Aron Lund, “The Jihadi Spiral,” *Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center,* February 8, 2017; URL: http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/67911?lang=en. Heller, “Syria’s Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission.”

[35] “New video message from Hayy’at Taḥrīr al-Shām: ‘Learn About Hayy’at Taḥrīr al-Shām,’” *Jihadology,* February 14, 2017 ; URL: http://jihadology.net/2017/02/14/new-video-message-from-hayyat-ta%E1%B8%A5rir-al-sham-learn-about-hayyat-ta%E1%B8%A5rir-al-sham/.

[36] “Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic,” *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, May 6, 2017; URL: http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB.

[37] Ahmed Mourad, “Al-Naql wal-Kahraba: Souwar Jadidah lil-Fouda fi Idlib (Transportation and Electricity: New Sides of the Chaos in Idlib),” *al-Mudun,* June 13, 2017; URL: https://goo.gl/1QqF3N; Mourad Abduljalil, “Harb al-Kahraba fi Idlib… al-Nizam Yuwaffirha wal-Hayah wal-Ahrar Yaqta’unuha (The Electricity War in Idlib… The Regime Provides It, and the Hayah and Ahrar Cut It),” *Enab Baladi*, June 18, 2017; URL: https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/156707. For background on the factions’ service competition, see Sam Heller, “Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib,” *The Century Foundation,* November 29, 2016; URL: https://tcf.org/content/report/keeping-lights-rebel-idlib/.

[38] “Ahrar al-Sham Tatabanna Rasmiyyan Rafa’ Alam al-Thourah al-Souriyyah Sha’aran Laha (Ahrar al-Sham Officially Adopts Flag of Syrian Revolution as [One of] Its Symbols),” June 22, 2017; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/301; “Ahrar al-Sham Tu’tazim Itlaq Mubadirat Idarah Muwahhadah lil-Shimal al-Souri (Ahrar al-Sham Intends to Launch Unified Administration Initiative for Syrian North),” July 15, 2017 ; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/663; Hussam Tarsha, “Al-Ta’qib ala Bayyan ‘Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’ houl Tasrihat al-Mutahaddith bi-Ism al-Hukoumah al-Turkiyyah (Comment on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s Statement Regarding the Statements of the Turkish Government’s Spokesman),” *JustPaste.it,* June 26, 2017; URL: https://justpaste.it/189hm.

[39] Sam Heller (@AbuJamajem), Twitter, May 9, 2017 ; URL: https://twitter.com/AbuJamajem/status/862043270632878082; “‘Tahrir al-Sham’ Tuwaddih Mawqifaha min Dukhoul al-Jeish al-Turki li-Idlib (Tahrir al-Sham Clarifies Its Position on the Turkish Military Entering Idlib),” *Orient News*, June 26, 2017; URL: https://goo.gl/UNsjrV; “Ahrar al-Sham: Sanuridd bi-Kull Hazm ala Ayy Tahdid li-Maqarratna wa-Mawaqi’na al-Istratijiyyah (Ahrar al-Sham: We Will Respond with All Determination to Any Threat to Our Bases and Strategic Positions),” *al-Dorar,* July 7, 2017; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/524; “Hall Yuaddi Ihtimal ‘al-Tadakhul al-Turki’ ila Muwajihat Askariyyah bein Fasail al-Shimal al-Souri? (Is the Possibility of Turkish Intervention Leading to a Military Confrontation Between North Syria’s Factions?),” *al-Dorar,* July 7, 2017 ; URL: http://aldorars.com/week_issues/7; “Ahrar al-Sham: Khayyarna al-Awwal al-Ihtikam lil-Shara’ ma’ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Ahrar al-Sham: Our First Choice Is Resort to Religious Law with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham),” July 15, 2017; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/651. For the Turkish official statement that fueled much of the speculation about Turkish intervention, see “Turkey and Russia to deploy in Syria’s Idlib: Erdogan spokesman,” *Reuters*, June 22, 2017; URL: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-russia-idUSKBN19D1WI.

[40] Manhal Barish, “Bi-Hadaf al-Seitarah ala al-Hudoud wa-Jabal al-Zawiyyah: Saddam Washik bein ‘al-Qaida’ wa-‘Ahrar al-Sham’ (With the Goal of Seizing the Borders and Jabal al-Zawiyyah: An Imminent Clash between al-Qaida and Ahrar al-Sham),” *al-Quds al-Araby*, July 15, 2017; URL: http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=754331.

[41] Ahmad Abazeid, “Keif Inharet Harakat Ahrar al-Sham? (How Did Ahrar al-Sham Collapse*?)” Toran Center, August 9, 2017; URL: https://goo.gl/swkaNe.*

[42] “Al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah Tahsal ala Nuskhah Maktoubah lil-Ittifaq al-Jadid bein Ahrar al-Sham wa-Tahrir al-Sham (al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah Obtains Written Copy of New Agreement Between Ahrar al-Sham and Tahrir al-Sham),” *al-Dorar*, 23 July 2017; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/779.

[43] See Hussam Ibrahim Atrash (@hossamalatrash1), *Twitter,* July 20, 2017; URL: https://twitter.com/hossamalatrash1/status/887996537527250944. Abdullah al-Muheisini, a member of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s Majlis Shar’i (Religious-Legal Council),

also distanced himself from a fatwa issued by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham permitting its fight against Ahrar al-Sham, denying that the council was consulted. "'Al-Muheisini' Yanfi Ilmuh bi-Bayyan Asdarethu 'Hayat Tahrir al-Sham' bi-Ism al-Majlis al-Shar'i (Muheisini Denies Knowledge of Statement Issued by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Majlis Shar'i's Name)," *al-Dorar,* July 19, 2017 ; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/723.

[44] "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: La Budd min Taslim al-Manatiq al-Muharrarah li-Idarah Madaniyyah (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: The Liberated Areas Must Be Handed to a Civil Administration)," *al-Dorar*, July 23, 2017 ; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/776.

[45] "Awwal Fasil Askari Yu'lin Tayiduh li-Mubadirat Tahrir al-Sham al-Khassah bi-Tashkil Idarah Madaniyyah (First Military Faction Announces Its Support for Tahrir al-Sham's Initiative to Form a Civil Administration)," *al-Dorar*, July 24, 2017; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/790.

[46] Krause, *Rebel Power*, pp.17-35.

[47] Ibid., p.18.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., pp.18-19.

[50] Ibid. pp.22-24.

[51] Other negative behaviors Krause identifies include outbidding, chain-ganging, and spoiling. Ibid. 23-4, 29-30.

[52] Ibid., pp. 27-28.

[53] Ibid., p. 27.

[54] Ibid., p. 28.

[55] Ibid., p. 20.

[56] Ibid., pp. 25-30.

[57] Ibid., pp. 24, 30.

[58] Ibid., pp. 30-32.

[59] Krause defines national movements as "distinct in that their social solidarity is based on national identity and their common purpose is political autonomy. In other words, (1) all members of national movements perceive themselves as part of a collective nation that share a common history, language, culture, religion, and/ or ethnicity with ties to a particular piece of territory, and (2) national movements launch a sustained effort to achieve political autonomy to protect the nation and its people." Ibid., 3.

[60] Ibid., pp.195-196.

[61] Krause measures significance in terms of numerical membership, wealth, and popular support. Ibid., p. 18.

[62] See Sam Heller, "The Home of Syria's Only Real Rebels," *The Daily Beast,* June 17, 2016; URL: http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-home-of-syrias-only-real-rebels; Heller, "Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib"; Ibrahim al-Assil, "Al-Qaeda Affiliate and Ahrar al-Sham Compete for Control in Idlib," Middle East Institute, June 29, 2017; URL: http://www.mei.edu/content/article/al-qaeda-affiliate-and-ahrar-al-sham-compete-control-idlib. In his account, Nour al-Din al-Zinki's Atrash says other factions deferred to both Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusrah/Fateh al-Sham during merger negotiations. "The factions were saying, 'Let Ahrar and Fateh al-Sham agree, and we'll follow," he writes. At another point, he says, "All the factions on the battlefield at that time stood behind Ahrar's decision, even the factions some thought Jolani had put under his thumb, like [Liwa] al-Haqq, Jeish al-Sunnah, and Ajnad al-Sham." Atrash, "The Mergers." Krause also raises the question of how well groups can themselves read their movement's hierarchy and groups' relative significance. Krause, *Rebel Power*, p. 192.

[63] Informed source inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, August 2017.

[64] "Al-Jolani: Amrika wa-Russiya Mutawatiatan ma' Nizam al-Assad (Jolani: America and Russia Are Complicit with the Assad Regime)," Liqa Khass (Special Meeting), *Al Jazeera,* September 18, 2016; URL: https://goo.gl/QjnH5w.

[65] Sheikh said the group aimed "to unify the Syrian battlefield in a single entity and under a unified command that leads the military and political action of the Syrian revolution such that it realizes its goals of toppling this criminal regime," adding, "The page of al-Sham won't be turned in negotiation sessions or in conferences that crown this butcher [Assad]." "New video message from Hayy'at Taḥrīr al-Shām's Hishām al-Shaykh: 'First Words,'" *Jihadology*, February 9, 2017; URL: http://jihadology.net/2017/02/09/new-video-mesaage-from-hayyat-ta%E1%B8%A5rir-al-shams-hisham-al-shaykh-first-words/.

[66] "May this action be a lesson to some of these defeatist politicians in Geneva, and before it Astana," Jolani said, "a lesson that

wipes away some of the shame that those reckless ones attached to the people of Sham. It's time for those reckless ones to leave this war to those it belongs to, and to stand aside." He said these political representatives were being manipulated by foreign powers. *Al-Dorar*, "Al-Jolani: Amaliyyat Homs Dars li-Ba'ad al-Siyassiyin al-Munhazimin fi Jineif wa-Asitana (Jolani: Homs Operation a Lesson to Some of These Defeatist Politicians in Geneva and Astana)," 28 February 2017; URL: http://eldorar.com/node/109240.

[67] Attoun said Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's founding principles included "the establishment of a balanced relationship with influential parties (governmental or otherwise), limited to the extent possible, and without being subordinate to those countries. Thus, we don't provoke their aggression or appeal to them for assistance, and we have our totally independent personality, and our decision-making is independent and internal… without our jihad turning into the service of their interests." Abdurrahim Attoun (Abu Abdullah al-Shami), *JustPaste.it,* February 10, 2017 ; URL: https://justpaste.it/13ied.

[68] Heller, "Syria's Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission."

[69] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Tarfud al-Muwafaqah ala 'Mubadarat al-Mashayikh' wa-Tutalib bi-'Inha Halat al-Tasharzum' (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Refuses to Agree to 'the Sheikhs' Initiative' and Demands 'the End of This State of Fragmentation'), *al-Dorar,* July 20, 2017; URL: http://aldorars.com/news/734.

[70] "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: La Budd min Taslim al-Manatiq al-Muharrarah li-Idarah Madaniyyah," *al-Dorar.*

[71] The recording of radio chatter was presumably recorded and leaked by a hostile state actor, but its authenticity seems not to be in dispute. "Tasribat Kashf al-Haqiqah – al-Tasrib al-Thani – Abu Mariya al-Qahtani (Leaks to Reveal the Truth – the Second Leak – Abu Mariya al-Qahtani)," *YouTube*, August 12, 2017; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC-o77m6CRI.

[72] In amateur footage of his July 28, 2017, sermon, Sheikh said that the insurgency's factions could no longer remain as fragmented pieces. "Abu Jaber al-Sheikh 'Ummam al-Duniya Takalabet ala "Jama'at al-Dawla," wa-Ahrar al-Sham Man Badaat bil-I'tida al-Akhir (Abu Jaber al-Sheikh: The Nations of the World Pounced on 'the State Group,' Ahrar al-Sham Is the One That Started This Last Aggression*),*" *Shabakat Sham al-Ikhbariyyah*, July 29, 2017; URL: https://goo.gl/s1zqm7.

[73] "Tasribat Kashf al-Haqiqah – al-Tasrib al-Thani – Abu Mariya al-Qahtani," *YouTube.*

[74] "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Khalaqat Jami' al-Zurouf Qabl Tawjih al-Darbah al-Qadiyyah li-'Ahrar al-Sham'.. Fa-Maza Fa'alet..? (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Created All the Conditions Before Directing the Decisive Blow at Ahrar al-Sham… So What Did It Do?)," *Shabakat Sham al-Ikhbariyyah*, July 22, 2017; URL: https://goo.gl/nBLzU5.

[75] Labib al-Nahhas (@LabibAlNahhas*), Twitter,* December 31, 2016; URL: https://twitter.com/LabibAlNahhas/status/815210531330068480; Saleh al-Hamawi, "Al-Taghallub al-Na'im (Soft al-Taghallub)," *Syria Noor*, February 20, 2017; URL: http://syrianoor.net/revto/22144; "Shubuhat al-Taghallub wa-Tatbiq Shari'at al-Ghab (The Errors of al-Taghallub and the Implementation of the Law of the Jungle)," *Ahrar al-Sham*, January 28, 2017; URL: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3awjMQV6xnQUnp3SHRSY1BHSk0/view. After the announcement of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, U.S. Special Envoy Michael Ratney issued a statement clarifying that the U.S. government considers Hayat Tahrir al-Sham an expansion of Jabhat al-Nusrah and actually saying that the approach of Jolani and those around him is "al-taghallub." U.S. Embassy Syria (@USEmbassySyria), *Twitter,* March 11, 2017; URL: https://twitter.com/USEmbassySyria/status/840540398602858499.

[76] See Attoun, *JustPaste.it*, 2017; Atrash, "The Mergers."

[77] Informed source inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham who spoke on condition of anonymity, author's interview, *Telegram*, August 2017.

[78] "Jabhat al-Nusrah – Manhajuna wa-'Aqidatuna ma' al-Duktour al-Sheikh Sami al-Oreidi (Jabhat al-Nusrah – Our Program and Creed, with Doctor and Sheikh Sami al-Oreidi)," originally published October 21, 2013; URL: https://archive.org/details/MNH_3KE_SAM.

[79] "Abu Muhammad al-Jolani… Al-Nusrah wa-Mustaqbal Souriyya (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani… Nusrah and Syria's Future)," Liqa al-Youm (Today's Meeting*), Al Jazeera,* December 19, 2017 ; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIr1HoHJlQA; "Al-Jolani: Hizb Ullah Zail.. Wa-Ladeina Thaar ma al-Alawiyyin (Jolani: Hizbullah Is Transient… And We Have a Vendetta with Alawites)," Bila Hudoud (Without Boundaries*), Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2015; URL: https://goo.gl/2vMRMo.

[80] Aron Lund, "Major salafi faction criticizes Jabhat al-Nosra," *Syria Comment,* May 4, 2013 ; URL: http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/major-salafi-faction-criticizes-jabhat-al-nosra/. Ahrar al-Sham also took a more generally inclusive, populist line than Jabhat al-Nusrah. See Heller, "Ahrar al-Sham's Revisionist Jihadism."

[81] For example, see "New video message from Hayy'at Taḥrīr al-Shām's Hishām al-Shaykh: 'First Words,'" *Jihadology*.

[82] See the first video address of new Ahrar al-Sham Hassan Soufan (Abu al-Baraa), in which he cannot bring himself to blame Hayat Tahrir al-Sham for Ahrar al-Sham's defeat and rally his faction against it. "Kalimah Mariyyah lil-Qaid al-Amm li-Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah 'Hassan Soufan,'" *YouTube*, user "Baladi-News Network," August 7, 2017; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40YZLfuBA-0.

[83] Sam Heller (@AbuJamajem), *Twitter,* July 29, 2017 ; URL: https://twitter.com/AbuJamajem/status/891318577013411841.

[84] Manhal Barish, "'Jabhat al-Nusrah' al-Rabih al-Wahid min Waqf al-Da'am al-Insani wal-Askari (Jabhat al-Nusrah the Lone Winner from Halt in Humanitarian and Military Support)," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 29, 2017; URL: http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=762301.

[85] Ussal-Sara'fil-Sham (@asseraaalsham*), Twitter*, July 25, 2017; URL: https://twitter.com/asseraaalsham/status/889817587651162112; "Tahrir al-Sham Tuseitar ala Mahkamat Ma'arat al-Nu'man wa-Tujbir Raisaha alal-Istiqalah… wa-Ahali al-Madinah Yantafidun Rafdan li-Heimanat al-Heiah (Tahrir al-Sham Takes Over the Ma'arat al-Nu'man Court and Forces Its Head to Resign… City Residents Rise Up to Reject the Hayah's Dominance)," *Shabakat Sham al-Ikhbariyyah*, July 31, 2017; URL: https://goo.gl/LTakgi.

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[88] Attoun, *JustPaste.it*, 2017.

[89] U.S. Embassy Syria, Twitter, March 11, 2017; U.S. Embassy Syria (@USEmbassySyria), *Twitter,* August 6, 2017; URL: https://twitter.com/USEmbassySyria/status/892725901787619328.

[90] "Turkey takes extra measures on Syria border over Idlib," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 11, 2017; URL: http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-takes-extra-measures-on-syria-border-over-idlib-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=116634&NewsCatID=341.

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[96] "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: La Budd min Taslim al-Manatiq al-Muharrarah li-Idarah Madaniyyah," *al-Dorar*.

[97] "New video message from Hayy'at Taḥrīr al-Shām: 'Learn About Hayy'at Taḥrīr al-Shām,'" *Jihadology*.

[98] For example, see U.S. Embassy Syria, *Twitter*, March 11, 2017.

[99] Krause, *Rebel Power*, p.36.

[100] This is a comparison that some have drawn explicitly, as with the U.S. Special Envoy Michael Ratney's comparison of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to Iraq's Mujahideen Shura Council, the predecessor to the Islamic State. See U.S. Embassy Syria, *Twitter,* March 11, 2017.

Downplaying Jihad in Jordan's Educational Curriculum, 2013-2017

by Kirk H. Sowell

Abstract

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is often thought of as a relatively liberal Muslim country - the quintessential "moderate Arab Muslim ally". However, Jordan has paradoxically made a disproportionate contribution to the phenomenon of modern Islamist terrorism, both in terms of leading figures and foot soldiers. On a per capita basis, Jordan has made a very strong contribution to terrorist groups such as al-Qaida and Islamic State. Jordan is also a country which from its foundation has had a weak sense of identity. This article takes as its premise that Jordan's own heavily Islamic, quasi-jihadist education system has aggravated the identity problem, making Jordan more vulnerable to recruitment. It examines three versions of the core curriculum Islamic studies textbook used in universities to both provide a baseline for how Islam is conceived and show that Jordanian authorities recognised that this was a problem. The textbook used up to 2014-2015 set forth a classical Islamic view of the role of the state and jihad as a means of expanding Islamic rule, a view much closer to the world view of al-Qaida than the modern Jordanian state. A new 2015-2016 edition made substantial changes, de-emphasizing jihadist-friendly teachings. A 2017-2018 edition has completed the transformation, finally bringing the university Islamic curriculum in line with the "tolerant, moderate" vision Jordan's leaders espouse.

Keywords: Curriculum, Education, Jihad, Jordan, Salafi-jihadism, Terrorism

Introduction

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan enjoys an awkward distinction of being both a strategic ally of the United States with close relations with other Western countries and yet also a major contributor to the global Salafi-Jihadist movements. While Jordan's leaders consistently attribute the country's terrorism problems to external forces or purely economic causes, the disproportion of its contribution to jihadist recruitment makes such claims suspect.

With a citizen population of 6.7 million, Jordan makes up only about one-half of one percent of the Muslim world and just over two percent of all Arab Muslims. Yet at the leadership level, any list of the top dozen global jihadist leaders over the last generation would almost certainly include four Jordanians: Abdullah Azzam, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, and Maqdisi's infamous pupil, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Similarly, an estimated 3,000-4,000 Jordanians had traveled to fight during the war in Syria by 2016, despite intense security monitoring that has meant many are arrested before they can leave.[1] On a per capita basis, Jordan appears to be the leading Arab and Muslim exporter of foreign jihadists.[2]

One straightforward explanation for this is that since the beginning of the 1980s, Jordan has had an energetic and well-organized traditionalist Salafist movement.[3] While traditional Salafism is politically at opposite poles from a Salafi-Jihadist group like al-Qaida, the theological worldviews of the two on issues like the role of the state, foreign relations with non-Muslims and jihad largely overlap, and many Salafi-Jihadists begin with exposure to ordinary Salafism. Yet Jordan is not alone in having a Salafist movement from which these groups can recruit, so this explanation alone is insufficient to account for Jordan's disproportionate contribution.

Jordanians weak sense of national identity is also an important factor. Created by Britain in the early 20th century in a territory where there had not before been a unitary state, Jordan's sense of national identity was weak from the beginning. As Jordan grew and developed over the decades, by the time the transnational Islamic ideology known as Salafi-Jihadism arose in Jordan – following Maqdisi's return from Kuwait in 1992[4] – the country already had a well-developed identity problem. The Muslim Brotherhood was much closer to the regime during Jordan's early years than more recently, and Jordan's education system became heavily

Islamist (but not Salafist), even though Jordan was never an Islamic state, and this only reinforced the country's identity quandary. An April 2017 article in the *CTC Sentinel* addressed this issue, noting not only deprivation of education but also the nature of the Islamic education. As the authors noted:[5]

[Researchers have found] that in many societies, the impetus for radicalization was linked to concrete problems felt by youths, including economic deprivation, social disenchantment, and most of all, lack of political voice and identity…. Less understood to the outside world, though, is how the antiquated curricula is saturated with Islamic symbolism rather than Jordanian nationhood and civic identity… expressions of injustice, helplessness, and powerlessness are symptomatic of the weak attachment Jordanian youths have with their state and society. At the heart of the problem lies the absence of any robust sense of Jordanian nationalism or national identity.

Two policies have been put in place since 2014 which show the monarchy must have become convinced that it needed to act to bridge the chasm between the country's cultural and religious orientation and its modern condition. One was an effort to establish more uniform control over mosque sermons throughout the kingdom, creating a "unified sermon" system and excluding jihadist-friendly imams from mosques.[6] A second policy change was education reform, which among other changes resulted in a substantial reduction in the role of Islam in education, with changes to secondary education becoming the main focus of public controversy in 2016.[7] Some study of both of these policies would further help illuminate Jordan's counter-jihadism policies.

A further reform, which is the focus of this article, has involved dramatic changes in the core curriculum Islamic studies text used in Jordan's universities, transforming a curriculum immersed in what might be called "soft jihadism" – consistent with historical conceptions of jihad and the Islamic state – to a vision of Islam more in line with the modern Jordanian state. The second part of this article will look at the 2013 edition of the *Islamic Culture* textbook and shows that its emphasis on the concept of the Islamic state, jihad as a means of spreading Islam and various rules adopted during Islam's early centuries meant that it cultivated a worldview which, though in some ways distant from the Salafi-Jihadist worldview, was much closer to the ideology of al-Qaida than to that of the Hashemite monarchy, making a transition from mainstream Islam to jihadism easier.

 The third part of this article continues the case study by examining new editions of the Islamic studies textbook published in 2015 and 2017; these are so dramatically revised that they may be taken as an admission of the problem. The 2015 edition makes broad-based changes, deleting many passages inconsistent with modern Jordanian society and policy. It also dramatically recasts interpretations of jihad, reframing the doctrine as entirely focused on self-defense and emphasising minority rights. The 2017 edition completes this transformation, rendering an interpretation of Islam devoid of classical definitions of jihad and the role of the state and more directly endeavoring to counter Salafi-Jihadist thinking. Only with this new version, published in September 2017, does Jordan's university curriculum now align with the vision of Islam its leaders espouse.

While Jordanian officials have never expressly acknowledged that their Islamic education was responsible for Jordan's contribution to global jihadism, the revisions have been consciously made. It is especially notable that the academic at the University of Jordan's Sharia College who oversaw the revisions, Dr. Sharaf al-Qada, is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood Society, a splinter group from the Muslim Brotherhood which many Islamists view as a regime front. The group's 2015 founding, according to Brotherhood Shura Council member Riyadh al-Adhayaleh, was "a decision by the government to form a new group, [which] does not mean anything to the Brotherhood, simply a coup created by the state."[8] Comments by Qada from an interview are included in part three of this article.

The dramatic changes have not been discussed publicly. Jordan University President Azmi al-Muhafatha discussed it openly only in general terms in October 2016, saying that in terms of fighting "extremism," the Islamic Culture curriculum was expected to undergo changes.[9] Examining whether these reforms and others at the pre-university level have an impact will only be measurable in the years ahead.

Teaching Islam: A University Curriculum Case Study

Up through the 2014-2015 school year, the standard Islamic studies text across Jordanian universities for their core curriculum was a textbook entitled *Islamic Culture & Modern Issues*.[10] The book and its successors were produced by the Sharia College at the University of Jordan, but were used throughout the country. Except for students who took Islamic law (*sharia*) as a course of study, it was the only Islamic studies textbook which the typical student was likely to read. Whether the class is required or elective depends on the university. Jordanian universities have a very narrow core; at the country's flagship institution, the University of Jordan, only four classes are mandatory: Arabic, English, Civics and (for males) Military Education.[11]

In contrast to the information environment defined by Jordan's media as well as core curriculum materials dealing with Jordanian history and civics, to enter into that of *Islamic Culture* was to enter a world in which modern Jordan did not exist. While Jordan's Hashemite monarchy claims descent from Islam's founder, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as such is absent. Even when discussing the concept of terrorism, where the text focused heavily on Israel as a contemporary manifestation of terrorism, the 2004 "Amman Message," Jordan's primary statement with other Muslim nations against terrorism, only appeared in a later edition.

Instead, *Islamic Culture* presented a world in which public affairs were governed by an Islamic state, a state in which Islamic rather than secular legal codes prevail, a state ruled not by a dynastic monarchy but by a figure appointed by religious scholars who was obligated to follow their dictates. It was a state which wages jihad to spread the rule of Islam, and while respectful of the religious freedoms of minorities under Muslim rule, imposes a special tax on non-Muslim subjects, who are not citizens of the state but *dhimmi* in the classical Islamic sense – subordinate subjects rather than equal citizens.

Given the contemporary focus on a terrorist group which calls itself the Islamic State (IS), it is necessary to note that the phrase "Islamic State" wherever it appears in this article does not refer to this group. Instead "the Islamic state" is a mainstream Islamic concept referring to the political entity which Islamic tradition states Muhammad founded after his migration to the Arabian city of Medina in 622. The term is used so commonly that any Muslim in Jordan with even a slight degree of Islamic education will be familiar with it. What makes this important is that embedding the concept in the education system makes it an easy reference point for Islamist movements competing with a state like Jordan, which is very clearly not an Islamic state.

The textbook's 2013 edition contained six units: introduction, sources and key elements (the Quran, Hadith, Arabic language, Islamic history), aspects of Islamic culture (beliefs, worship, morals), "Islam and Human Relations" (dialogue, jihad, human rights and terrorism), "Islamic Culture and International Issues" (secularism, globalisation, cosmopolitanism, and modernism), and "Cultural Issues and the Formation of the Muslim Person" (youth, gender relations, the status of women in Islam, customs, beauty and the "Place of the Aqsa Mosque in Islam"). The focus of this article relates to how Islamic education has provided a friendly environment for the spread of jihadist ideas in general and al-Qaida recruitment in particular. Therefore, the material presented here largely comes from Unit One, "An Introduction to Islamic Culture," which defined the nature of Islamic identity and community, and Unit Four ("Human Relations") and the subsections within it that focused on jihad and the nature of the state.

Defining Islamic Culture & Identity

Unit One of the curriculum presented an idealized Islamic State reflecting true Islam, yet the vision presented bears no real resemblance to the modern Jordanian state. It is easy to see how someone believing that the Islamic model presented is the only appropriate model for a Muslim society – which is how the text presented it – might cast in doubt the legitimacy of the Hashemite State.

Unit One, entitled "An Introduction to Islamic Culture," included sections on the basic concepts and characteristics of Islamic culture and how Islam was better than other religions or belief systems. The first mention of an Islamic state comes in a section on "Freedom from Sin," which begins with a discussion of common problems in human societies. In explaining why other cultures fail in preventing crime generally and

theft in particular, the textbook explains that (purportedly) there is little theft in Muslim societies because there is an "Islamic state" which provides welfare services and education (although it notes that Islamic education is currently "weak") as well as a deterrent through "the cutting off of the hand" of those not prevented from theft by these services (see the Appendix and translation section A).

A further segment of relevance in Unit One to the nature of the state comes in discussing the concept of "Balance in Islam." Several aspects of "balance" are given from different parts of life, and one of them is political life:

Balance in the Political System Between the Authority of the Ruler and the Authority of Religious Scholars: it is religious scholars who appoint the ruler, and then play an advisory role, and he is obligated by the majority of scholars who have authority to issue binding rulings, to establish justice. It is also upon the religious authorities to monitor the ruler and hold him to account, and remove him if desired, and likewise the ruler has the right to be heard and obeyed in things which are obligatory.[12]

Aside from religious education and a limited welfare state, these conceptions are completely alien to modern Jordan. Not only has neither Jordan's monarchy or any of its ministers ever claimed it to be an Islamic state, while the Islamic punishment of cutting off the hand for theft does not exist in Jordan. Indeed, it would be extremely controversial for a Jordanian public figure to even advocate such a policy. Furthermore, the political model presented here of the role of religious scholars and the ruler stands in stark contrast to how the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan works – the Jordanian king is chosen by rules of succession which are controlled by the previous king, and religious scholars are mere employees of the state who do not even have the right to draft their own sermons.

Unit One also includes section on "Positive Action," by which it means ways in which Islam aims to change society for the better; it further estranges modern Jordan from the student's understanding of Islam. This section deepens the association between Islam and the establishment of the state and of jihad - both to spread Islam and intervene in other countries. It is much more consistent with the worldview of a group which calls Muslims to engage in military action abroad, than the modern Jordanian state.

This section presents Islam as being carried out through four kinds of action. One, *dawa wa risaliya*, meaning missionary effort (*dawa*) and the message of Islam (*risaliya*), is entirely peaceful and non-political, focused on preventing moral corruption in society. The second "positive action" relates to the founding of an ill-defined Islamic state:

Two: The **obligation to found a State** of Truth and Goodness. And thus the prophetic migration to the holy city of Medina was obligatory upon all those capable, either men or women. They migrated and risked their lives, sacrificing the financial well-being in the cause of God and in order to found a **State of Islam** [the phrase here is *dawlat al-islam*, not *al-dawla al-islamiya*]. [13]

Note that here as elsewhere, the text takes for granted that students are familiar with the concept of the Islamic state, although in this segment it is described as a "State of Truth" and then "State of Islam," so the implication is that these are different ways of presenting the same concept.

The segment then goes on by quoting Quran sura 8:72 regarding people's different obligations, depending on whether they have joined a new entity, exempting Muslims who have not yet migrated to the Islamic state from fighting against a people with whom they have a treaty. This verse has potential implications for modern Jordan given its close, often warm relations with non-Muslim states and frosty but vital peace treaty with Israel. Yet as elsewhere in the book, there is never a connection made between the Islamic principles laid out and Jordan's current policies, or modern Jordan society in any way.

Three: The **obligation of jihad** in the way of God. For God has imposed upon Muslims an obligation to not stand passively in the face of tyranny and oppression, for God has said, "Fight in the way of God against those who fight you but do not transgress, for God does not love transgressors." For Muslims are thus charged with jihad to spread the religion of God to His creation, and to raise oppression on those who are oppressed and

viewed as weak among non-Muslims.[14]

The text then cites Quran sura 4:75, which address those who "are not fighting" to help the oppressed who call upon God to "appoint a protector" and a "helper" – providing a basis for calls of military intervention to either relieve "oppression" or to "spread the religion of God."

A fourth point, "Depending Upon God," defines dependence upon God in a way which emphasises the relationship between religion and the state. Summarising the life of the Prophet Muhammad as being "entirely devoted to work, jihad, thinking and planning," the textbook explains that, "Thus Islam did not suffice with a call to reform and change, but offered to mankind Islamic law which is to be considered a practical path and program to reform societies in every time and place."[15]

Islamic Culture & Human Relations

Unit Four, dealing with how Muslims relate to non-Muslims, sends contradictory messages, with some passages teaching dialogue and coexistence but others the spread of the rule of Islam through warfare, overlapping heavily with an Islamist (including Salafi-Jihadist) worldview while being foreign to modern Jordan.[16] These deal both with the nature of the state and its foreign relations, in which spreading Islam, including through jihad, is a major goal. Aside from jihad, the unit's other three sections are Dialogue, Human Rights and Terrorism.

Consider first the topic of foreign relations, where the text explains the purpose of diplomacy as follows:

For it is among the functions of the Muslim state (here *al-dawla al-muslima*, not *al-dawla al-islamiya*) to work for peaceful coexistence, civilizational exchange and promote the spread of Islam in the world through missionary work and dialogue. For the Prophet Muhammad sent letters to kings and rulers to call them to Islam, and these letters which the prophet sent to nearby countries are evidence that the Islamic State is permitted to open embassies in non-Muslim countries in order to foster mutual acquaintance…[17]

There is nothing controversial or "extreme" about this statement regarding the historical basis for diplomatic relations with non-Muslims. Nonetheless, yet again the framework of the "Islamic State" and of foreign relations framed as promoting Islam brings up the contrast between the model of Islam put forward and Jordan's modern state, which has a peace treaty with Israel and plays a subordinate role as a client state of non-Muslim powers in the international system.

The unit's section on "Jihad in Islam" was the 2013 edition's systematic treatment of the concept of jihad (see the Appendix section B).[18] While not inconsistent with mainstream Islamic interpretations, the curriculum's teachings are a world away from how the contemporary Jordanian state functions, both in terms of how it projects itself rhetorically, and in terms of its actual policy. The text repeatedly refers to the "spread of Islam" as a key function of jihad, and says that jihad "empowers Muslims" to, among other things, "to command the good, and this means that righteousness prevails with guidance from God, and also to prevent that which is prohibited…" Yet not only does Jordan not engage in jihad to spread Islam, it also does not have a police force similar to Saudi Arabia's Commission for the Enjoining of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which would be needed to carry out what this text defined as a key goal of jihad.

One key segment lays out a three-fold outline for how to deal with non-Muslims living in the Muslim state. The first step is to proclaim Islam peaceably. If non-Muslims refuse Islam, they are to be given the option of retaining their religion under Muslim rule while pay a religious tax, or *jizya*. What is implicit in this passage and those which precede it is that the rule of an Islamic state comes with the spread of Islam. The third step, for those who rejection option two, is warfare.[19]

What is notable here is that Jordan has a substantial Christian minority, and it does not require them to pay a *jizya* tax, but instead extends to them equal rights. The footnote citation for the term "*jizya*" defines it as "money which the infidel pays in exchange for his safety and security under the rule of Islam." Furthermore, while textbook's definition of jihad does set down civilized rules of war – to not engage in abuse, plunder or unnecessary killing – it makes clear that the purpose of jihad is to spread Islam, or at least, the rule of an Islamic

state. The section ends with a passage which presents relations with non-Muslims as being characterised by perpetual warfare, contradicting other sections of the book which talk of dialogue.

Thus God established this truth in His book, that infidels' combat against Muslims is something which continues, and their efforts to achieve their goals do not end, and reality also establishes this. Thus we find that the infidels' fight against Muslims never ends, and their efforts to push others away from the religion of God have not ended, and thus there was a commandment to confront their force and aggression, with force that deters them and prevents their aggression.

The 2013 curriculum followed this with a section on "Types of Jihad" (see Appendix section C). The teachings are mainstream and uncontroversial, discussing topics such as the different ways in which a believe can engage in jihad (missionary work, personal engagement in warfare, support for those who do), the difference between individual and collective duty to jihad, and how jihad relates to the well-known division between "Mecca Suras" and "Medina Suras" in the Quran. The segment dealing with members of other religions teaches that jihad does not mean forced conversion, but as with the passage above, treats the religious rights of non-Muslims as linked to the acceptance of Muslim rule. This passage is followed by the section on "Human Rights," which includes an instruction on religious freedom. The instruction is framed in very broad terms consistent with classical Islamic concepts of religious freedom for non-Muslims.

Unit Four also has a section on terrorism, but it defined the problem in a way entirely unrelated to modern Jordan's conflict with Islamist terrorist groups. After a discussion of general definitions, the text focuses on pre-1948 Zionist organizations and after that the state of Israel as key examples of terrorist actors, along with other non-Muslim groups such as the Italian mafia, Neo-Nazi groups and drug cartels. The one Muslim example it gives is the historical example of the group known as the 11-12 century Assassins (*al-hashashin*). The book's one reference to al-Qaida and its activities read:

And following the events of September 11, America declared its war on terrorism, and this war focused on Afghanistan. Thus the Taliban regime was brought down and the al-Qaida organization was driven from the country, and America also occupied Iraq. And thus combatting terrorism became a means of imperial occupation of peoples.

This may be contrasted with both the public rhetoric and actual policy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which is an ally of the West and is solely engaged in military action against organisations which claim to be based on Islam, notably al-Qaida and IS. This section of the 2013 edition made it hard to imagine that at the time the book was published Jordan was engaged in a war against the organisation mentioned, or that the modern Muslim world had a problem with terrorism at all.

Islamic Education Moves Toward Modern Jordan, 2015-2017

Signaling a clear move away from the classical Islamic framework for university education, two revisions to the curriculum brought about a dramatic recasting of some of the issues highlighted in the 2013 version – anything resembling the classical Islamic state disappeared as the text was rewritten in what appears to have been a conscious effort to counter jihadist thought. The doctrine of jihad was both de-emphasized and recast to focus entirely on self-defense – no more jihad to spread Islam or impose virtue. The third edition was published in 2015 under the title *Lectures in Islamic Culture* [20]. It was followed two years later with a fourth edition entitled simply, *Islamic Culture* [21] (referred hereafter as simply the 2015 or 2017 editions).

The de-emphasis on the framework of the "Islamic state" mainly takes place in the 2017 edition. Thus the 2015 edition retains teachings on how the Islamic State provides for the welfare and education of subjects, and includes the punishment of cutting off the hand,[22] one of the most obviously antiquated aspects. Because it was placed in the section explaining why "Divinity" was a key characteristic of Islamic culture, this reinforced the identification of Islam with these concepts. The 2017 edition deletes this entire segment of the "Divinity" discussion – both the Islamic state as a welfare provider and the cutting off the hand are removed. The only reference to the "Islamic State" comes later in the section in a discussion of the concept of Shura, or

"consultation," and is framed purely as a historical reference to the 7th century and not as a permanent feature. [23] By contrast, the passage presenting the king as being appointed and subject to accountability by Muslim scholars is retained through the 2017 edition.[24]

Perhaps spurred by concern of Jordan's contribution to foreign fighter flows, which by early 2015 was widely recognized to be a problem,[25] the 2015 edition made a notable change with regard to Unit One's "Positive Action" section - the one focused on the founding of an Islamic state and jihad to spread Islam. Both the 2015 and 2017 editions delete the reference to hijra for the purpose of building a "State of Islam" and the references to jihad which follow, including the one "to spread the religion of God." The only reference to a "state" which remains is in the heading, but it is changed from "The Obligation to Establish a State of Truth and Goodness," to "The Obligation to Establish a State of Truth and Goodness in Practice." Then the paragraph the phrase "in the way of God" originally preceded "in order to establish a State of Islam," but with the latter deleted the changes present "hijra" as a spiritual or charitable effort instead of one oriented toward affairs of state or warfare.

2015: Teachings on Jihad Transformed

The most dramatic change comes over the course of the 2015 and 2017 editions in terms of the doctrine of jihad and with it the broader discussion of how Muslims are to engage with the non-Muslim world. As is clear from the discussion above, the original textbook's fourth section, "Islam and Human Relations," was written as if it were a compromise between the view which prevailed during and shortly after the Arab conquests in Islam's early centuries and modern Jordan's peaceful relations with other states, having one section on the need for dialogue and the next on the role of jihad in spreading Muslim rule. This ends in 2015.

The 2015 edition modified the "Jihad in Islam" section to remove any sense of jihad as a means of spreading Islam. While the section maintains the structure of the 2013 edition, passages which referred to "spreading Islam" through jihad are removed and jihad is reframed as entirely revolving around two purposes: "self-defense for Muslims," and "the defense of the right of non-Muslims to choose their own religion".[26] Thus references to "fighting polytheists" which appear in early Islamic sources are imaginatively reinterpreted to be about religious freedom: "Thus God commanded Muslims to fight polytheists because they were preventing people from hearing the call of Islam, and to enter into it if they wish, which fulfills the second purpose of jihad."[27] Nonetheless the "three options" of (i) preaching, (ii) acceptance of Muslim rule and (iii) fighting remains, while the keeping of the passage on the application of the jizya as a tax on religious minorities[28] is the most glaring inconsistency with contemporary Jordanian practice.

The 2015 edition also reprints in full the "Amman Message," a 2004 declaration among 84 governments coordinated by Jordan which condemned religious terrorism and put forward a vision of Islam focused on coexistence. This allowed the modern state to enter into the textbook for the first time, as part of the statement declares, "For the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has adopted a path which brings into focus the true picture of Islam…."[29]

2017: Completing the Transformation to Modern Jordan

The 2017 edition completes this transformation, with the unit dealing with relations with non-Muslims now the first time setting forth a systematic polemic against interpretations of Islam which are more militant than those held by the Jordanian monarchy, nearly erasing jihad entirely. For unclear reasons the "Amman Message" section is deleted, but "Jihad" is no longer surfacing in the table of contents, but instead is relegated to a short subsection.

The first two parts provide a 10-page section which for the first time contains a systematic argument against jihad-focused interpretations of Islam which conflict with the kingdom's official stance. This includes explanations of how Islam is compatible with religious diversity and the "wisdom in disagreement." It also puts forward reasons for rejecting Salafi-Jihadism – without ever referencing this concept directly – by talking about different points of view in Islam and how extremist narratives are created by selective citations from Islamic sources. The segment is rather superficial – for example, it does not mention the four Sunni schools of law by

name or discuss the differences between them in any degree of detail – but there is present a conscious effort to counter what Jordan officials views as hostile ideologies for the first time.[30] The section on "Dialogue with Others" then lays out the case for dialogue as a component of Islam, including dialogue with not only Christians and Jews but also "worshippers of idols."[31] The multiple positive references to Muslim-Jewish coexistence and dialogue in both sections are notable.

With jihad deemphasized, the new unit dealing with relations with others is entitled, "The Theory of the Clash of Civilizations."[32] The purpose of the chapter is to frame conflicts between societies in general terms unrelated to Islam, explaining that the concept began with the Greeks and was accentuated by the Cold War, followed by an extensive discussion of Samuel Huntington's famous book by this title. The text explains that civilizational clash is a negative aspect of human life but a real one, and that this is the reason Islam established jihad, but solely as a means of self-defense.[33]

The discussion of jihad itself covers just one page and omits all the passages contained in the previous two editions which are incompatible with current Jordanian policy. The core "three options" passage on (i) preaching, (ii) submission and (iii) fighting is gone, and with it any reference to the jizya as well as all citations to the "Jihad and Righteousness" hadith collection by Bukhari, one of the chief collectors of the sayings of Islam's founder during the early centuries. The text repeats the formulation from the 2015 edition about jihad being solely related to self-defense for Muslims and the defense of religious freedom for non-Muslims, and tells a famous story of the Caliph Omar visiting a church and promising to make sure it is not converted into a mosque. The only source cited is a Quranic version related to people who are oppressed engaging in fighting. [34] Ultimately, Huntington gets more space than jihad.

The 2017 edition also adds new material in a reorganized Unit Six on "Extremism" and "*takfir*," both of which are written in general terms but are sufficiently direct that the average reader will understand that they are attempting to refute the Salafi-Jihadist worldview. In discussing *takfir* – the practice of declaring a Muslim to be an apostate, thus allowing him to be killed under traditional interpretations – this is framed as a "dangerous" doctrine which can only be applied by the community of scholars. Yet even this treatment illustrates the weakness of the text since the treatment is so superficial that it is unlikely to convince anyone who already has opinions about the matter, giving no positive examples or even mentioning the widely-known fact that a Muslim can be executed for apostacy. Finally, the section on Terrorism, contained in this same unit, contains the same superficial and biased treatment as the 2013 edition. [35]

Correcting "Misunderstandings" – A Guided Revision

Jordanian officials never admit that the country's Islamic education was responsible for its contribution to modern jihadism. Instead they portray curriculum changes as necessary only to correct "misunderstanding" by certain students. This came across in three interviews with academics at the University of Jordan's Sharia College, including one with Dr. Sharaf al-Qada, the lead editor of the 2015 and 2017 editions of the Islamic Culture textbook.[36] When asked about any relationship between Jordan's Islamic education and recruitment by groups such as al-Qaida, Qada emphasised that the texts had always taught coexistence and dialogue, but that some passages – such as references to jihad as a means to "spread Islam" – were "misunderstood" by some students. As this article has already noted, Qada is correct in asserting that even the 2013 text did include segments promoting coexistence and dialogue. Yet Qada also commented that Jordan had long had a problem with students holding erroneous views, recollecting that after the attacks of September 11, 2001 he had gotten into arguments with students who believed the attacks were legitimate.

Regarding the new textual material in the 2017 edition, Qada acknowledged that this had been drafted with the intent of countering what the Sharia College viewed as erroneous views of Islam, and especially of jihad. Regarding segments of sections of the pre-2017 edition which on their face taught that jihad should be used to extend the rule of Islam, Qada insisted that this had never been the intent, since references to fighting always related to self-defense. Nonetheless the text itself did not expressly say there is a right of non-Muslims to reject not only Islam but also Muslim rule. As noted above, this problem is eliminated in the 2017 edition as all passages linking jihad to Islamic rule of non-Muslims were deleted.

Conclusion

Jordan's transformation of its university core curriculum on Islamic studies is a notable attempt to reduce factors which have helped make it a major jihadist recruiting ground. At a minimum, the reform ensures that the university curriculum is not reinforcing the Salafi-Jihadist narrative - something which was the case up to 2015. While Jordan's international partners will be pleased that it is bringing its university curriculum into line with its public rhetoric, one might also consider the impact of having waited this long – 30 years from al-Qaida's founding and two decades after it became globally prominent – in order to stop promoting "soft jihadism." This study may be viewed as a starting point for broader changes instituted in parallel over the past three years, including to education at lower levels and also restrictions on pro-jihadist imams preaching in mosques, which further studies may expand upon.

Appendix: Translations from Islamic Culture (2013 edition)

Section A

"By contrast, in Islam God has laid down beforehand preventative measures to the crime of theft, and these include:

Guaranteeing support for each subject of the **Islamic State**, whether through the state itself by providing work and helping those in need – and this is something also present in many Western countries – or through societal aid (mutual assistance from relatives). This is an obligatory system for which Islam is exemplary.

Faith education which purifies a person from crime by reminding him of God [describes religious education further]…. A range of societal institutions participate in this education, such as the family, the mosque and schools and the state by all its parts, including official media. This education is not present in western countries, and weak at the present time in the **Islamic State**."

Declaring publicly the punishment for theft, which is a means of deterrence, because simply declaring the punishment deters many [discusses the concept of deterrence further]…. And furthermore Islam has established a solution to the crime of theft for those who are not prevented from it by previously discussed measures – and they are just a few – and thus a punishment has been established, which is the **cutting off of the hand**, upon establishment of guilt with all the conditions of this crime beyond doubt.[37]

Section B – "Jihad in Islam" [38]

1 - The term "jihad" is taken from *jahd*, sincerity in a matter and excess of exertion in it, or else *juhd*, which means exertion of energy, and here it is meant to mean exerting all possible in the spread of the call of Islam and defense of it.

And thus **jihad** comes to mean fighting infidels and fighting them, and responding to their aggression. The truth of jihad: the greatest possible exertion in beating back the enemy by hand or through speech. For among the goals of Islam is to achieve peace, to spread justice and mercy among people, to provide security to all God's creation [cites a series of Quranic verses of a general religious nature, not related to warfare].

For Islam has commanded its followers to repeat the words of peace in their day after each prayer [cites a Quranic verse], in order to teach them that peace is one of the names of God, and to explain to them that peace can only be achieved through compliance with the commands of God. To confirm the importance of peace in life, God has made the greetings of peace to Muslims, commanding them that they are to say this to one another. For it causes wrongs to be forgotten and entrance into Paradise, as it is a greeting of the people of Paradise to one another, and the greeting of the Angels upon entering it.

And thus looking into jihad and judgments related to it finds that it was established to provide security, **spread Islam**, to achieve goodness, push back evil, prevent oppression, and to prevent the rule of the law of the jungle.

2 – "The legitimacy of fighting in previous divine messages" – The textbook further describes jihad as a principle continued by Islam from earlier revelations:

Islam is not alone in legislating jihad, but we find it established in the message of all prophets for the same reason it exists in Islam.…[quotes the Quran].

3 – "The Place of Jihad in Islam" – This section is the most systematic explanation of the theological purpose of jihad. It introduces the idea by citing a hadith which says, "Prayer is the pillar and head of Islam, while its core and summit is jihad," and then cites a Quran version which refers not to jihad but to Muslims being "empowered" to carry out Islam, including the principle of "commanding the good and forbidding vice."[39] The text explains that jihad is to fulfill Islam, and not to be carried out for bad motives or in a way that is abusive:

Thus jihad empowers Muslims upon the earth, and by this empowerment makes it possible to command the good, and this means that righteousness prevails with guidance from God, and also to prevent that which is prohibited, which means the elimination of evil and corruption on the earth, and the suppression of error, and put an end to the forces of oppression and tyranny. For the verse makes clear that Muslims, upon being empowered, are not to fall into contentiousness, are not to engage in brutality or oppress people… [lists other abuses such as theft, "to find delight in shedding blood," etc.]… but instead it is to empower them to undertake prayer, and give zakat, and seek to achieve goodness through commanding the good and forbidding the prohibited.

The text goes on to explain purposes for which jihad was established.

And jihad was established for two main reasons:

First: **to spread Islam**, to open the way before it, to remove obstacles which are in its way, following God's command to spread His religion, and extend His law to all people. As the prophet said, if the Emir is to give an order to an army or raiding party, the order would be that if it came upon polytheists, then the emir would present three options:

1 – To call them to Islam, and inform them about it and call them to enter into it, and if they agreed, then they would become among the assembly of Muslims.

2 – If they do not adopt Islam, and do not enter into it, the Emir would offer to allow them to stay within their religion, on the condition that they not raise their hands to fight Muslims, and agree to pay an amount of money called the "jizya," which is a tax upon non-Muslims as their participation in the Muslim state, similar to how Muslim contribute the zakat [Islamic charity].

3 – If they were to reject the first and second options, then Muslims are to declare war on the enemy, and prepare a number of men to fight them. For the third choice meant calling upon God for help in fighting them, to requite them for their error, strike their forces which interfere with the spread of Islam and thus prevent giving guidance to people and spreading the word of God.

Second: To defend Muslims, and their doctrine, to protect their security and their land, to defend them against danger which threatens their state. For God has said that the infidels will not end their fighting of Muslims with the intent of pushing them from the religion of God, or to tempt them away and mislead them. [The text quotes a verse in support.[40]]

Thus God established this truth in His book, that infidels' combat against Muslim is something which continues, and their efforts to achieve their goals do not end, and reality also establish this. Thus we find that the infidels' fight against Muslims never ends, and their efforts to push others away from the religion of God have not ended, and thus there was a commandment to confront their force and aggression, with force that deters them and prevents their aggression.

Section C[41]

4 – "Types of Jihad" – This section sets out three kinds of jihad. The first is jihad "by word and by missionary work," corresponding with the peaceful spread of Islam already laid out. The second is "Jihad by one's resources and oneself," which is framed as obtaining paradise through sacrifice of one's self and funds. Interestingly, the Quranic verse cited does not mention either jihad or any other word for fighting, but simply obtaining paradise through self-sacrifice, but the textbook's context makes the martial intent clear. And indeed this is immediately followed by a third kind of jihad, which is "Jihad by equipping warriors – providing them with what they require in terms of weapons, equipment and other needs," and then quotes a hadith saying, "He who has equipped a warrior in the way of God has himself gone to war, and he who succeeds a warrior in the way of God through good has also gone to war."

Note that this last hadith is one of a number of points in the 2013 edition in which it cites "The Book of Jihad & Righteousness," a collection of hadith from Bukhari, one of the two prominent classical collectors of the purported sayings of Islam's founder. What makes it notable is that the 2013 edition relied on it heavily, but it disappears completely in the 2017 edition. Citations to it are reduced, but still exist, in the 2015 edition.

5 – "The Obligation to Fight" – This section explains the theological distinction between when jihad as *fard kifaya* (a collective obligation, or one fulfilled if a sufficient number of Muslims engage in the activity) and a *fard ayn* (an individual obligation, or an obligation incumbent upon all Muslims). The text explains that the latter applies especially when there is a sudden attack on Muslim territory. It does not explain when the collective jihad obligation comes into play.[42]

6 – "The Wisdom in Delaying the Sanctioning of Jihad" – This section explains the distinction often made between "Mecca Suras" and "Medina Suras" in that the former are entirely peaceful and the latter contain injunctions related to warfare. It explains that the reason for the distinction is "likely" due to the need for spiritual preparation and the presentations of proofs before jihad is authorized, mirroring the chronological order established above.[43]

7 – "Jihad and members of other religions" – This section explains that jihad does not mean forced conversion, citing examples of the protection of the rights of religious practice by other religions in the Muslim world. Unlike the classical definition of jihad, it does not limit this right to monotheistic minorities like Jews and Christians, but simply states "followers of other religions." Given changes made to later editions of the book to focus on the defense of minorities' religious rights, it is worth quoting the text's application of jihad to protecting non-Muslim subjects of a Muslim state:[44]

It is necessary to emphasize that jihad not only sanctions the defense of Muslims, but it is also to defend non-Muslim subjects (*ahl al-dhima*) who are under the protection of Muslims and who are their subjects. And jihad is also sanctioned to raise oppression from people in every land….

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Notes

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[10] Ahmad Nufal et al, *Islamic Culture & Modern Issues* (*al-thaqafa al-islamiya wa qadaya al-*asr, which can also be more literally translated as "Islamic Culture & Issues of the Age), Amman: Hamid House (*dar hamid*) for Publishing & Distribution, 2013. A. Nufal is the lead editor of an editorial team with 19 other members from the Sharia College faculty at the University of Jordan in Amman.

[11] For example, see course syllabi at the University of Jordan; URL: http://registration.ju.edu.jo/StudyPlans/2202frnci.pdf ; Irbil National University; URL: http://www.inu.edu.jo/Uploads/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA-pdf/11791123631.pdf ; Zarqa University; URL:http://zu.edu.jo/ar/Collage/Science_and_Technology/Dept_InternetTechnology/files/A_its_s_7.pdf and Balqa Vocational University; URL: http://www.bau.edu.jo/bauar/Colleges/Alia/media/Diploma_Accounting.pdf

[12] A. Nufal, p. 32.

[13] A. Nufal, pp. 40-41.

[14] A. Nufal, p. 41.

[15] A. Nufal, p. 41.

[16] A. Nufal, pp. 163, 212.

[17] A. Nufal, p. 181.

[18] A. Nufal, pp. 183.

[19] A. Nufal, pp. 186.

[20] Sharaf al-Qada et al (Eds.). *Lectures in Islamic Culture*, Amman: The Hamid House and Office for Publishing, 2015.

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[22] al-Qada 2015, pp. 15-16.

[23] al- Qada 2017, p. 37.

[24] al-Qada 2017, p. 19.

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[26] al-Qada 2015, p. 170.

[27] al-Qada 2015, p.171.

[28] al-Qada 2015, p. 171.

[29] al-Qada 2015, pp. 188-194.

[30] al-Qada 2017, pp. 94-103.

[31] al-Qada 2017, pp. 104-108.

[32] al-Qada 2017, pp. 109-114.

[33] al-Qada 2017, pp. 110-113.

[34] Sura Hajj 39.

[35] al-Qada 2017, pp. 167-179.

[36] Interview with Dr. Sharaf al-Qada in Amman, October 22, 2017.

[37] A. Nufal, pp. 24, 25.

[38] A. Nufal, pp. 185- 187.

[39] The hadith is cited to from the Kitab al-Iman from the Stories of al-Tarmathi, while the Quranic verse is al-Hajj 41.

[40] Baqara p.217.

[41] A. Nufal, p. 188.

[42] A. Nufal, p. 188-189.

[43] A. Nufal, p. 190.

[44] A. Nufal, pp.190-191.

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Dilemmas of Jihadi Loyalty

by Jean-Pierre Filiu

Abstract

In a decade-long of activities, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has nurtured a unique mix of global and local jihadism. It has kept a distinctively Algerian leadership through all its various evolutions. But the Algerian field commanders in the Sahara region, far beyond the Algerian borders, have taken over the global dimension of jihadi projection from the AQIM leadership still holed up in Kabylia. The feud between the two main Sahara commanders aggravated the complexity of those shifting loyalties, first, inside AQIM, and second, with their regional partners and, third, in relation with Al-Qaida Senior Leadership. The short-lived "Islamic Emirate" of Northern Mali (2012-2013) and the recent coalition of a "Group for the support of Islam and Muslims" have shown AQIM enter alliances on its own initiative, while pledging unconditional allegiance to Zawahiri.

Keywords: Al-Qaida, Algeria, Sahel, AQIM

Introduction

The jihadi landscape in North Africa and the Sahel region represents a fascinating case study of shifting transnational loyalties. The jihadi insurgency waged during the nineties in Algeria by the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) [1] was far more powerful and murderous than the struggle waged at the same time in Egypt by several jihadi groups, the most important of them being the Gamaa Islamiyya.[2] But some of these Egyptian militants nurtured significant relations with Al-Qaida senior leadership (AQSL), first in Sudan, then in Afghanistan, through the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, who acted de facto as the deputy leader of the organization. On the contrary, Algerian jihadis turned down various offers of integration into AQSL after 1994 and opposed the "Algerianity" (*jaz'ara*) of their struggle in Algeria proper to the "global jihad" advocated by Usama Bin Laden and Zawahiri.[3]

It would take more than a decade of ferocious power struggles, low-intensity guerrilla and international realignment to eventually bring the Algerian jihadis into the Al-Qaida networks: in September 1998, the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) [4] split away from the GIA, condemning the spiral of terror that was consuming the very organization and refocusing its violence against the Algerian security forces. In June 2004, Abdel Malik Drukdal became the leader (*amīr* [5]) of the GSPC and enhanced his cooperation with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's group in Iraq, soon to be recognized by Bin Laden as the local branch of Al-Qaida. In July 2005, Al-Qaida in Iraq abducted two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad and executed them as a gesture of solidarity with the GSPC. In September 2006, Zawahiri celebrated the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks by announcing the GSPC's affiliation, before Drukdal pledged public allegiance to Bin Laden. In January 2007, the GSPC became officially Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

What should have been the end of a "globalizing" process, with AQIM as an affiliate of Al-Qaida for the whole of North Africa, would prove to have opened a vast set of new interrogations for the Algerian jihadi militants. Even the road to the establishment of an "Islamic Emirate", five years later in Northern Mali, therefore far away from the targeted "Maghreb", was paved with serious internal feuds and unexpected local alliances. This process is to be studied thoroughly in its successive stages, now that AQIM has completed a full decade of activities and that the collapse of the Malian "Islamic Emirate" has allowed access to some AQIM's internal documents.

The Challenges of Turning Global

AQSL had clearly assigned an "Islamic Maghreb" mission to the former GSPC, after fifteen years of Algeria-centred jihadi activities. This regional horizon was also made more accessible by an unprecedented wave of recruitment and training of Tunisian, Libyan and Moroccan militants by the GSPC, before sending them to Iraq, along with Algerian activists. But Drukdal kept the GSPC Algerian leadership structure in place and did not try to diversify it with the incorporation of other North African cadres. Even in distant Sahel, Drukdal relied on two Algerian local commanders: in the West, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, nicknamed Belaouar, "the one-eyed man", since he was believed to have lost an eye while fighting the Afghan army in Khost in 1991; in the East, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, whose smuggling networks with Libya and Niger had become increasingly prosperous. The veteran Belmokhtar claimed to control a full-fledged "brigade" (*katība* [6]) he had called pompously "Al-Moulathamoun", the "Veiled-ones", in a direct echo of the "veiled" tribesmen that spread Islam in the past through the Sahara.

AQIM struck Algiers twice with murderous suicide attacks on April 11 and December 11, 2007. It lived up to its "global" credentials by claiming it had mixed "global" and local targets, while using the Al-Qaida style suicide commandos. Despite the horrendous toll of the "black decade" of the nineties, Algeria had never experienced the trauma of suicide attacks, especially of such magnitude, with strings of simultaneous explosions: the three coordinated blasts in April targeted the government palace and two police stations and left 30 dead, all of them Algerian (even though AQIM claimed to have struck the "Interpol headquarters"); the two suicide attacks in December targeted the Constitutional Court and the UN local headquarters, with 17 out of the 47 persons killed actually working for the UN. Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika and his "national reconciliation" policy were directly challenged in the heart of the capital city. So the regime and its security apparatus reacted swiftly and forcefully: the jihadi cells were dismantled in Greater Algiers and AQIM commandos were rolled back into their historical stronghold in the mountainous range of Kabylia.[7]

Drukdal and his supporters were now largely cornered in what was certainly a safe haven, but with very limited capacity of projection. Their "global" aspirations were even more jeopardized by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) announcing its own merger with Al-Qaida, at the very end of 2007, without rallying AQIM and its "Islamic Maghreb". Drukdal, in order to keep the credibility of his "global" agenda, had to depend more and more on its two Saharan affiliates. Belmokhtar, who had previously launched murderous attacks against the Mauritanian security, ordered the killing of four French tourists in the last days of 2007. The jihadi threat on the Paris-Dakar land race reached such intensity that this international car competition was cancelled (it has since been transferred to Latin America). In March 2008, Abou Zeid joined the fray and had two Austrian tourists abducted in Southern Tunisia.

The competition between the two jihadi commanders led to an escalation in the kidnapping of Western hostages by both Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid. Those protracted crises delivered them significant media coverage and, eventually, hefty ransoms. Drukdal kept only nominal control over those operations, even though Abou Zeid, contrary to Belmokhtar, never missed an opportunity to praise Drukdal's leadership. The Mauritanian army, after months of mop-up campaign, succeeded in expelling Belmokhtar's supporters from its territory. But the Malian army failed in July 2009 to restore its authority over the Northern part of the country, keeping only garrisons in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal. Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid could now operate freely from their respective bases in Northern Mali. Belmokhtar negotiated the hostage releases through one of the advisers of the president of Burkina Faso, while Abou Zeid favoured the mediation of Iyad Ag Ghali, a former guerrilla leader of the Tuareg insurgency, who had recently returned from being Malian consul in the Saudi city of Djedda. The jihadi wealth was so abundant that a new group, distinct from AQIM, was formed under the name of Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique l'Ouest, which translates as "Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa," (MUJAO) [8], with strong connections with drug smugglers (cocaine was now routinely transported through the Sahel to Europe).

The First Jihadistan

The killing of Bin Laden in Pakistan, in May 2011, and his succession by Zawahiri impacted AQIM less than the revolutionary wave that shook Tunisia and Libya. Seifallah Ben Hassine, the founder of the Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group [9], a close associate to Al-Qaida, had been jailed in Tunisia since 2003 and was released shortly after Ben Ali's fall, in the framework of a general amnesty. He did not lose time to organize a vibrant salafi group, Ansar al-Sharia (AS/the Supporters of Sharia). And he missioned the French-Tunisian Boubaker al-Hakim, recently released from French jails, to establish AS' clandestine military branch. Hakim had fought in 2003-2004 in the Iraqi city of Fallouja, then a jihadi stronghold, and his own brother had been killed there in a US bombing.[10] While Hakim started to recruit fighters for AS, AQIM progressively expanded from Algeria into Tunisia, with a new base in the Chambi mountain range, close to the shared border of the two countries.

But the consequences of the Libyan revolution were even more important: thousands of Tuareg militants, often former guerrillas in Mali, had joined the mercenary ranks of what Moammar Gaddafi had labelled "the Islamic Legion". When the Libyan regime collapsed in the fall of 2011, the so-called "Legion" disbanded and disgruntled militants moved back to Mali, where many of them rallied behind Iyad Ag Ghali and his newly formed Ansar Eddine (Supporters of Religion). The fact that Gaddafi's loyalists had planted arms caches all over the desert, now accessible to any roaming gang, only contributed to the volatility of the situation and to the unprecedented dissemination of war weaponry. In January 2012, Ansar Eddine joined forces with the Tuareg separatist guerrillas to take over the garrisons of Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao in only a few weeks. A military coup in Bamako only aggravated the governmental rout in Northern Mali.

The separatists proclaimed, in March 2012, the independence of "Azawad", the Tuareg name for Northern Mali. But Iyad Ag Ghali had a totally different agenda. With the active support of AQIM and MUJAO, Ansar Eddine soon overran its former Tuareg allies, establishing a full-fledged Jihadistan (or "Islamic Emirate") on the ruins of the short-lived Azawad. Each component of the jihadi coalition had its own city to rule: Ansar Eddine in Kidal, AQIM in Timbuktu and MUJAO in Gao, even though each group was present in the others' fiefdoms. This was the first time an Al-Qaida branch could claim such vast territory, while Al-Qaida had always been subordinated to the Taliban in Afghanistan and had only achieved pockets of territorial control in Iraq or Yemen. Of course, AQIM was the minor partner in the relations with Ansar Eddine and MUJAO, who had strong roots respectively in the Tuareg and sub-Saharian populations. But this was a substantial achievement that Drukdal credited mainly to Abou Zeid, who was consolidated in his leading position as commander of the Tariq Ibn Zyad Brigade, proudly named after the Muslim conqueror of Spain in the eight century.

The "Timbuktu Papers"

The showdown between Abou Zeid and his now arch-rival Belmokhtar was inevitable. Iyad Ag Ghali tried briefly to mediate in Timbuktu between the two Algerian warlords, but Drukdal and AQIM now saw only problems in keeping Belmokhtar inside of the organization. A privileged insight into this controversy was provided through the so-called "Timbuktu papers", seized in this Malian city after its liberation from jihadi rule in 2013. Particularly revealing is the scathing letter sent by the AQIM leadership ("Advisory Board") to Belmokhtar, dated November 3, 2012. First, Belmokhtar was accused of having miserably failed in his management of the December 2008 kidnapping of two senior Canadian diplomats, including the UN special envoy for Niger, released after four months of detention for a relatively small ransom: "Who is incompetent? We, who wanted to consult and stressed the need for coordination in this type of case, or someone who acted alone, in his corner?"[11]

On top of that, Belmokhtar was bitterly blamed in the same letter for conducting his military operations on his own, without truly cooperating with other field commanders: "Unlike other Sahel emirs contributing to weapons procurement efficiently and in large quantities, his contribution is virtually non-existent."[12] But the worst attack stemmed from Belmokhtar's numerous attempts to establish a direct line of communication with Zawahiri, now supreme leader of Al-Qaida worldwide: "You delude yourself if you imagine that communications with the Central Command of Al-Qaida will be faster and easier than exchanges with the

regional command that is in your close vicinity."[13] The "close vicinity" between Drukdal's stronghold in Algeria and Belmokhtar's base in Mali, separated by more than three thousand kilometres, was pure rhetoric. But AQIM's resolve to smash any attempt by Belmokhtar to emancipate himself and reach on his own an official AQ status was adamant. The defiant commander was excluded from AQIM, while he pretended to have himself left the organisation to found his own group, "The Signers in Blood".

Six years after Drukdal's pledge of allegiance to Bin Laden, AQIM strongly believed it had secured the regional monopoly over the operational contacts with Zawahiri and Al-Qaida senior leadership (AQSL). Drukdal's local power base in Algerian Kabylia might appear dwarfed by the large territory patrolled by his supporters' brigade in Northern Mali, but Abou Zeid had nevertheless displayed over the years all the gestures and rites of loyalty to his "regional commander". Timbuktu served as a beacon for all the potential recruits in the Sahel region who could be more attracted by AQIM's "global" jihad than by the local/regional approaches of Ansar Eddine and MUJAO. Belmokhtar's exclusion had solidified AQIM chain of command. But this jihadi delusion of grandeur was to crumble very soon.

The 2013 Shock and its Aftershocks

In January 2013, the tripartite alliance between Ansar Eddine, AQIM and MUJAO started to move forcibly towards Southern Mali. The authorities in Bamako called for an immediate French intervention to stop the jihadi offensive. The Algerian army and security were incensed by what they considered as a betrayal by Iyad Ag Ghali, since they had invested a lot of time and energy, all through the second half of 2012, to mediate between Bamako and Ansar Eddine. Algiers therefore cooperated significantly with the French operation codenamed "Serval" by opening its airspace to French warplanes and sealing the border between Mali and Algeria. Before the end of January, the jihadi columns, brutally crushed by massive air strikes, had to roll back and evacuate Gao, then Timbuktu, in front of a few thousands French special forces.

While his former jihadi partners were falling in Mali under this Paris-led campaign, Belmokhtar launched an unprecedented attack on an Algerian oil complex at In-Amenas, some 1,500 kilometres south-east of Algiers, close to the Libyan border. The plant was run by the Norwegian Statoil and British Petroleum in a joint venture with the Algerian SONATRACH. Never had hydrocarbon-related installations been attacked in two decades of Algerian terrorism. The Algerian military assaulted the facilities with helicopters and air-to-ground missiles. The battle ended with the killing of 29 terrorists and of 40 civilians of ten different nationalities they had taken hostage.[14] Belmokhtar claimed, in a rare video message online, responsibility for the disaster on behalf of Al-Qaida.[15] His exclusion from AQIM proved inconsequential as he asserted his claims to be Zawahiri's representative for the whole region in the most spectacular way.

In Mali, the French offensive had received significant reinforcements from the Chadian army and, after taking over Kidal, was closing on the jihadi natural redoubt of Amettetaï, in the core of the Ifoghas range. This last stronghold was eradicated in February 2013, a fall followed by systematic clean-up operations. The French sources estimated some 700 jihadis had been killed and 200 captured out of a total force of 2,000 fighters in Mali.[16] It was soon confirmed that Abou Zeid had been killed while trying to escape the trap. Yahya Abou al-Hammam, the most senior AQIM cadre to have survived "Serval", became de facto Drukdal's new appointee for the Sahara. Interestingly, even through the Malian debacle, AQIM had remained incapable of delegating local power to non-Algerian jihadis (Abou al-Hammam, whose real name is Djamel Okacha, is also an Algerian, like Abou Zeid and Belmokhtar).

While AQIM was slowly recovering from its historical defeat, Belmokhtar went back on the offensive, this time in Niger, claiming with MUJAO, in May 2013, the joint responsibility of two coordinated suicide attacks (with at least 20 killed) in Agadez and Arlit, the first one against the regular army, the second one against a French-run mining facility. In August 2013, the two organizations officialised their merging in a new outfit branded "Al-Mourabitoun". This was a direct reference to the prestigious dynasty of the Almoravids, that had expanded in the Sahara through Sijilmassa in the year 1053, before ruling during one century over Morocco and Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus).

An Unprecedented Jihadi Polarisation

This profound restructuring of the regional jihadi map occurred while the confrontation between Zawahiri and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi intensified in the Middle East: Baghdadi had proclaimed an "Islamic State in Iraq and Levant", known under its Arab acronym as Daesh, in the Syrian city of Raqqa, in April 2013. This move had forced the Nusra Front to reassert its claims as the one and only Al-Qaida branch in Syria. Fully endorsed by Zawahiri, Al-Nusra resisted then the "global" plans uncovered by Baghdadi in Mosul in July 2014, while posing as "caliph Ibrahim". In Tunisia and Libya, the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) seemed to keep the upper hand, with Boubaker al-Hakim switching from the Tunisian AS (Ansar al-Sharia) to the global IS [17], before Baghdadi sent an Iraqi representative to organise Libya into three jihadi "provinces."[18]

Baghdadi's Libyan manoeuvres did not prevent Belmokhtar to have well-protected safe-havens on Libyan territory and to use these as his main operational base from which to strike Sahel, the way he used Malian territory against neighbouring Mauritania in the 2000s. Belmokhtar swiftly moved to crush the pro-IS dissent of Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, a minor MUJAO commander of Sahraoui origin, who pledged allegiance to Baghdadi in May 2015. Only a few days later, Belmokhtar confirmed his undisputed leadership over Al-Mourabitoun and its firm allegiance to Zawahiri. He even added to the name of his group "Al-Qaida for West Africa", then shortened it to "Al-Qaida for Africa."[19] Belmokhtar could not be satisfied with the sole Sahel, he now craved openly for the whole continent.

Al-Mourabitoun had already struck in the very heart of Bamako, killing 5 people on March 7, 2015, in the random shooting of a restaurant popular among the expatriate community. This attack was followed by a raid in Central Mali against an hotel in Sévaré hosting foreign UN contractors, on August 7, 2015: four terrorists, four Malian soldiers and five contractors were killed (two Ukrainians, one South African, one Nepalese and their Malian driver). Al-Mourabitoun and Ansar Eddine claimed the joint responsibility for this attack, demonstrating Iyad Ag Ghali's endorsement of Belmokhtar's ambitions. The highest casualties occurred on November 20, 2015, when 20 people were killed in the Bamako Radisson Blu hotel. The two Al-Mourabitoun gunmen perished in the assault. This time, Belmokhtar's supporters claimed they had acted in cooperation with AQIM. Al-Mourabitoun was shrewdly using those various attacks to nurture operational, propaganda and symbolic links with Belmokhtar's former jihadi partners.

Shortly after the Radisson Blu tragedy, Drukdal officially accepted Belmokhtar and his group back into the realm of AQIM. In an audio message broadcast on December 4, 2015, Drukdal declared "two martyrs signed this unity in their blood by attacking the hotel Radisson."[20] The AQIM leader was paying a significant lip service to the "Signers in Blood", the name of the splinter group Belmokhtar had founded when he was excluded from AQIM in November 2012. Three years after this humiliation, Belmokhtar had fully restored his position as the central figure in the globalization of jihad in the Sahel region. While Abou al-Hamman could nurture the fiction of the inclusion of Belmokhtar in the AQIM chain of command, Al-Mourabitoun operated *de facto* as an independent outfit.[21] AQIM probably considered such operational autonomy as a small price to pay to benefit from the multi-faceted impact of Al-Mourabitoun's high-profile attacks and to keep IS supporters at bay.

The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims

Al-Mourabitoun have recently managed to perpetrate a string of attacks that were unprecedented in their reach and/or their death toll: on January 15, 2016, three Al-Mourabitoun gunmen killed 30 persons (including 22 foreigners) in an hotel in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso, before being killed themselves; on March 13, 2016, three Al-Mourabitoun kamikaze gunned down 19 people at the Grand Bassam tourist resort, some 40 kilometres south of Abidjan (as in Ouagadougou, AQIM soon claimed the responsibility for the first such terror attack on the Ivory Coast); on January 18, 2017, five suicide attackers killed some 80 people in an attack on a military facility in Gao, a city that had been retaken from the jihadis (and mainly MUJAO) four years before, in the "Serval Operation". Such a terrorist record was daunting for Belmokhtar, especially since US sources claimed he had been targeted in an F-15 air raid in Libya, back in July 2015.

The Pentagon never confirmed Belmokhtar's death and those persisting rumours only enhanced the jihadi leader's clout and prestige, especially after AQIM disseminated online, on May 19, 2016, three messages attributed to its "commander."[22] It is most probably for security reasons that Belmokhtar did not attend the jihadi "summit" whose video recording was broadcast on March 2, 2017. But his deputy Hassan al-Ansari was present, close to Iyad Ag Ghali, who announced the formation of a "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims". This group pledged allegiance to Al-Qaida, with the endorsement of two AQIM commanders (including Abou al-Hammam), next to Belmokhtar's deputy. Iyad Ag Ghali threw in the new coalition the weight of Ansar Eddine, along with its affiliate for Central and Southern Mali, the "Liberation Front of Mecina [23]" (this "front" is led by the Malian preacher Amadou Koufa, with one of his disciples now heading in Burkina Faso the jihadi group Ansaroul Islam).

The decade running from the establishment of AQIM to the founding of the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims" offers a fascinating sequence of shifting jihadi loyalties. Drukdal and AQIM's top leadership have remained isolated in their stronghold in Kabylia, but they never lost touch with the jihadi networks roaming in the Sahara thousands of kilometres further south. They even maintained the fiction of their controlling them on behalf of Al-Qaida's supreme commander, Bin Laden until 2011, and Zawahiri ever since. Through this delicate and paradoxical structure, they succeeded in thwarting most of IS' infiltrations West of Libya and North of Nigeria. But, in order to achieve such a record, they had to abdicate their actual authority over the various groups operating in the Sahel region.

The main actors and beneficiaries of this decentralization process were, and remain to be, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Iyad Ag Ghali. The Algerian veteran emerged from the post-2013 jihadi rout as the main contender in a regional escalation of jihadi attacks that run from Senegal in the West to Burkina Faso and Niger in the east. The Tuareg chief is more concentrated on Mali, with his power base in the northern desert, and his Mecina branch granting him loyalties in the rest of the country. The question remains however open about the eventual absorption of AQIM into the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims". Yet there are numerous precedents in the jihadi underworld of accommodation between the formal structure and the operational dimensions. In that regard, the relations between AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun and Ansar Eddine constitute indeed a multi-faceted case study.

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Notes

[1] Groupe islamique armé means Islamic armed group.

[2] Gamaa Islamiyya means in Arabic Islamic Group (or Collective).

[3] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Local and global jihad: Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib", The Middle East Journal, vol.63, No. 2, Spring 2009, pp.218-219.

[4] Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat means Salafist group for preaching and combat.

[5] Amīr means literally commander.

[6] Katība can also be translated by "battalion", in that case this is more appropriate.

[7] The expression "triangle of death" came to describe the jihadi implantation between the three provinces of Boumerdes, Tizi Ouzou and Bejaïa.

[8] "Oneness and jihad" (Al-Tawhid wal-jihad) was the initial name of Zarqawi's group, before it became the Iraqi branch of Al-Qaida. MUJAO emphasis on "Western Africa" is also a challenge to the Algerian-led AQIM.

[9] Known by its French acronym GICT (Groupe islamique combattant Tunisien).

[10] Jean-Pierre Filiu, 'Ansar al-Fatah and the French "Iraqi" network'; in: Bruce Hoffmann and Fernando Reinares (Eds.), The

Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, pp. 362-263.

[11] Mathieu Guidère, "The Timbuktu Letters: New Insights about AQIM", Res Militaris, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2014, pp.25 URL: <hal-01081769> .

[12] Ibid. In the whole letter, Mokhtar Belmokhtar is called "Khaled Abou al-Abbas", one of his war monikers.

[13] Ibid.

[14] The investigation report commissioned by Statoil was highly critical of the Algerian army, of its incapacity 'to detect and prevent the attackers' and of its 'lack of imagination': 'an attack on In-Amenas should not have been entirely inconceivable', especially since 'there were strong economic incentives for the Algerian military to protect this critical national infrastructure' ('The In-Amenas attack', presented to Statoil Board of Directors on September 2013, 11, pp. 4 and 70).

[15] "Nous, Al-Qaida, revendiquons cette opération bénie", AFP, Nouakchott, January 20 2013.

[16] Alexandra Geneste et Nathalie Guibert, "La France organise aux Nations-Unies son retrait militaire du Mali", Le Monde, April 27, 2013.

[17] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The French 'Iraqi networks' of the 2000s : Matrix of the 2015 terror attacks ?", Perspectives on terrorism, Vol.10, No. 6, 2016.

[18] Ironically for an organization that claims in the Middle East to erase "colonial" boundaries, IS has rejuvenated in its own Libyan chart the colonial division between Tripolitana, Cyrenaica and Fezzan.

[19] The literal translation from Arabic is "Base for jihad in (Western) Africa", Al-Qaida meaning "base".

[20] Marc Mémier, "AQMI et Al-Mourabitoun: Le djihad sahélien unifié ?", Paris, Institut français de Relations Internationales (IFRI), January 2017, p.37.

[21] Ibid., p.39.

[22] Like in the "Timbuktu papers", Belmokhtar is designated as "Khaled Abou al-Abbas".

[23] In the nineteenth century, Sékou Amadou reigned over a theocratic "Mecina kingdom", strongly rooted in the peul (or halpulaar speaking) population, that included parts of today's Mali and Burkina Faso.s

Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram's Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombings

by Jacob Zenn

Abstract

Boko Haram was ranked the world's "most deadly" terrorist group in 2016 and the country where it primarily operates, Nigeria, was ranked the world's third "most terrorised" nation in 2017. However, for such a significant militant group there is a dearth of research on Boko Haram using document analysis that can shed light on the inner workings and decision-making processes of the group's leadership. Most researchers have instead examined structural factors in Nigeria to understand Boko Haram. This has led to an academic consensus that Boko Haram was originally peaceful and only marginally benefitted from its ties to al-Qaida - if at all. This article, in contrast, presents documents of the leadership of al-Qaida and Boko Haram that show early and continuing communications between Boko Haram and al-Qaida and al-Qaida had a significant impact on Boko Haram's founding in 2002, launch of a jihad in 2009 and introduction of suicide bombings in 2011. In addition, the al-Qaida-trained militants in Boko Haram played a leading role in conquering territory in Nigeria in 2013, setting up a line of communication to Islamic State in 2014 and facilitating Boko Haram's switch of allegiance and merger with Islamic State in 2015.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Nigeria, Africa, Terrorism, Islamic State, al-Qaida, Islamophobia, Salafism

Introduction

In the thirty years since al-Qaida's founding, there has been a significant amount of scholarship on the group and those affiliates and cells that have benefitted from al-Qaida's funding, training and advice. However, there is one group whose origins and violent rise is still misunderstood. This group is *Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah Liddawah wal-Jihad* [1], which has become known as "Boko Haram" and was ranked the world's "most deadly" terrorist group in 2016 for the number of people it has killed.[2]

The key debates about Boko Haram reflect the debates surrounding jihadism more generally, such as whether structural and local factors or external influences and individual agency best explain Boko Haram's origins and violent rise.[3] The former view, which is supported by Alexander Thurston, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Kyari Muhammed, tends to see only a "marginal" role of al-Qaida in Boko Haram's origins and violent rise and instead sees Boko Haram as the product of "multi-dimensional" factors, such as "religious doctrines, poverty and inequality, post-1999 politics, youth agency, and geography."[4] The latter view, in contrast, finds Boko Haram to be primarily the result of the individual decisions of militants who sought to engage in a jihad in Nigeria and were empowered to do so because of al-Qaida's and particularly al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) and al-Shabab's funding, training and advice. Neither view can be fully correct but this article argues the latter view is more accurate but also underutilised in explaining Boko Haram's founding, launch of a jihad, and tactical innovations, such as suicide bombings.

The article will present three episodes or cases of Boko Haram from: (i) the group's founding in 2002-2003, (ii) launch of jihad in 2009-2010 and (iii) introduction of suicide bombings in 2011-2012. It is argued that these three cases exemplify how al-Qaida's significant impact on Boko Haram has been misunderstood to be "local" phenomena in most previous research on the group. Furthermore, this article discusses obstacles and opportunities for future research on Boko Haram.

2002-2003: The Case of Ibrahim Harun

There are a number of incorrect assumptions about Boko Haram's origins that are reflected in most literature on the group. One such assumption is that Boko Haram began as a primarily peaceful movement in 2002 or 2003 before becoming violent and that al-Qaida's impact on the group has been speculative or marginal.

Thurston, for example, considers al-Qaida's influence on Boko Haram to have been "marginal" to the group's "overall development" and argues that Boko Haram was a "mass religious movement" before transitioning to armed struggle."[5] Jean Herskovits, similarly, has argued that Boko Haram "began in 2002 as a peaceful Islamic splinter group."[6] Consistent with this, Hilary Matfess argues that Boko Haram was a "largely peaceful, dissident religious sect that had been founded by Muhammed Yusuf in 2002" and that Boko Haram's "purported relationship" with "global Salafi-Jihadist groups" began as late as Boko Haram's "joint training with AQIM in 2009-2010."[7] Kyari Muhammed has also argued that Boko Haram "emerged as a home-grown group with local grievances."[8]

One other example from this school of thought that disregards any role of al-Qaida in Boko Haram's origins or violent jihadist motives for Boko Haram's founding comes from Pérouse de Montclos, who wrote that:

> "…in 2003, the so-called 'Nigerian Taliban' [Boko Haram's name from 2003 to 2009] were students from the city of Maiduguri who preached a cultural revolution and went to farming in a rural and remote area, the village of Kanama, near the Niger border. Chased away by the army, they returned to Maiduguri and joined the most radical preacher in town, Mohammed Yusuf, who was killed by police in 2009."[9]

Pérouse de Montclos has furthermore characterised Boko Haram's "possible links" to AQIM as the product of "speculation" of "many articles" in the security studies field and "analysis" [of Boko Haram] as "often spoiled by the storytelling of a global jihad linked to al-Qaida or [Islamic State]."[10] One final perspective from another researcher, Adam Higazi, is that adopting the style of al-Qaida has been "good propaganda" for Boko Haram but that there were no operational ties. Notwithstanding evidence to the contrary, Higazi also depicted Boko Haram's pledge of loyalty to Islamic State in March 2015 as "a response to the pressure being exerted by the new regional military alliance against Boko Haram" starting in late January 2015 but not indicative of lengthier negotiations between the two groups or ideological reasons for the pledge.[11]

The common portrayal of Boko Haram's origins in much of the literature on the group is at odds with the first reports about Boko Haram closest in time to the group's founding. In 2004, Boko Haram was widely described to be a small religious movement of 200 to 1,000 mostly educated and well-off members who engaged in military training at a remote camp near the Nigeria-Niger border to launch a jihad and create an Islamic state in Nigeria modeled on Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.[12] Only after 2010 when Boko Haram leader Abubakr Shekau declared a jihad against Nigeria and the U.S., and the group gained attention in the scholarly community and media, did Boko Haram become portrayed as "peaceful" at the time of its founding.

Analysis of primary source documents from Boko Haram and al-Qaida also paints a different story about al-Qaida's relationship with Boko Haram at the time of the group's founding than is presented in most of the literature. One overlooked example from the time of Boko Haram's founding is that one of Boko Haram's leaders in 2003, a Saudi-born Nigerian named Yusuf Ahmed, and another Boko Haram member named Muhammed Ashafa met with Ibrahim Harun in 2003 to arrange for Harun to send 21 Boko Haram members to train in Niger with AQIM's predecessor, the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC).[13] According to Ibrahim Harun's court transcript from the Eastern District of New York in March 2017, Harun was a Saudi-born Nigerien (from the Republic of Niger) who trained in Afghanistan before 9/11, killed two U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan in 2002 and was deployed to Nigeria in 2003 after meeting with two of the highest ranking al-Qaida members in Pakistan - Abdel Hadi al-Iraqi and Abu Faraj al-Libi - to plan attacks on U.S. and Israeli interests in Nigeria with Boko Haram.[14] Harun's plans in Nigeria came to a halt only when the Boko Haram member who Harun deployed to Pakistan to meet with al-Qaida's external operations unit, Ashafa, was arrested at the airport in Pakistan before his return to Nigeria.[15] The case of Ibrahim Harun is indicative of Boko Haram's ties to al-Qaida's senior leadership in Pakistan since as early as 2003.

The decoded messages on Ashafa's hard drive showed that Harun not only met with leaders of Boko Haram in Nigeria, such as Yusuf Ahmed, but also with members of the GSPC in Nigeria. The head of al-Qaida's external operations unit was also directing Harun from Pakistan on where to target in Nigeria, and consulting with Harun on a range of issues from storing weapons and conducting surveillance to whether Harun should marry

or not.[16] Harun was arrested in Libya in 2005 after fleeing Nigeria when Ashafa was arrested in Pakistan. Harun was then extradited to the U.S. in 2012 after he was able to leave Libya during the country's civil war in 2011 and confessed to Italian border authorities of being a member of al-Qaida.

Yusuf Ahmed was not the only Boko Haram leader with direct ties to al-Qaida at the time of Boko Haram's founding. Two Nigerian scholars, Kyari Muhammed and Abdul Raufu Mustapha [17], who respectively have written that Boko Haram was only "trying to mimic" al-Qaida or "burnish its symbolic credentials" through propaganda about al-Qaida, have nonetheless also written that Boko Haram's founder in 2002 was a certain jihadist named Muhammed Ali.[18] According to Kyari Muhammed, Muhammed Ali was "a Nigerian who was radicalized by jihadi literature in Saudi Arabia and was believed to have fought alongside the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan."[19] Muhammed Ali was also reported in Nigerian press in 2004 to have led Boko Haram with Yusuf Ahmed. According to such reports, the "duo" of Muhammed Ali and Yusuf Ahmed were the only ones who knew the sources of Boko Haram's funding at the time.[20]

Al-Qaida in its *al-Risalah* magazine in January 2017 also recognized Muhammed Ali as the Boko Haram founder and said his initial funding came from "members of al-Qaida residing in the Arabian Peninsula."[21] This could refer to Osama Bin Laden's Yemeni "envoy" to northwest Africa, who visited Nigeria in 2002 on the invitation of a GSPC member in Nigeria.[22] Other researchers who have interviewed former Boko Haram members also found that Muhammed Ali fought in Afghanistan, as Kyari Muhammed suggested, and was a "disciple" of Bin Laden in Sudan in the mid-1990s and had received a promise of money from Bin Laden to form a jihadi cell in Nigeria.[23]

The profiles of Muhammed Ali and Yusuf Ahmed suggest it is unlikely that under their leadership Boko Haram was at the time of its founding simply "a mass religious movement" or a "peaceful Islamic splinter group" or that its "purported relationship" with AQIM (or its predecessor, the GSPC) began only after 2009. Moreover, these two leaders with direct ties to al-Qaida would have been an unlikely choice for a "homegrown" group that emerged as a result of poverty, politics or other domestic problems.

Both Muhammed Ali and Yusuf Ahmed were killed in early 2004 when the Nigerian government cracked down on Boko Haram's base camp in the town of Kanama in Yobe State, Nigeria, near the border with Niger. The camp was called "Afghanistan" in tribute to the group's inspiration, the Taliban. According to northern Nigerian civil society activist-turned-politician Shehu Sani and journalists who reported on Boko Haram in 2004, Boko Haram had "amassed weapons" and engaged in "military training" at the Afghanistan camp.[24] In an academic article in 2015, a scholar on West African intellectual history, Andrea Brigaglia, who conducted fieldwork in Nigeria on Boko Haram's origins, also questioned how a "peaceful" group could have engaged in combat for several weeks with Nigerian security forces if not for the group's prior amassing of weapons and military training at the camp.[25]

Brigaglia's fieldwork in northern Nigeria was unique. He identified the group's early supporters in 2002, including naming the imams in Yobe State who facilitated recruitment to the Afghanistan camp from Salafi mosques, rather than relying on intangible structural factors to explain Boko Haram's founding. Brigaglia suggested that the Afghanistan camp was not a "simple commune" as "virtually all the literature on Boko Haram" depicts. Rather, Brigaglia suggested that the camp represents the genesis of Boko Haram and was "a camp with international connections"; established for the purpose of training "(al-Qaida's?) militants" (*sic*); and was "the first of its kind in the history of Nigeria."[26] However, Brigaglia did not further explore the "international connections" of Boko Haram in 2003 – something that primary sources, such as transcripts from Ibrahim Harun's trial, have since provided.

Brigaglia also argued that the Afghanistan camp was an "appendage" of northern Nigeria's Salafi mission known as *Ahl as-Sunna*. Another often cited leader of Boko Haram in 2002, Muhammed Yusuf, was, according to Brigaglia, responsible for liaising between the Afghanistan camp and mosques in north-eastern Nigeria. Yusuf admitted in an interview that some members of the Afghanistan camp were his students, although he denied being the group's leader (Muhammed Ali was the leader and clashed with Yusuf over when a jihad should be launched, with Yusuf arguing to delay the jihad).[27] However, Brigaglia argued that some of *Ahl as-Sunna's*

leading clerics expected that the Afghanistan camp's members would only carry out attacks or join jihadist groups abroad but not, as Ibrahim Harun planned, within Nigeria.

According to Brigaglia, it was the correct interpretation that the Afghanistan camp was going to be used for training to wage jihad in Nigeria and not abroad that led *Ahl as-Sunna's* most prominent cleric, Shaykh Jafaar Mahmoud Adam, to turn against the camp's jihadi project one year after the camp's founding. Shaykh Jafaar then consented to the Nigerian government crackdown on the camp in late 2003.[28] This has become the origin of Boko Haram's desire for revenge against both Nigerian Salafis and the Nigerian government and is still reflected in the rhetoric in Boko Haram's videos in 2017.[29]

In 2017, a recording of one of Shaykh Jafaar's deputies, Shaykh Aminu Daurawa, was released for the first time and featured him saying in a sermon in the week after 9/11 that "Allah is a suicide bomber."[30] This audio added to other evidence that *Ahl as-Sunna's* most prominent clerics, including Shaykh Jafaar, spoke favorably of al-Qaida, Bin Laden and jihadism after 9/11 and would likely have supported a jihadi training camp for Nigerians to join al-Qaida's jihads at least in Afghanistan and Iraq.[31] Other documentary sources, such as those emerging from the Ibrahim Harun case, are increasingly corroborating Brigaglia's hypothesis about Boko Haram's origins, which this author finds to be convincing, and which challenges most other research on the subject.

2009-2010: The Launch of Jihad under Shekau's Leadership

As discussed in the above section, al-Qaida had a significant impact on Boko Haram's founding. This is evidenced by the operational coordination between Yusuf Ahmed and Muhammed Ashafa with Ibrahim Harun and al-Qaida's external operations unit in 2003; the experience of Boko Haram founder, Muhammed Ali, with al-Qaida in Sudan and Afghanistan and reports of his receiving money from al-Qaida to form Boko Haram's Afghanistan camp in 2002; and the objective of the Afghanistan camp to train Nigerians to fight in jihads in Afghanistan and Iraq with the consent, at least initially, of *Ahl As-Sunna's* clerics.

A second area where al-Qaida had a significant impact on Boko Haram was in assisting the group to launch a jihad in Nigeria after Abubakr Shekau became Boko Haram leader in 2009. This assistance mostly came from the al-Qaida affiliate AQIM whose leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, pledged loyalty to al-Qaida in 2006. Bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, accepted Droukdel's pledge of loyalty in 2007 and claimed to have been "entrusted" to do so by Bin Laden: this is why the GSPC changed its name to AQIM in 2007.[32]

Some Boko Haram members, such as the son of a wealthy Borno State contractor, Adam Kambar, retreated to GSPC camps in the Sahel after the destruction of the Afghanistan camp in late 2003. Kambar and several other Boko Haram members were later tried on terrorism charges in Nigeria in 2007 for their training with the GSPC, which had by then become AQIM.[33] Kambar and 17 other suspects were not convicted, however, due to pressure for their release from groups such as the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (SCSN) of which Muhammed Yusuf had been a member.

SCSN, for example, accused the Nigerian government of Islamophobia by saying that such trials "employed the machinery of the state to victimize Muslim organizations and individuals" and "stereotyped and slandered Islam and Muslims."[34] Kambar, however, later became a U.S. specially designated terrorist in 2012 for, among other reasons, his alleged direct communications with Ayman al-Zawahiri.[35] Babagana Ismail Kwaljima, who was also released with Kambar in 2007, was arrested again in Nigeria in 2011 in the days before the suicide bombing of the UN building in Nigeria's capital of Abuja in August 2011, which killed 23 people.[36] Kwaljima was believed to have been planning a major attack when he arrested, which was probably the attack on the UN headquarters.

Other Boko Haram members stayed in Nigeria after 2003 and continued following Boko Haram's preachers, who were now under Muhammed Yusuf's leadership and most famously argued that "Boko" is "Haram", which roughly means "Western education" is "blasphemous" in the Hausa language. Boko Haram carried out few attacks in Nigeria from 2004 to 2009. However, there was another government crackdown on Boko Haram

after Muhammed Yusuf announced in June 2009 that he would soon launch a jihad and a "Chadian extremist with limited ties to al-Qaida" reportedly entered Nigeria to launch an attack on "high profile targets" with Boko Haram.[37] This crackdown in July 2009 killed around 800 Boko Haram members including Yusuf.

After July 2009, according to Kyari Muhammed, Boko Haram then "went underground" but was able to "remarkably re-surface" in 2010 with "changed tactics."[38] Similar to Kyari Muhammed, Abdul Raufu Mustapha wrote that in July 2009 "Boko Haram went underground, re-organized and resurfaced in 2010 under the leadership of [Abubakr] Shekau."[39] There is a key analytical point that is absent from these two common explanations about Boko Haram's transition from 2009 to 2010: after Boko Haram went "underground" in 2009 AQIM's support is the reason why the group was able to "remarkably re-surface" and "re-organize" with "changed tactics" and launch a jihadist campaign in Nigeria in 2010.

Documents found in Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011 confirm what the current Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP [40]) and Ansaru [41] leaders also have stated in their own biographies: after July 2009 Boko Haram members retreated to the Sahel and AQIM provided critical training and financial support to the group (ISWAP and Ansaru are discussed below in this article).[42] One document dated to August 2009 was a letter from AQIM's commander of the Tariq ibn Ziyad Brigade in the Sahel, Abu Zeid, to AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel. The letter shows that Boko Haram's new leader, Abubakr Shekau, sent three emissaries in August 2009 to meet with Abu Zeid to "consult on waging a guerilla war" in Nigeria.[43] These three Nigerian emissaries included Khalid al-Barnawi and Abu Muhammed, who later became two of the founders of Ansaru in 2011, and another militant, Abu Rayhan. Khalid Al-Barnawi had been involved in one of the GSPC's most notorious attacks on Lemgheity military barracks in Mauritania in 2005 with a number of future AQIM commanders, such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar. After 2005, Khalid al-Barnawi led a training camp in Algeria where Abu Muhammed, who had been at the Afghanistan camp in 2003, also trained.[44] There was another training camp for Nigerians at the same time in Algeria led by Adam Kambar, who returned to Algeria after he was released from custody in Nigeria in 2007.[45]

Abu Zeid wrote in the letter to Droukdel in August 2009 that "we know them well" referring to the three emissaries who had fought in the Tariq ibn Ziyad Brigade, and said that they recounted how Muhammed Yusuf's killing and torture in July 2009 was what also happened to Muhammed Ali in late 2003. Abu Zeid's statement and Khalid al-Barnawi's background as well as the case of Ibrahim Harun indicate the relationship of the Boko Haram leadership to AQIM must have predated – by far – August 2009. Considering the clandestine nature of AQIM, it is also unlikely Shekau could have so quickly dispatched three high-level Boko Haram emissaries to meet an AQIM leader such as Abu Zeid after the Nigerian government's crackdown on Boko Haram from July 26-29, 2009 if not for pre-existing close ties between Boko Haram and AQIM before August 2009.

The letter from Abu Zeid to Droukdel also proves that after Shekau took over leadership of Boko Haram from Muhammed Yusuf, among his first activities was to send the three emissaries to meet with AQIM leadership. The three emissaries told Abu Zeid they faced a "big problem with weapons and money" and wanted trainings of Boko Haram members in intervals of 200 fighters, which Abu Zeid detailed to Droukdel in his letter. Subsequent documents released by AQIM in April 2017 included letters between AQIM and Shekau and AQIM and Khalid al-Barnawi from the months before al-Barnawi split from Shekau and formed Ansaru in 2011. The letters show that AQIM responded positively to the requests of Shekau's three emissaries.[46] In one letter that Droukdel wrote to Shekau in August 2009, which was also found in Bin Laden's compound in 2011, Droukdel said "We are happy at the arrival of your delegation" and "we welcome the union [with Boko Haram], and see it as a necessity to strengthen it, develop it, and raise it to a continuous level". Droukdel also said that AQIM would provide to Boko Haram "waves" of trainings to its members as well as weaponry, "which is not a problem, because of their abundance," and money "to the extent that we have it, so we have added some extra."[47]

According to a separate document, Droukdel confirmed to Shekau that he ordered Abu Zeid to provide $250,000 to Shekau before Boko Haram launched its first attack under Shekau's leadership on Bauchi prison in September 2010, which freed 150 Boko Haram members who were imprisoned in July 2009 (and hundreds

of other common criminals).[48] Reports had also appeared in the Nigerian press in 2012, based on Nigerian intelligence documents that had been made public, of about $250,000 that AQIM gave to Boko Haram to kidnap foreigners in Nigeria.[49] One month after Boko Haram's attack on Bauchi prison, Shekau wrote to Abu Zeid in October 2010 to say "thank you for the training and financial generosity," which indicates AQIM's money and training likely facilitated Boko Haram's first attack under Shekau.

Another letter found in Bin Laden's compound in 2011 included a request from Shekau asking to speak to "Bin Laden's deputy", Ayman al-Zawahiri, about "joining the organization."[50] This letter was not addressed to anyone in particular but by context of the letter it was likely intended for Droukdel to forward to al-Zawahiri. Al-Zawahiri had been more open than Bin Laden to enlist new affiliates, which was evidenced by al-Zawahiri's acceptance of the GSPC's affiliation with al-Qaida in 2006 when Bin Laden presumably could have done so himself and of al-Shabab's affiliation with al-Qaida in 2012 when Bin Laden declined to do so publicly before his death in May 2011. This may be why Shekau was advised to communicate with al-Zawahiri instead of Bin Laden on matters of "joining the organization" of al-Qaida. However, a loyal courier may have nonetheless delivered Shekau's letter to Bin Laden, which is why it was found in his compound in Pakistan in 2011.[51]

Shekau's letter to al-Zawahiri was a follow-up to Abu Zeid's request to Shekau's three emissaries when they met in August 2009 about whether Boko Haram was "an organization" or wanted to "join an organization." The three emissaries said Shekau was injured in July 2009 but wanted to speak directly on the matter of "joining an organization", which appears to be why Shekau wrote directly to al-Zawahiri to ask about joining al-Qaida. The three emissaries also said that they were "delaying" the matter of forming "an organization" until they "established jihad in Nigeria". This is likely why Shekau declared a jihad in a video and released his first written statement on a jihadi web forum announcing Boko Haram's new official name—Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah Liddawah wal-Jihad—at the first anniversary of Muhammed Yusuf's death in July 2010 and two months ahead of Boko Haram's first attack on Bauchi prison in September 2010. Even though AQIM and Boko Haram had not publicized their "union" at this time in 2010, an accredited AQIM member of the al-Fallujah jihadi web forum, Abu-Dujanah al-Tunisi, reacted to Shekau's written statement by saying that he had "credible information" that Boko Haram had "joined" AQIM and that the "union" would soon come.[52] Shekau's July 2010 video showed, however, that he had already begun to disobey Droukdel's advice to not declare a jihad "until the time is ripe from all perspectives with calm nerves, together with a comprehensive consultation with the jihad leaders in the Islamic world."[53]

Shekau's actions immediately after the July 2009 crackdown and AQIM's support to Boko Haram before Boko Haram's first attack in September 2010 present an opposite assessment of Boko Haram's ties to AQIM than what researchers, such as Thurston, have described as "informal", "loose", and "marginal."[54] Such terms are not applicable to the level of trust exhibited by the top levels of AQIM and Boko Haram leadership, including Shekau, Droukdel and Abu Zeid, whereby Shekau could immediately reach out to AQIM's leadership in 2009 and receive virtually all the support that he requested from AQIM during a time of need.

2011-2012: AQIM and Al-Shabab Support for Suicide Bombings in Nigeria

This article has argued that al-Qaida and AQIM had a significant impact on Boko Haram's founding in 2002-2003 and its launch of a jihad in 2009-2010. A third area in which AQIM and al-Shabab had a significant impact on Boko Haram was in suicide bombings. In addition to empirical evidence of AQIM's and al-Shabab's influence on suicide bombings in Nigeria, there are theoretical perspectives to support that expertise in suicide bombings was imported to Nigeria. Michael C. Horowitz, for example, found in 2010 that the "diffusion" of suicide bombing reflects "some sort of transmission from group to group" and that "while it is tempting to evaluate the behavior of every group solely in terms of its local context, a broader perspective is necessary". In this case it was Boko Haram's suicide bombings (or suicide bombings by Boko Haram members who then became aligned with Ansaru, as this section discusses) that were a product of the "combination of learning and emulation" from AQIM and al-Shabab.[55]

There had never been a suicide bombing in Nigeria's history before Boko Haram's first suicide attack on the Federal Police Headquarters in Abuja in June 2011. However, from June 2011 until the end of 2011 there were

seven suicide bombings in Nigeria and throughout 2012 there were 29 more suicide bombings in the country. [56] This totaled 36 suicide attacks in an 18-month period from June 2011 until the end of 2012, according to data this author has collected. The rapid rise in suicide bombings in Nigeria suggests not that Boko Haram gradually learned the tactic through trial and error, but rather that the group learned the tactic from other groups and immediately carried out suicide bombings in Nigeria with proficiency.

Although Boko Haram's relationship with AQIM was closer than to al-Shabab, there is evidence that both AQIM and al-Shabab provided trainings in suicide bombing to Boko Haram before the group's first suicide bombing in June 2011. The first suicide bombing in Nigeria's history at the Federal Police headquarters in June 2011 was preceded by a Boko Haram member who the day before the attack warned the media that members who "arrived from Somalia" would soon carry out an attack.[57] This warning proved to be correct. Another Boko Haram member who claimed the attack the day after it was launched, Abu Fatima, later joined Ansaru in 2012 and became its "commander of suicide operations".[58] Yet another Boko Haram spokesman claimed to a journalist who has contacts to Boko Haram leadership, Ahmed Salkida, that the bomb used in the suicide attack "was a ready-made bomb acquired from abroad," presumably from AQIM.[59]

Mamman Nur, who was Muhammed Yusuf's third-in-command behind Shekau, also led up to 90 Boko Haram members in training with al-Shabab after Yusuf's death in July 2009.[60] After this training, Nur was reported to have masterminded the second suicide bombing in Nigeria's history at the UN building in August 2011, which killed 23 people. As mentioned earlier, this attack was also planned in coordination with AQIM-trained Babagana Ismail Kwaljima, who had been released from custody on terrorism charges with Adam Kambar in 2007.[61]

A UN report also found that a group of Boko Haram members returned to Nigeria from training with al-Shabab in March 2011, which was three months before the group's first suicide bombing in June 2011.[62] This suggests that the return of al-Shabab-trained Boko Haram members to Nigeria in 2011 immediately preceded the introduction of suicide bombings in the country and that the training Boko Haram members received from abroad contributed to the group's first suicide bombings. It is possible that AQIM and al-Shabab coordinated the training of the Nigerian suicide bombers with AQIM sending some Boko Haram fighters with Mamman Nur to Somalia before their return to Nigeria in the first half of 2011.

Geographically, the suicide bombings in Nigeria from June 2011 until the end of 2012 were primarily in Nigeria's Middle Belt [63] region, where 30 of the 36 suicide bombings took place: only six were in the three states of north-eastern Nigeria - Borno, Yobe and Adamawa - during that 18-month period. This is despite that the vast majority of other attacks from June 2011 until the end of 2012 were concentrated in north-eastern Nigeria, albeit mostly relatively small-scale attacks, such as assassinations of Islamic clerics, bombings and shootings at police stations, government offices or churches, and bank robberies.[64] It was the suicide bombings in the Middle Belt that made Boko Haram a major threat to international targets and to Nigeria's unity. Nearly half of the suicide bombings in the Middle Belt targeted churches, especially on holidays such as Easter and Christmas, which escalated Muslim-Christian tensions because the Middle Belt is a fault line between Nigeria's majority Muslim population in the north and majority Christian population in the south.

The Middle Belt and states surrounding the region, such as Kano, is also where Ansaru was most active, with its kidnapping of 11 foreigners in four operations from 2011-2013. One of the kidnappings was led by two Mauritanian AQIM members in Kano targeting a German engineer in January 2012; it was claimed by AQIM's al-Andalus agency directly.[65] In three of the kidnappings the hostages were killed in rescue attempts, while in only one instance a hostage escaped.[66]

According to the documents released by AQIM in April 2017, Ansaru, whose shura [council] included Khalid al-Barnawi and Abu Muhammed, broke away from Shekau in 2011. Among other reasons that Khalid al-Barnawi cited for breaking away from Boko Haram was that Shekau had fighters killed who had gone for training in Somalia (with al-Shabab) or in Algeria (with AQIM). This training in 2010 coincided with the condolence messages at the one-year anniversary of Muhammed Yusuf's death that AQIM and al-Shabab released in July 2010, thus indicating their support for Boko Haram at that time.[67] However, AQIM support

only continued to Ansaru under Khalid al-Barnawi's leadership and did not extend to Boko Haram under Shekau's leadership after al-Barnawi had broken away from Shekau in 2011 and formed Ansaru.

Because Ansaru operated in and around the Middle Belt in 2011-2013, where 30 of the 36 suicide bombings were carried out from June 2011 until the end of 2012, and Boko Haram under Shekau primarily operated in north-eastern Nigeria, it is likely the suicide bombings in Nigeria from June 2011 until the end of 2012 were carried out by Ansaru and AQIM- and al-Shabab-trained militants in Boko Haram. However, the AQIM- and al-Shabab-trained militants in Boko Haram were likely antagonistic to Shekau and closely aligned with Ansaru. One example of this is the case of the mastermind of a major suicide car bombing at a church outside of Abuja on Christmas Day 2011 that killed 41 people. This mastermind, Kabiru Sokoto, claimed in his court trial to have received a portion of $250,000 from "a group in Algeria" and was also reported to have made a phone call to the suicide bomber of the Federal Police headquarters in the hours before that attack in June 2011 and to have made phone calls to Mamman Nur.[68] Kabiru Sokoto said in his trial, however, that Khalid al-Barnawi's deputy, Abu Muhammed, was in charge of "North Central" - referring to the Middle Belt - and that he answered to Abu Muhammed, not Shekau.[69]

Kabiru Sokoto's claim suggests that his operation was carried out by fighters in Boko Haram who were aligned with Khalid al-Barnawi and Abu Muhammed of Ansaru and Mamman Nur. Mamman Nur had rivaled Shekau for the leadership of Boko Haram after Muhammed Yusuf's death in July 2009. He was bolstered by the credibility he had gained from training in Somalia, which Shekau may not have permitted because it enabled Nur to challenge Shekau's hold on the group's leadership. However, Nur did not formally break with Shekau because he wanted to prevent the infighting that Boko Haram carried out against Ansaru after Khalid al-Barnawi had broken away from Shekau in 2011.[70] Presumably, Kabiru Sokoto and other beneficiaries of AQIM and al-Shabab funding and training also did not formally break from Boko Haram for the same reasons as Nur.

There were also specific ideological and personality issues that explain why Khalid al-Barnawi broke with Shekau but Nur did not. For example, Khalid al-Barnawi wrote to AQIM that Shekau declared *takfir* on civilians as if he were a "graduate" of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) from which the GSPC broke in 1998. Shekau, also like one of the GIA's leaders, considered himself to be the "caliph and greatest imam" and ignored the advice of both Boko Haram's shura and AQIM's shura. Khalid al-Barnawi's longer history with AQIM and the GSPC than Nur could explain why al-Barnawi was reminded of the GSPC's own experiences with the GIA and could not bear co-existing with Shekau in 2011 while Nur could. The AQIM documents released in April 2017 show that once Shekau stopped responding to "letters of advice" from AQIM leaders, such as sharia advisor Abu al-Hasan Rashid al-Bulaydi, Khalid al-Barnawi and his supporters consulted with AQIM and formed Ansaru in 2011.[71]

Most likely, Ansaru kept the remainder of the $250,000 from AQIM for itself after Ansaru split from Shekau in 2011. Ansaru then used the money for kidnappings and major suicide bombings, especially at churches in the Middle Belt on Christian holidays. This would have been consistent with AQIM's desire to fund kidnappings of foreigners for ransom in Nigeria and Droukdel's perception of the conflict in Nigeria in his statements as one between a "Crusader minority" and a Muslim majority (although Muslims and Christians are nearly equally distributed in Nigeria).[72]

Shekau's spokesmen in Boko Haram claimed many of the suicide attacks in the Middle Belt, including the Kabiru Sokoto-masterminded attack at the church outside of Abuja on Christmas Day 2011, even though Kabiru Sokoto did not answer to Shekau.[73] This is because the militants involved in such attacks, such as Mamman Nur and Kabiru Sokoto, had not formally broken with Shekau like Ansaru did. Shekau's spokesman, who was in phone contact with Kabiru Sokoto, still admitted after his arrest in January 2012 that "most of us were tired of fighting but we could not come out to say so because of fear of reprisal from our leader, Imam Shekau, on dissenting members."[74]

Thurston has argued that because Boko Haram "could" have learned to carry out suicide bombings on its own that is incorrect to suggest that the tactic was therefore not "homegrown" while Pérouse de Montclos has

argued that Boko Haram "did not need any foreign instruction to rebel against the Nigerian government."[75] However, the evidence about the first series of suicide bombings in Nigeria, like the evidence about Boko Haram's founding in 2002-2003 and the launch of jihad in 2009-2010, suggests that Boko Haram did seek and benefit significantly from the support of al-Qaida and its affiliates. The first suicide bombings in Nigeria from June 2011 until the end of 2012 were carried out by Ansaru or Ansaru-aligned militants in Boko Haram who were trained and funded by AQIM and al-Shabab. Thurston also misinterprets factional relations in Boko Haram and the impact of the group's training with AQIM and al-Shabab where he writes that Boko Haram's "self-generated" attacks, such as assassinations on motorbikes, do not "correlate" with "the alleged interventions of outsiders."[76] In the two years after Ansaru broke from Shekau in May 2011, the impact of the training with AQIM and al-Shabab was evidenced not through the attacks of Shekau's faction of Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria, which were mostly "self-generated", but through the suicide bombings and kidnappings of Ansaru and Ansaru-aligned militants in Boko Haram in the Middle Belt region.

Obstacles to Recognising Al-Qaida's Significant Impact on Boko Haram

This article presented three cases that show al-Qaida had a significant impact on Boko Haram's founding in 2002-2003, launch of jihad in 2009-2010 and first series of Boko Haram suicide attacks in 2011-2012. These cases should not, however, be considered the full evidence of al-Qaida funding, training and advising of Boko Haram but rather they should be seen as a sample of this. For example, in separate analyses this author has detailed how Ansaru members, such as Khalid al-Barnawi and Abu Fatima, and Ansaru-aligned Boko Haram members, such as Mamman Nur, rejoined Boko Haram under Shekau's leadership in 2013. In addition to them, Ansaru-aligned Nigerian militants who fought alongside AQIM in Mali rejoined Boko Haram when they returned to Nigeria after the French-led military intervention in Mali in February 2013.[77] This paved the way for Boko Haram's occupation of territory in north-eastern Nigeria starting in March 2013. If those analyses or the analysis in this article are correct, Thurston's claim that al-Qaida's impact on Boko Haram was "marginal" or that AQIM did "perhaps not" have a "decisive effect" on Boko Haram are major under-estimates. [78]

The occupation of territory, for instance, not only allowed Boko Haram to achieve one of its original aims envisaged in 2002 - to govern a Taliban-like state (at least in terms of sharia punishments) - but it also opened up space for the group's kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 and the group's pledge of loyalty to the Islamic State in 2015. Thurston has recognised that, "If training in Mali occurred, and if it allowed Boko Haram to begin holding territory in Nigeria in 2013, these developments do not seem to have enthused AQIM."[79] Such "developments" did not "enthuse" AQIM because when Boko Haram occupied territory in Nigeria in 2013 some of the group's tactics, such as "enslaving" the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls, using girls in suicide bombings and burning boys in their school dormitories, were not to the liking of either AQIM or Ansaru members who did not rejoin Boko Haram.[80]

This does not mean, however, that Ansaru members, Ansaru-aligned Boko Haram members and AQIM-allied Nigerian militants who fought in Mali did not rejoin Shekau's faction of Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria and improve its capabilities in kidnappings-for-ransom, which became Boko Haram's biggest "war chest"; suicide bombings, which increased from less than 10 in north-eastern Nigeria and neighboring countries from 2011 to 2013 to more than 200 in the same region from 2014 to 2016; and conquering territory.[81] Rather, after they rejoined with Boko Haram in 2013 Shekau exploited those capabilities in ways AQIM did not approve. Shekau's excesses are also why Mamman Nur, Abu Fatima and Khalid al-Barnawi all broke again from Shekau by 2016 and Nur, Abu Fatima and Muhammed Yusuf's son, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, took over the lead of ISWAP in August 2016 and ejected Shekau from the group (Khalid al-Barnawi returned to Ansaru before his arrest in April 2016).

Part of the concern about recognising al-Qaida's significant impact on Boko Haram is that, according to Thurston, it reflects an "alarmist agenda".[82] However, a certain level of alarmism may have been useful for countering Boko Haram. In 2007, the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (SCSN) claim that the Nigerian

government's allegations about Adam Kambar and Babagana Ismail Kwaljima were not true but Islamophobic and the sultan of Sokoto's claim at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington D.C in 2007 that "there is no al-Qaida in Nigeria" led to complacency.[83] That same year, Ousmane Kane described Boko Haram as "largely homegrown, not [an] offshoot of militant groups with ties to the Middle East" and argued that "if Islamism exist[ed] in [sub-Saharan Africa], it exist[ed] in the form of moderate revivalists attempting to implement social change."[84] This complacency was shattered when Boko Haram went "underground" in 2009 and then "remarkably resurfaced" with its first series of attacks in 2010 with AQIM support, and when Nigeria experienced the first series of Ansaru and Boko Haram kidnappings and suicide bombings in 2011, also with support from AQIM and al-Shabab. At the time in 2011, Ansaru's first kidnapping in Nigeria was "ruled out" as an al-Qaida operation by, among others, Thurston, because AQIM "had to [Thurston's] knowledge, made no inroads into Nigerian territory."[85]

A lack of alarm - and perhaps also awareness - about al-Qaida in the early 2000s likely also contributed to Shaykh Jafaar's and other Salafi clerics' promotion of al-Qaida and Bin Laden in their sermons and on billboards in cities such as Kano, even as late as 2006.[86] Had Nigerian Salafis never formed what Thurston admits was a "close relationship" with Boko Haram and tolerated an al-Qaida presence at the Afghanistan camp in Nigeria in 2002, the Nigerian government's crackdowns in 2003 and 2009 and Boko Haram's reprisals with AQIM and al-Shabab support may have never become a defining feature of the conflict in Nigeria.[87]

Others, such as Abdul Raufu Mustapha and Pérouse de Montclos, have argued respectively that analysis showing al-Qaida's significant impact on Boko Haram comes from a "Western security mind-set" and that it may "help authoritarian and corrupt regimes to get international financial and military support in their war on terrorism."[88] Similar to Pérouse de Montclos, Thurston has expressed concern that this analysis may lead to the "stereotyping" of "African Islam" as "essentially pacifist" until it is influenced by a more "militant" style of "Arab Islam" and be used by Nigerian politicians to "downplay" Boko Haram's "domestic support" or "security force abuses."[89] However, the three foremost Boko Haram "insiders" and a former lawyer for Muhammed Yusuf, who are all Nigerian Muslims, have recognised al-Qaida's impact on Boko Haram's financing, ideology and operations.[90] Moreover, it is problematic to distort analysis that al-Qaida had a significant impact on Boko Haram despite the evidence because it may lead to poor counter-terrorism policies or incorrect assumptions. Researchers and officials can neutrally evaluate the analysis in this article and, if it is accepted, still prescribe counter-terrorism solutions that they believe are not counter-productive.

Finally, the prevailing meta-narrative that Boko Haram is "homegrown" and "local" has in effect, if not also by intent of Gulf-based research patrons[91], not only led to a misunderstanding of al-Qaida's significant impact on Boko Haram's founding, launch of jihad and suicide bombings, but it has also inhibited a broader critique of the impact of external actors on Boko Haram. For example, to this author's knowledge, Brigaglia is still the only scholar to have investigated the early *Ahl as-Sunna*-Boko Haram alliance in 2002 in any depth and not only from an ideological but also a logistical, operational and individual agency perspective.[92] Moreover, the antagonism towards non-Salafi Muslims, such as Sufis, secular governance and democracy and the promotion of jihadism by Gulf-funded and Gulf-trained Salafis in Nigeria created conditions for the early expansion of Boko Haram's ideology and recruitment pool in the 2000s. Muhammed Yusuf may have broken from Shaykh Jafaar in the mid-2000s but Yusuf carried with him the legacy of the Afghanistan camp in his preaching until his death in 2009, which transferred to Shekau with his declaration of jihad in 2010.[93] Further research on these aspects of Boko Haram's founding in 2002 would not only overturn the conventional wisdom that it was a "peaceful" group in 2002 but also shed further light on the extent to which Shaykh Jafaar or his deputies in *Ahl as-Sunna* collaborated with, and knew about, al-Qaida's role in the Afghanistan camp in 2002.

Conclusion

While this article does not argue that external factors and individual agency are the only ways to explain the founding and rise of Boko Haram, the article does suggest that more research on external influences and the decision-making processes of Boko Haram leaders using primary sources be conducted. The strongest reason

for emphasising external influences and individual agency is that it contributes to understanding the indicators for what the teacher of critical thinking and advanced analytic techniques, Randolph H. Pherson, has termed "signposts of change" or "sudden shifts".[94] Why did Boko Haram form a training camp in Nigeria right after 9/11 in 2002? Why did Boko Haram suddenly begin launching attacks in September 2010 after being "underground" for a year? Why were an unprecedented 30 of 36 suicide bombings from June 2011 until the end of 2012 in the Middle Belt? And why did Boko Haram begin raiding military barracks and conquering territory in Nigeria one month after the French-led military intervention in Mali in February 2013? Structural factors did not vary significantly before these changes, but the external influences and individual decisions of militants did.

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Notes

[1] This name in Arabic literally means the "[Sunni Muslim] Group for Preaching and Jihad."

[2] Dionne Searcey and Marc Santora, "Boko Haram Ranked Ahead of ISIS for Deadliest Terror Group," *New York Times,* 18 November 2015. "Boko Haram has been the most deadly terror group in Africa (2010-2016)," The Atlas, 2016; URL: https://www.theatlas.com/charts/HJ2t0y3Zb .

[3] Daniela Pisoiu and Sandra Hain, "Theories of Terrorism: An Introduction." Routledge, (September 2017).

[4] Alexander Thurston, "Boko Haram The History of an African Jihadist Movement," Princeton: Princeton University Press (forthcoming January 2018). Alex Thurston, "The disease is unbelief': Boko Haram's religious and political worldview," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper, No. 22, January 2016; URL: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper_Alex-Thurston_Final_Web.pdf

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jean Herskovits, "In Nigeria, Boko Haram Is Not the Problem," *New York Times*, 2 January 2012; URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/02/opinion/in-nigeria-boko-haram-is-not-the-problem.html .

[7] Hilary Matfess, "Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Women Witness," London: Hurst Publishers (forthcoming 2018).

[8] Kyari Mohammed, "The message and methods of Boko Haram," in: Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Ed.) Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria,(Ibadan: French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA)–Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014.

[9] Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, "Jihad in Sub-Saharan Africa-Challenging the Narratives of the War on Terror," *World Policy Institute*, October 2016; URL: http://www.worldpolicy.org/sites/default/files/policy_papers/Jihad%20in%20Sub-Saharan%20Africa-Challenging%20the%20Narratives%20of%20the%20War%20on%20Terror.pdf .

[10] Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2016) A Sectarian Jihad in Nigeria: The Case of Boko Haram, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27:5,pp. 878-895. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "Introduction," in: Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, op. cit. (2014).

[11] Had Higazi consulted primary source documents, such as communiqués between Boko Haram and Islamic State-loyal Africa Media news agency from 2014, the Twitter account that Africa Media set up for Boko Haram in early January 2015, which was two months before the account hosted Boko Haram's pledge to Islamic State, or now public internal audios from Boko Haram leaders, such as Mamman Nur and Abu Fatima, he may have since reconsidered his claim, which was unsourced and was not evidence-based. Thurston has similarly argued that the "timing of the affiliation" with Islamic State reflected Boko Haram's "weakness", although he provided no evidence to corroborate the claim. Primary sources show that Boko Haram leaders, including Mamman Nur, Abu

Fatima and Shekau, made the pledge to Abubakr al-Baghdadi because they all believed he was a legitimate caliph. The continued recognition of al-Baghdadi as caliph by Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi in his sermons in ISWAP territory that are posted on the Telegram application and by Boko Haram leader Shekau shows that even despite Islamic State's territorial losses in 2017 and Shekau's demotion by Islamic State in August 2016 all leaders' loyalty to al-Baghdadi has transcended temporal battlefield victories and losses and organizational politics and fracturing. Moreover, Boko Haram's reported losses as a result of "military pressure" in 2015 were mainly in major towns in north-eastern Nigeria, while most of the Borno countryside, eastern Yobe, and the north-eastern tip of Adamawa have remained "not accessible" and have been under ISWAP or Boko Haram de-facto control since 2014, according to the UN. Translations of Africa Media documents and Boko Haram's internal audios are available in Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, "The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State," London: Hurst (forthcoming 2018). See also Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram and the Islamist Insurgency in West Africa", Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Terrorism, Non-Proliferation, and Trade Subcommittee," 24 February 2016; URL: https://gallery.mailchimp.com/28b6673fcc2022a1dd557acae/files/Jacob_Zenn_Written_Testimony_Feb_24_2016.pdf . UNOCHA Northeastern Nigeria Humanitarian Situation Update, September 2017; URL: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20102017_ocha_nga_ne_sitrep_no_sept_2017.pdf . Alexander Thurston, "Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement," Princeton University Press (forthcoming January 2018); pp. 183. Adam Higazi, "Mobilisation into and against Boko Haram in North-East Nigeria," in M. Cahen, M.E. Pommerolle, K. Tall (Eds.), Collective Mobilisations in Africa: Contestation, Resistance, Revolt. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

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[13] United States District Court. "United States of America against Ibrahim Suleiman Adnan Adam Harun" Case 1:12-cr-00134-BMC-MDG, 4 August 2016. "Al Qaeda Operative Convicted Of Multiple Terrorism Offenses Targeting Americans Overseas," Department of Justice U.S. Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, 16 March 2017. Kamarudeen Ogundele, "Suspect Admits Links with al-Qaeda," *The Nation*, 4 April 2012; URL; https://issuu.com/thenation/docs/april_04__2012 .

[14] USA v. Hausa, Eastern District of New York, Docket number 1:12-cr-00134, 21 February 2012; URL: https://www.unitedstatescourts.org/federal/nyed/327440/.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] This author expresses remorse for Abdul Raufu Mustapha's passing in 2017 and would like to refer readers to an obituary in his name; URL: https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/about/news/professor-abdul-raufu-mustapha-1954-2017 .

[18] Muhammed Ali is not to be confused with Ali Mohamed, the U.S. Army officer who infiltrated Egyptian Islamic Jihad in the 1980s and later became a trainer for al-Qaida. J. M. Berger. *Ali Mohamed: A Sourcebook for Researchers* (N.p.: Intelwire Press, 2006), pp. 1-2.

[19] Abdul Raufu Mustapha, "Understanding Boko Haram," in: A. R. Mustapha (Ed.) Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp., 147- 198. Kyari Mohammed, "The message and methods of Boko Haram," in Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria, edited by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Ibadan: French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA)–Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014.

[20] "The Big Haunt"*, Tell* [Lagos] 26 April 2004, pp. 22, 26.

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[28] The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram", *Diritto e Questioni Pubbliche*, 15(2), pp. 174 - 201, 2015.

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[30] Abdulbasit Kassim, "Shaykh Aminu Daurawa, Boko Haram and the Theological Discourse on Suicide Bombing," *Medium*, 19 August 2017; URL https://medium.com/@ak61/shaykh-aminu-daurawa-boko-haram-and-the-theological-discourse-of-suicide-bombing-a8e5941c5035 .

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[32] Don Rassler, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Liam Collins, Muhammad al- Ùbaydi, Nelly Lahoud, and Stuart Caudill, "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?" West Poin, N.Y.: t Combating Terrorism Center, 3 May 2012; URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined .

[33] "Five Nigerians on Terror Charges," *BBC*, 27 November 2009; URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7108629.stm .

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[37] "WikiLeaks: US Had Intelligence on Boko Haram Attack," *Africanheraldexpress*, 13 December 2010; URL: http://www.afran.info/modules/news/article.php?storyid=5884 .

[38] Kyari Mohammed, "The message and methods of Boko Haram;" in:Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos,op. cit. (2014).

[39] Abdul Raufu Mustapha, "Understanding Boko Haram," in Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria, Ed. by A. R. Mustapha, pp. 147- 198. Oxford: James Currey, 2014.

[40] Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) is the name Boko Haram adopted after it pledged allegiance to Islamic State in March 2015. It has been led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi (Habib Yusuf), who is Muhammed Yusuf's son, since August 2016. It was led by Abubakr Shekau from March 2015 to August 2016.

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[43] Abdallah Abu Zayd 'Abd-al-Hamid to 'our Shaykh and Emir, Abu Mus'ab 'Abd-al-Wadud' Subject: A letter from the Emir of the Nigeria group", Bin Laden's Bookshelf: Office of the Director of National Intelligence (released in January 2017 but dated to August 2009); URL: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Abdallah%20Abu%20Zayd%20Abd-al-Hamid%20to%20Abu%20Mus%20ab%20Abd-al-Wadud.pdf .

[44] "Exclusif...Mort des deux otages occidentaux tués au Nigeria: Une source d'AQMI livre quelques details," *Agence Nouakchott d'Information*, 10 March 2012

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[46] At least one of these letters was found in Bin Laden's compound in 2011 and released by the U.S government in November 2017. Shaykh Abu Al-Hasan Rashid, "Documents of Advice And Sharia Instruction to the Fighters In Nigeria," (released in April 2017 but dated to before Bin Laden's death in May 2011); URL: https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/shaykh-abucc84-al-hcca3asan-rashicc84d-22sharicc84ah-advice-and-guidance-for-the-mujacc84hidicc84n-of-nigeria22.pdf . A translation of these letters are available in Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, "The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State," Hurst (forthcoming 2018).

[47] Ibid.

[48] Abdulbasit Kassim, "The Initial Source of Boko Haram Funding Explained," *Medium*, 16 May 2017; URL: https://medium.com/@ak61/the-initial-source-of-boko-haram-funding-explained-1b142fd5a672 . "More than 700 inmates escape during attack on Nigerian prison," *The Guardian*, 8 September 2010; URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/08/muslim-extremists-escape-nigeria-prison .

[49] Boko Haram Gets Sponsorship from Algeria, FG Tells Court," *Vanguard,* 10 May 2013. Lawan Adamu, "The Untold Story of Kabiru Sokoto," *Daily Trust*, 13 February 2012.

[50] Abubakar Shekau, "Praise be to God the Lord of all worlds," Bin Laden's Bookshelf: Office of the Director of National Intelligence (released in August 2016 but dated to before Bin Laden's death in May 2011); URL: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Praise%20be%20to%20God%20the%20Lord%20of%20all%20worlds.pdf .

[51] Don Rassler, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Liam Collins, Muhammad al- Ùbaydi, Nelly Lahoud, and Stuart Caudill, "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?" West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, 3 May 2012; URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined .

[52] Abu Dujanah al-Tunisi's statement was released on several Arabic language jihadi web forums, including a post to Ansar al-Mujahidin 23877.

[53] The video of Shekau's declaration of jihad was posted to Youtube only in 2013 but was likely filmed in 2010 because of Shekau's references to then current events, such as the World Cup in 2010. The video was not widely seen, although Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported on it in July 2010 and may have received it directly from Boko Haram but not posted it on the AFP website. "Late Shekau Declaration of War against Christianity and Western Education," 26 August 2013; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Okrm2ZryK90 . A translation of the video is available in Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, "The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State," London: Hurst (forthcoming 2018). 'America, die with your fury', *AFP*, 14 July 2010; URL: https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/america-die-with-your-fury-489783 .

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[56] This is based on the author's data set of suicide attacks in Nigeria from 2011 to 2015. The data is based on news reports of suicide bombings during this period. The author thanks Omar Mahmoud for corroborating some of this data.

[57] Ahhmed Salkida, "The Story Of Nigeria's First Suicide Bomber-*BluePrint Magazine*," Sahara Reporters, 26 June 2011. "Police Headquarters Bombing: IG Had Meeting With Bomber," *Point Blank News,* 17 June 2011.

[58] Udumu Kalu, "Al-Qa`ida-Boko Haram Links in Kano Since 2009," *Vanguard*, 24 December 2011. Ahhmed Salkida, "The Story Of Nigeria's First Suicide Bomber"*BluePrint Magazine,*" Sahara Reporters, 26 June 2011. "Police Headquarters Bombing: IG Had Meeting With Bomber," *Point Blank News*, June 17, 2011. "Nigerian Islamists vow 'fiercer' attacks," *AFP*, 15 June 2011. "Another Islamic Sect Emerges to Counter Boko Haram?" *Desert Herald*, 2 June 2012

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[61] Despite the reports, this author believes it was likely Abu Muhammed and not necessarily Mamman Nur who was the foremost mastermind of the attack on the UN building. John Gambrell, "Nigeria: 2 Suspects Arrested in UN HQ Bombing," *Associated Press*, August 31, 2011; "Boko Haram Gets Sponsorship from Algeria, FG Tells Court," *Vanguard*, May 10, 2013; "Boko Haram Promises Bloodier Days; Threatens More Attacks On Churches And Government Buildings," *Sahara Reporters*, 19 July 2012. Lawan Adamu, "The Untold Story of Kabiru Sokoto," *Daily Trust*, 13 February 2012. "I am Alive, Says Abubakar Shekau in New Video," *Vanguard*, 26 September 2013.

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[63] Nigeria's "Middle Belt," which includes Kaduna, Jos (Plateau State), and areas around Abuja, is a region of central Nigeria populated by diverse ethnic groups. It is where majority Muslim northern Nigeria and majority Christian southern Nigeria meet and where religious clashes have taken place.

[64] This data is compiled in the author's data set. Available on request.

[65] On June 2, 2012 Algeria's Arabic-language Ech-Chourouk newspaper's website quoted "well-informed sources" saying the two Mauritanian AQIM kidnappers of the German engineer were Ibrahim Daoussa and Abdelhalim Saral. "Nigeria Detains 5 with 'Al Qaeda-links' over German Kidnap," *Agence France-Presse*, 27 March 2012; Lawal Danuma, "Kidnapped German Killed in JTF Raid," *Daily Trust*, 31 May 2012. "al-Andalus Media presents a new statement from al-Qā'idah in the Islamic Maghrib: "On the Killing of the German Prisoner in Nigeria", *al-Andalus Media*, 15 June 2012.; URL: http://jihadology.net/2012/06/12/al-andalus-media-presents-a-new-statement-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-on-the-killing-of-the-german-prisoner-in-nigeria/. "Al-Andalus Media presents a new statement and video message from al-Qā'ida in the Islamic Maghrib: "To the German Government: If They Release Umm Sayf Allah al-Anṣārī Then We Will Release To You Our Prisoner", *al-Andalus Media*. 23 March 2012.; URL: http://jihadology.net/2012/03/23/al-andalus-media-presents-a-new-statement-and-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-to-the-german-government-if-they-release-umm-sayf-allah-al-an%E1%B9%A3ari-then-we-will-re/ .

[66] In the fourth kidnapping, Ansaru killed seven hostages in Sambisa Forest in March 2013 and claimed the British were trying to rescue them, although such claims may have been false. "New statement from Jamā'at Anṣār al-Muslimīn Fi Bilād al-Sūdān's Abū Yūsuf al-Anṣārī: "Killing the Christian Prisoners As A Result of the Joint Nigerian-British Military Operation," 9 March 2013; URL: http://jihadology.net/2013/03/09/new-statement-from-jamaat-an%E1%B9%A3ar-al-muslimin-fi-bilad-al-sudans-abu-yusuf-al-an%E1%B9%A3ari-killing-the-christian-prisoners-as-a-result-of-the-joint-nigerian-british/ .

[67] "The Brigades of Tawhid in Nigeria," *Arrahmah.com*, 22 August 2009; "Periodical Review July 2010 – No. 2," ICT's *Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group*, August 2010.

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[81] Ahmed Salkida, "What Does Boko Haram Want?", *Storify*, 1 November 2014; URL: https://storify.com/jeremyweate/whatdoesbhwant .

[82] Alexander Thurston, "Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement," Princeton: Princeton University Press (forthcoming January 2018), pp. 15.

[83] "No Al-Qaeda, Taliban in Country – Sultan," *Leadership*, 15 November 2007; URL: http://allafrica.com/stories/200711150531.html .

[84] Ousmane Kane, "Islamic Inroads in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 64 - 67.

[85] In contrast, Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler, who was kidnapped by AQIM in Niger in 2008 and saw a courier from Kano, Nigeria among his captors, wrote in 2012 that "There seems to be a reluctance to believe that [al-Shabab, AQIM and Boko Haram] are all part of the same jihadi movement. Many want to believe that Boko Haram is different, somehow less dangerous than al-Qaida's other African affiliates. While I understand the reluctance to acknowledge that al-Qaida might have won a solid foothold in Africa's most populous and important country, again, I know that to be the case." Robert Fowler, "My 130 days in the hands of al-Qaeda's African 'monsters', by former hostage," *The Telegraph*, 10 March 2012; URL: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/nigeria/9136201/My-130-days-in-the-hands-of-al-Qaedas-African-monsters-by-former-hostage.html . For a similar perspective from 2005, see Stephen Schwartz, "Islamic Extremism on the Rise in Nigeria," *Terrorism Monitor*, 21 October 2005; URL: https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-extremism-on-the-rise-in-nigeria/ . Alex Thurston, "A Kidnapping in Northern Nigeria [Updated]," *Sahelblog*, 16 May 2011; URL: https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2011/05/16/a-kidnapping-in-northern-nigeria/ .

[86] Abdalla Uba Adamu, "Enter the Dragon: Shari'a, Popular Culture and Film Censorship in Northern Nigeria," November 2004.

[87] Alexander Thurston, "Nigeria's Mainstream Salafis between Boko Haram and the State," Islamic Africa, Vol. 6, No. 1 (July 2015), pp. 109 - 134.

[88] Abdul Raufu Mustapha also pointed to two arguments that were supposedly "embellishing" and "contradictory", such as that, first, "Boko Haram operated as al-Qaida's representative in Nigeria" and, second, that "no al-Qaida affiliate has recognized Shekau or Boko Haram as one of their own." However, Boko Haram's attempted and successful attacks from as early as 2003 with Ibrahim Harun show that it is neither an "embellishment" nor "contradictory" to argue that Boko Haram was at least a "representative" of al-Qaida's interests in Nigeria even though Droukdel only privately recognized in correspondences with Shekau in 2009 that AQIM had a "union" with Boko Haram. Boko Haram "represented" al-Qaida's interests in, among other ways, Shekau's claim of the attack on the UN building in Abuja in 2011 (even though Ansaru-aligned militants may have actually masterminded the attack) and in the demand of the kidnappers in the jointly claimed Ansaru and Boko Haram kidnapping of a French family in northern Cameroon in February 2013 for France to halt its military intervention in Mali. Thurston has also argued without providing any examples that analysis of al-Qaida's significant impact on Boko Haram relies on a "highly selective use of evidence." However, this article, for example, relied on diverse evidence in Hausa, Arabic, English and French languages, including primary source oral and written correspondences and biographies of jihadi leaders and court transcripts, unique attack data sets, analysis of jihadi video content, news reports from 2004, this author's fieldwork in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Mali, Mauritania and Algeria and interviews with and reports from Boko Haram "insiders". Abdul Raufu Mustapha, "Understanding Boko Haram," in Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria, Ed. by A. R. Mustapha, pp. 147- 198. Oxford: James Currey, 2014. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2016) A Sectarian Jihad in Nigeria: The Case of Boko Haram, Small Wars & Insurgencies, Vol. 27, No. 5, pp. 878 - 895. Alexander Thurston, "Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement," Princeton: Princeton University Press (forthcoming January 2018), pp. 263.

[89] These three insiders are all highly guarded about sharing their sources publicly, including Fulan Nasrallah; a longtime journalist with contacts to Boko Haram leaders, Ahmed Salkida; and an alleged ISWAP member who has released images of dead fighters and their biographies on Facebook, Datty Salafi. Muhammed's Yusuf lawyer, Barrister Zanna Mustapha, has stated that Mahamat Daud was a Francophone Boko Haram member who facilitated Boko Haram members' travel to northern Mali to fight with the

AQIM-allied Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) in 2012. However, according to Zanna, Daud was resentful about Shekau being named the leader of ISWAP in 2015. Ahmed Salkida, "What Does Boko Haram Want?" 1 November 2014; URL: https://storify.com/jeremyweate/whatdoesbhwant . Facebook account of "Datti Assalafiy" 28 August 2016"; URL: "Clash of the titans- Idris Ahmed and SK usman clash over BH, Assalafiy," *knottedpost.com* , 30 August 2017; URL: http://tabloids.knottedpost.com/news/clash-of-the-titans-idris-ahmed-and-sk-usman-clash-over-bh-assalafiy/ . "Update on the Unlawful Arrest and Detention of Datti Assalafiy," *cupstv.com,* 15 August 2017; URL: https://cupstv.wordpress.com/2017/08/15/update-on-the-unlawful-arrest-and-detention-of-datti-assalafiy/ . "Can Senegal Bear The Costs Of A War With Boko Haram?", Fulansitrep, 24 November 201; URL: . https://fulansitrep.wordpress.com/2015/11/24/can-senegal-bear-the-costs-of-a-war-with-boko-haram/ .

[90] Alexander Thurston, "Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement," Princeton: Princeton University Press (forthcoming January 2018), pp. 189.

[91] Research supporting this "meta-narrative", for instance, has been sponsored by Georgetown's Saudi-funded "Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding" and the Brookings Institution's Qatar-funded "Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World". Alexander Thurston, "Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement," Princeton University Press (forthcoming January 2018), Pp. 9 - 10.

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[94] Randolph H. Pherson, Alan R. Schwartz, Elizabeth Manak, "Anticipating Rare Events: The Role of ACH and Other Structured Analytic Techniques," *Pherson Associates*, 2008; URL: http://www.pherson.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/05.-Anticipating-Rare-Events-The-Role-of-ACH-and-Other-SATs_FINAL.pdf .

Al-Qaida's Strategy in Libya: Keep it Local, Stupid

by Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack

Abstract

This article looks at how al-Qaida-linked groups focus on the local struggle in Libya, how they have shaped their strategies and activities in the country, and what impact this has had on the communities where they are active. It explores how al-Qaida-linked groups have adapted their strategies differently in the eastern cities of Benghazi and Derna and draws out the main implications for Libya's future and the future of al-Qaida-linked groups in Libya. It argues that in Libya, al-Qaida-linked groups have done a better job than their ISIS-linked counterparts at staying rooted to local concerns, local actors, and evolving country dynamics, and that this has allowed them to mimic and replicate local and traditional power structures. The Libyan authorities' failure to delegitimize the underpinning ideology of al-Qaida-linked groups, the normalization of violence and extremism within society, and a pervasive zero-sum mentality have all contributed to the longevity of these groups. The core conclusion is that the rise of Salafi-jihadism in Libya is a symptom of broader, deeper governance problems and that without sustained, unified political and social efforts to address these problems, al-Qaida-linked groups will continue to maintain a presence in the country.

Keywords: Libya, Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaida, Benghazi, Derna, Jihadism, Local

Introduction: Prioritisation of the Local over the Global

Throughout the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, al-Qaida positioned itself as a supporter of local movements across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, tapping into, and strengthening, relationships with local Salafi-jihadi leaders and seeking to insinuate itself into communities by quietly building its legitimacy through a focus on local issues and concerns.[1] Although the rhetoric of al-Qaida's senior leadership has continued to divide its attention fairly equally between the 'near enemy' (namely 'apostate' Middle Eastern regimes) and the 'far enemy' ('America' or 'the Crusaders') since the Arab Spring[2], in strategic terms it has allocated most of its resources to 'local' struggles.[3] This is in part due to the intense competition for followers, funding and ideological legitimacy which was sparked by the rise of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) from 2013 onwards.[4] The fluidity and constant mutability of jihadi groups means that as ISIS retreats following military defeats in Sirte, Mosul and Raqqa throughout late 2016 and 2017, it is likely that al-Qaida will actively seek to reclaim the mantle of jihadi leadership by absorbing remnant ISIS fighters and capitalizing on its local networks to reenergize its appeal and reach.[5] Given both ISIS and al-Qaida have a presence in Libya, the country provides an ideal case study through which to analyse how these global and regional dynamics are shaping the activities and strategy of al-Qaida-linked groups at a local level and what impact this might have on communities where they are active. In so doing, this article aims to contribute to existing literature on the increasingly 'glocal' or 'hybridised' strategy and ideology of Salafi-jihadi groups and to explore what impact this localised approach could have on the future shape and influence of the Salafi-jihadi movement, as well as strategies to counter it.[6]

The paper will first give a brief outline of al-Qaida's connections to Libya, then will consider how al-Qaida-linked groups have adapted their strategies differently in the eastern cities of Benghazi and Derna, before drawing out the main implications for Libya's future and the future of al-Qaida-linked groups in Libya. The two case studies show that these groups are incredibly flexible and can adapt to different human terrains and ideological narratives. In Libya, the dominant narratives centre on a fear of the unaccountable centralization of authority. Therefore, al-Qaida-linked groups have wisely tailored their narrative around that concern.[7] This article focuses on eastern Libya. It is outside its scope to cover the strategies of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which has a presence in southern Libya, or to consider other manifestations of the broader Salafi-jihadi movement in western Libya. Given the often nebulous connections between al-Qaida and its offshoots,

'al-Qaida' will refer to the central organization founded by Osama bin Laden and currently led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, along with official regional affiliates such as AQIM, while al-Qaida-linked groups will refer to Libyan groups that through their ideology, leadership or organizational structure have some links to al-Qaida. Salafi-jihadi will refer to anyone adhering to Salafi-jihadi ideology or practices, no matter what group or organization they are affiliated with.[8]

In Libya, al-Qaida-linked groups have done a better job than their ISIS-linked counterparts at staying rooted to local concerns, local actors, and evolving country dynamics, particularly given the latter's heavier reliance on foreign fighters and desire to assimilate to the global ISIS franchise which has led most Libyans to view ISIS unfavourably as a vehicle for foreign influence and intervention. Libya's connections to al-Qaida and global Salafi-jihadi networks stem from the so-called Libyan 'Afghan Arabs' who travelled to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, in many cases fighting for, or alongside, al-Qaida and its founders.[9] These connections have been renewed across subsequent generations and many of the powerful revolutionary militias that formed during the 2011 uprisings against the regime of Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi (1969 – 2011) had strong links to global jihadi networks in general and al-Qaida specifically, particularly in eastern Libya.[10]

Groups with links to al-Qaida such as Ansar al-Sharia Libya (ASL) were able to take advantage of the insecurity, instability and lack of governance that has plagued Libya since the country split into several competing factions in the summer of 2014 and were able to establish jihadi statelets in several locations.[11] They achieved this for the most part by tapping into existing local power structures, focusing on local concerns, and in some cases muting their connections to the larger Salafi-jihadi movement. While this prioritisation of the local struggle against a 'near enemy' manifested itself differently in different Libyan contexts, there are many parallel trends which help to illuminate the local focus adopted by many al-Qaida-linked groups across Libya. However, it is important to note that there is little evidence that Zawahiri or his deputies within the central al-Qaida command structures directly control the activities of ASL or any other al-Qaida-linked group in Libya.[12] Rather, ASL is linked to al-Qaida, in particular al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), through a loose network of shared ideology, training camps, support structures, and personal connections, with each entity lacking the power to compel the other.[13]

The LIFG and Connections to the Jihadi MilieuThe Libyan 'Afghan Arabs' who travelled to jihadi fronts to fight in the 1980s and 1990s not only formed connections with a global network of Salafi-jihadi fighters, but they also formed strong connections with each other. When they returned to Libya, they sought to apply the military training and organizational experience they had learned overseas against the Qadhafi regime at home. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was formed in Afghanistan in the early 1990s by a group of 'Afghan Arabs' but the group only formally announced its existence in 1995.[14] The LIFG engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Qadhafi regime in eastern Libya throughout the second half of the 1990s but was ultimately unsuccessful at its stated goal of overthrowing the regime.[15] As the group came under increasing pressure following the September 11th 2001 attacks, with the US listing it as a terrorist organization, many LIFG fighters went to fight for, or alongside, al-Qaida at other jihadi fronts overseas.[16] Some of al-Qaida's senior leadership figures were former LIFG members, most notably Abu Yahya al-Libi who is believed to have been second in command to Zawahiri before being killed by a drone strike in 2012.[17]

In particular, Libya's eastern cities of Derna and Benghazi had strong links to al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), the Iraqi Sunni al-Qaida affiliate founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999, which later evolved into ISIS. In late 2007, the so-called "Sinjar Records" revealed a strong eastern Libyan contingent among fighters who joined AQI between 2006 and 2007, with 52 fighters listed as coming from Derna alone.[18] In November 2007, Zawahiri and Abu al-Layth al-Libi, a senior LIFG figure based in Pakistan, appeared together in a video produced by al-Qaida's media arm al-Sahab to announce a merger between LIFG and al-Qaida.[19] However, despite evidence of close links at a personal level between members of the LIFG and al-Qaida, the LIFG leadership based in Libya later said the decision to merge with al-Qaida had been invalid as it did not have the agreement of the LIFG's ruling council and denied there was any formal alliance between the two entities. The Libya-based LIFG leadership also criticised al-Qaida's strategy of indiscriminate bombings and targeting the West.[20]

From 2006 onwards, LIFG leaders, along with several other Salafists and Islamists, engaged in a process of reconciliation with the Libyan regime through Qadhafi's son Saif al-Islam Qadhafi, resulting in the LIFG formally announcing its disbandment in 2010. As a result, many Salafi-jihadists were initially slow to join the uprisings in February 2011.[21] However, once they did, their battle experience and their willingness to ally with the broader non-Islamist elements opposing Qadhafi - as a means to cement their revolutionary legitimacy - meant that they were often able to carve out effective military fiefdoms that included Islamist and non-Islamist elements. To rebrand itself and attempt to curry favour in the political climate of the Arab Spring, the LIFG transformed itself into the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (LIMC) and a handful of figures with links to al-Qaida secured roles in Libya's new political and military governance in structures – for example former LIFG leader Abdelhakim Belhadj was made head of the powerful Tripoli Military Council.[22] Yet for the most part former Salafi-jihadists such as Belhadj, as well as other Islamist actors of all stripes, failed to transform their revolutionary prowess into significant political power. Belhadj's al-Watan party failed to secure any seats in the General National Congress (GNC) elections in July 2012, while the al-Umma al-Wasat party established by former LIFG ideologue Sami al-Saadi only won two seats.[23]

Libyans' reluctance to support Islamist or jihadi parties can be traced to a deep mistrust of political Islamism, political parties, and entities perceived to be beholden to foreign interests. Libya's population is almost entirely Sunni Muslim with a tradition of Sufism and religious moderation; the majority of Libyans do not strictly follow one religious leader or school of thought. Consequently, the sectarian divides that al-Qaida and ISIS have traditionally exploited to their advantage in Syria, Iraq and Yemen are less applicable in Libya and - potentially resultantly - Salafi-jihadi ideologies do not resonate so strongly.[24] In the Libyan collective psyche and vernacular there is often little distinction between violent Salafi-jihadi groups like al-Qaida and other non-violent Islamist groups, leading many Libyans to classify all Islamists as harbingers of terrorism, extremism and international isolation, no matter their ideology or practices.[25] Furthermore, under Qadhafi, Salafi-jihadists had little opportunity to build up local support networks, improve their popular image or institutionalise their interactions with Libyan communities as they had done in parallel instances in Egypt and Tunisia. Derna could be considered an exception to this, although for the most part Derna's Salafi-jihadi support networks were created and sustained overseas. In this context, al-Qaida affiliates quickly discovered that they needed to focus on championing local struggles rather than the larger battle for the soul of the *umma (*Islamic community*),* framing their ideology and aims within the Libyan context in order to gain traction, build networks and gain momentum in Libya.

Al-Qaida-Linked Groups in Benghazi: Flying Under the Radar

In the immediate wake of Qadhafi's ouster, the most prominent and influential al-Qaida-linked group in Libya was Ansar al-Sharia Libya (ASL), a Salafi-jihadi group which is an amalgamation of two separate groups: the Ansar al-Sharia Brigade in Benghazi (ASB) and Ansar al-Sharia in Derna (ASD). Groups under the Ansar al-Sharia banner also had a presence in Sirte, where they later defected to ISIS, as well as in Ajdabiya and Tripoli. ASB was established by Muhammad al-Zahawi in Benghazi in February 2012, while ASD was founded by former Guantanamo inmate Abu Sufian bin Qumu in Derna during the uprisings.[26] In 2012, ASL made international headlines after they were accused of being responsible for the 11 September 2012 attack against the US Special Mission in Benghazi that killed US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others.[27] Zahawi denied his group was responsible for the attack but stopped short of condemning it.[28] ASL likewise denied that it had any links to al-Qaida or other international jihadi groups. However, ASL adheres to Salafi-jihadi ideology, rejects democracy, regularly expresses support for al-Qaida ideologues in its propaganda, and many of its leaders are known to have contact with key al-Qaida figures.[29] There is also some evidence of cooperation between ASL and AQIM, al-Qaida's official North African affiliate which has a presence in south-western Libya.[30] In 2014, both Ansar al-Sharia branches were designated as terrorist organizations by the US State Department as well as the UN.[31]

ASL experienced a significant social backlash in Libya over its suspected involvement in the attack on the US Special Mission in 2012, particularly as the knock-on effect in Benghazi was a decline in security for the populace and worsening political isolation for the city as whole. After directly targeting America, the trope

of America as the 'far enemy' proved unpopular in a city seeking to embrace the outside world after decades of marginalisation. Throughout 2012 and 2013, most international actors withdrew from the city and the campaign of assassinations against Qadhafi-era figures, journalists, judges and civil society activists intensified. [32] Although no group claimed responsibility, ASL and other Islamist militias were believed to be behind these assassinations. In order to counter its sliding popularity, ASL began to focus on winning local support in Benghazi through the provision of social health care, public services and religious teaching. As the Libyan central state increasingly failed to govern effectively in Benghazi, ASL was able to provide an alternative safety net to some communities, particularly those which did not trust the central state to provide services and governance. This allowed it to soften its Salafi-jihadi image and establish a relationship with locals that was not based purely on politics, conflict or ideology.[33]

ASL also sought to make itself more attractive by rebranding itself as a local group with local interests; ASB removed 'brigade' from its name in order to present itself as a movement rather than an armed force, consistently denied any links with al-Qaida, and championed local struggles.[34] The most important example of this is ASL's participation in the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), a coalition of powerful Islamist militias primarily formed as a response to the anti-Islamist Operation Dignity launched in May 2014 in Benghazi by Qadhafi-era general Khalifa Haftar.[35] The BRSC included elements of Libya Shield Force 1 (LSF), the 17 February Brigade, Jaysh al-Mujahadeen and Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade, as well as ASL. BRSC designated ASL's Zahawi as its leader, with LSF's Wisam bin Hamid as the military leader and Jalal Makhzum of Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade serving as the military commander. After Zahawi's death in early 2015, bin Hamid became the most important figurehead in BRSC.[36] The BRSC functioned as an umbrella organisation under which these militias could fight against Dignity forces and protect the interests of 'revolutionaries' against the encroachment of Qadhafi-era figures such as Haftar. To some extent, ASL's participation in BRSC was undoubtedly predicated on self-preservation; however, it also served to legitimise ASL within a Libyan context. The escalating conflict between BRSC and Operation Dignity created a context in which ASL could couch its violent Salafi-jihadi ideology in revolutionary terms once more, casting Haftar as the tyrant (*taghut*) who sought to undo the gains of the revolution.[37] As a result, ASL fought alongside many non-jihadi militias in Benghazi, as well as cooperating with ISIS cells despite fighting them elsewhere in Libya - in the context of Benghazi, they were all united by the local struggle against Haftar.[38]

The BRSC succeeded in taking control of several areas of Benghazi in 2014, declaring the city an Islamic emirate, and held some areas for nearly three years.[39] However, the establishment of ISIS *wilayat* (emirates) in Libya in November 2014, and ISIS's subsequent seizure of territory around Sirte in mid-2015, increased the pressure on ASL in Benghazi. Several high-level figures and foot soldiers defected from ASL to ISIS, drawn by the promise of power and glory in Sirte.[40] Concomitantly, international support for Haftar's anti-Islamist Libyan National Army (LNA) forces was invigorated, resulting in a growing number of defeats and casualties for the BRSC. ISIS's loss of territorial control in Sirte in December 2016 at the hands of forces aligned with Libya's UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), supported by US air strikes, only served to embolden Haftar's Benghazi campaign, with the BRSC quickly losing ground and support.[41] In May 2017, ASL officially announced that it was disbanding [42] and in July 2017 Haftar declared Benghazi fully 'liberated from terrorists'.[43] Although minor clashes were still ongoing in certain areas of the city in October 2017, the military and political clout of Salafi-jihadists in Benghazi had certainly been severely undermined. Yet it is foolish to believe that al-Qaida linked groups will simply give up or that the seeds of Salafi-jihadism that they have sown in Benghazi will simply wither away.

Al-Qaida-Linked Groups in Derna: A Force to Be Reckoned With

In Derna, after the 2011 uprisings, Libyan militias with links to al-Qaida and international Salafi-jihadi networks were able to exert their control over the city far more quickly and comprehensively than their counterparts in Benghazi - or elsewhere throughout Libya for that matter. Derna had been the main stronghold for the LIFG in the 1990s and its residents had a long history of fighting for jihadi causes overseas. As a result, there was a deep pool of recruits who were amenable to Salafi-jihadi ideology.[44] Furthermore, the city was severely marginalised and neglected under Qadhafi, meaning that the social structures which helped provide resistance

to Salafi-jihadism in other areas of Libya, such as tribes, political activism and centres of learning, were weak and were easily undermined by powerful groups such as the al-Qaida-linked Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB) and Abu Sufian bin Qumu's branch of Ansar al-Sharia in Derna (ASD). ASMB is one of the most powerful individual groups in Derna and like ASD, espouses an ultraconservative ideology and frequently cites al-Qaida ideologues.[45] However, it advocates Libyan nationalism rather than creation of a caliphate. It was one of the driving forces behind the strict implementation of Sharia law and practices in Derna from 2012 onwards. The influence of these groups grew steadily from that point, effectively turning Derna into a jihadi statelet where rival Islamist and jihadi militias fought for supremacy among themselves, cutting its residents off from the rest of the country.[46]

It was only with the establishment of an Islamic State (ISIS) offshoot in Derna in October 2014 that these al-Qaida-linked groups and other local factions opposed to ISIS made a concerted effort to rally together and consolidate their legitimacy locally.[47] ISIS swiftly began expanding its control in the city, enforcing the group's strict interpretation of Sharia law and attempting to subsume other Salafi-jihadi groups. However, there was stiff resistance from existing al-Qaida-linked groups primarily because they did not want to cede power to another group but also because they rejected the extreme brutality and foreignness of ISIS practices such as *takfiri* (declaring as infidels) edicts, crucifixions, forced child marriages, and the prohibition of smoking.[48] ASMB, ASD, Jaysh al-Islami al-Libi and other local militias joined forces to create the Derna Mujahadeen Shura Council (DMSC) and utilised local anger over ISIS's brutal tactics to portray themselves as local protectors, eventually driving ISIS out of Derna in summer 2015.[49] DMSC's victory against ISIS was also publically praised and defended by AQIM, and there is evidence that some AQIM fighters also joined the battle in Derna. [50] However, unlike in Benghazi where ASL was a key component of BRSC, it is ASMB that dominated the DMSC with ASMB leader Salim Darbi leading the DMSC. Despite Darbi's death in 2015, ASMB remains the most powerful force within the DMSC.

This championing of local political struggles was a key tactic utilised by the DMSC to strengthen its legitimacy on a local level, despite its practices being nearly as brutal and draconian as those of ISIS. After driving ISIS out of Derna, the DMSC's primary goal became defeating Khalifa Haftar and his anti-Islamist forces, a cause which was widely supported in the city due to its deep animosity for the Qadhafi regime and any figures associated with it.[51] Whereas ISIS's objective of waging global jihad and establishing an Islamic State in Libya gained little traction among Derna's powerful militias, the DMSC's bid to defeat Haftar and prevent Qadhafi-era figures from seizing the Libyan state ticked all the right boxes in that city's Byzantine local politics.[52] However, the strength of the DMSC's local support will soon be tested. In August 2017, Haftar and the LNA turned their attention from Benghazi to Derna, ramping up airstrikes against DMSC positions and enforcing a complete siege of the city, preventing even medical supplies from entering.[53] The siege has continued since then, with at least 15 civilians killed by LNA airstrikes in the city on 30 October.[54] While there is no love lost between many Derna residents and the DMSC, Haftar's tactic of collective punishment is highly reminiscent of Qadhafi's approach against the LIFG decades ago and may serve to strengthen the DMSC's role as protector of the population, despite their largely unpopular Salafi-jihadi ideologies.[55] Furthermore, while Qadhafi's regime was strong enough to temporarily crush Salafi-jihadis and force them to flee abroad, Haftar does not currently have that level of power or control. As has been shown time and again, military strategies alone cannot defeat extremist ideology - especially if the victors bring only more violence, brutality and marginalisation.

he Legacy of Salafi-Jihadism in Eastern Libya

Globally, al-Qaida has survived so long despite its defeats and setbacks because it has learnt from past failures and adapted. Where ISIS has invited direct confrontation and military annihilation through its high-profile brutality, al-Qaida has adopted a cautious bottom-up approach to building support. This keeps it below the radar, but makes it no less dangerous.[56] ASL has already applied this technique in Benghazi, and it is likely that its official disbandment is a continuation of this strategy. By publically claiming it has disbanded, ASL may be able to protect itself against complete annihilation at the hands of Haftar's forces, distance itself from the last three years of fighting in Benghazi, and allow its members to reintegrate into the city at a social level rather

than a military one. As such, they may live to fight another day and rejoin other al-Qaida linked groups. The threat that ASL directly poses may be significantly reduced in the short term, but while chaos and insecurity still reign throughout Libya, it may not take the group, or others similar to it, long to rebuild a support base. In Derna, the DMSC has cemented its legitimacy, not by watering down its ideological beliefs, but by framing its objectives so that they specifically appeal to the historic and socio-political context of Derna itself. By defeating ISIS and fighting against Haftar, the DMSC and its constituent parts have appealed to ingrained fears of central authority, thereby portraying themselves as patriotic Libyans first, Salafi-jihadis second.[57] Indeed, al-Qaida-linked groups have done a better job mimicking such local and traditional structures than their ISIS-linked equivalents.

Furthermore, there are three peculiarities of the current Libyan context that heighten the insidious and highly dangerous threat posed by al-Qaida linked groups in Libya. Firstly, although Haftar and his allies have struck a significant blow to the organisational and military capacity of Salafi-jihadi groups in Benghazi, and may soon do the same in Derna, there have been no efforts to deconstruct or delegitimize their underpinning ideology. The Salafi-jihadi movement is highly mutable and its recruits' allegiances are fluid. Therefore if al-Qaida or other groups can tap into a pool of potential recruits who have amenable beliefs, then all that is required for a new Salafi-jihadi organisational structure to emerge is the socio-political conditions in which it can thrive - namely instability, conflict and division.[58] The ideology and loyalties can be constructed in an ad hoc fashion to fit the circumstances. Although Haftar has achieved a military victory in Benghazi, defeating the BRSC will do little to improve quality of life for the city's residents if the 'victory' is not supported by a governance system that can meet their basic needs, provide security, and establish functioning institutions. At present, that seems as distant as ever, despite reinvigorated efforts at national political reconciliation.[59] Likewise while many Derna residents would like to see the DMSC vanquished, they seem unlikely to support Haftar, and the collective punishment his forces are inflicting on the city, if all that awaits them is further marginalisation and isolation under the new governing political authorities in the wake of his victory.

Secondly, it is important to recognise that the ongoing post-2014 civil war, which has normalized violence, brutality and extremism, ultimately strengthens the ability of Salafi-jihadi groups to radicalise vulnerable segments of Libyan society. Despite Haftar's vehemently anti-Islamist rhetoric and his dismissal of all his political and military opponents as terrorists, many of those fighting under his command have been accused of war crimes including the torture and extra-judicial execution of prisoners with the International Criminal Court (ICC) recently issuing an arrest warrant for Mahmoud al-Warfalli, one of Haftar's senior commanders. [60] Furthermore, Haftar's deepening alliance with powerful 'Madkhali' Salafist militias [61] in Benghazi has led to several ultra-conservative *fatwas* (religious edicts) being issued in eastern Libya, most recently denouncing Libyan followers of Ibadi Islam as infidels.[62]

The Madkhalis also appear to have a growing influence on the policies of Haftar's military governate. In February 2017, eastern Libya's military governor issued a decision banning women from travelling without a *mahram* (male chaperone).[63] This sparked outrage and was quickly rescinded, but it highlights both the increasing normalisation of such ultra-conservative practices and the willingness of Haftar and his allies to capitulate to such groups in return for military support. Indeed, far too often the violence of Salafi-jihadists has been shown to be equivalent to the horrors of war and militia rule inflicted by their opponents. It seems that any purely military fight against Salafi-jihadism has a perverse way of generating the exact conditions that help the movement to expand, namely authoritarianism, repression, human rights abuses, and the normalization of violence. By employing only military strategies to counter these groups, while simultaneously empowering rival groups with similarly violent and sometimes equally perverse ideologies, Haftar and his allies are paradoxically laying the foundations for a triumphant comeback by al-Qaida-linked groups at some point in the future.

Finally, Libya's zero-sum mentality has created a situation where hundreds of different militias and political factions exist, but few if any have a coherent, unifying vision of what they stand for or how they see the future of the country. Groups seek to rally support and exert power through external struggle against anyone seen to be encroaching on the specific and ever-fluctuating interests that impact the members of that group, whether that is access to territory, economic resources, international patronage, or political legitimacy. Without external

enemies like ISIS or Haftar, most of these groupings fall apart; the current infighting among the revolutionaries that fought together against Qadhafi is a prime example of this.

In this vacuum, the relative cohesiveness of Salafi-jihadi ideology could prove truly dangerous. While Salafi-jihadism similarly relies on an external enemy against which to rally support, it also has a core internal vision built around the establishment of a Caliphate (whether now or in the future) and the governance systems and legal practices that this entails. Arguably, no other political or religious movement, party, or militia in Libya currently has such a coherent vision. It remains to be seen whether al-Qaida linked groups can maintain their commitment to such a clear vision, while simultaneously adapting to local realities in such a granular way. Nevertheless, the dangers posed by groups adhering to Salafi-jihadism should not be defined by their capacity or desire to function as the Libyan extension of transnational al-Qaida, ISIS, or future jihadi movements. In the Libyan context, al-Qaida and ISIS appear to be associative monikers that local jihadi groups deploy, as it suits them, to better wage their local struggles. The rise of Salafi-jihadism in Libya is a symptom of broader, deeper governance problems; without sustained, unified efforts to address these problems, these groups will continue to have the opportunity, the means and most likely the followers to establish local fiefdoms and destabilize society in a way that could take generations to undo.

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Compiled and selected by Judith Tinnes

[Bibliographic Series of Perspectives on Terrorism - BSPT-JT-2017-7]

Abstract

This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on Al-Qaeda and its affiliated organizations. Though focusing on recent literature, the bibliography is not restricted to a particular time period and covers publications up to early November 2017. The literature has been retrieved by manually browsing more than 200 core and periphery sources in the field of Terrorism Studies. Additionally, full-text and reference retrieval systems have been employed to expand the search.

Keywords: bibliography; resources; literature; Al-Qaeda; affiliates; franchises; AQC; AQAP; AQIM; AQIS; HTS; Osama bin Laden; Ayman al-Zawahiri

NB: All websites were last visited on 08.11.2017. A previous bibliography on Al-Qaeda since 2001 has been published by Eric Price in Issue 7(1) of "Perspectives on Terrorism". - See also Note for the Reader at the end of this literature list.

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Recent Online Resources for the Analysis of Terrorism and Related Subjects

complied and selected by Berto Jongman

The items included below became available online in September, October and November 2017. They are categorised under twelve headings:

1. Non-Religious Terrorism: Actors, Groups, Incidents and Campaigns

2. Religious (mainly Jihadi) Terrorism: Actors, Groups, Incidents and Campaigns

3. Terrorist Strategies and Tactics

4. Conflict, Crime and Political Violence other than Terrorism

5. Counter-Terrorism – General

6. Counter-Terrorist Strategies, Tactics and Operations

7. State Repression and Civil War at Home and Clandestine & Open Warfare Abroad

8. Prevention and Preparedness Studies (including Countering Violent Extremism, De-Radicalization, Counter-Narratives)

9. Intelligence

10. Cyber Operations

11. Risk & Threat Assessments, Forecasts, Analytical Studies

12. Also Worth Reading

N.B.: 'Recent Online Resources for the Analysis of Terrorism and Related Subjects' is a regular feature in 'Perspectives on Terrorism'.

1. Non-Religious Terrorism: Actors, Groups, Incidents and Campaigns

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