

# BROOKINGS

Op-Ed

## Al Qaeda's M&A Strategy

Daniel L. Byman Tuesday, December 7, 2010

**O**n September 11, 2006, al Qaeda celebrated the fifth anniversary of its marquee terrorist attack by announcing that it had signed up hundreds of new members — an impressive growth spurt for an organization whose membership is often estimated by American counterterrorism analysts to be in the low thousands.

But al Qaeda hadn't so much recruited its new members as acquired them: They were from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC by its French initials), a jihadist group that for years had almost exclusively targeted the ruling regime in Algeria. "The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat has joined the Al Qaeda organization," Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's No. 2, crowed. "May this be a bone in the throat of American and French crusaders, and their allies, and sow fear in the hearts of French traitors and sons of apostates." A few months later, the GSPC adopted the moniker "al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM). A minor-league guerrilla operation had rebranded itself as a franchise of the biggest name in Islamist terrorism.

AQIM is not alone in going from a local to a global focus. The popular image of al Qaeda is of an organization that draws its membership from disillusioned Muslims who, infuriated by U.S. support for Israel or intervention in the Muslim world — and beguiled by the idea of a universal caliphate — go off to join the fight. But in fact, much of al Qaeda's growth in the last decade has been the kind of expansion that any American businessman would recognize: They've systematically tried to absorb

regional jihadist start-ups, both venerable and newly created, and convince them that their struggle is a component of al Qaeda's sweeping international agenda — and vice versa. Zawahiri himself was once head of one such organization, Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which he led from an exclusive focus on toppling the Egyptian regime to an embrace of al Qaeda's anti-American and pan-Islamic agenda. Al Qaeda branches have since popped up in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, and the organization is making inroads with groups in Pakistan, Somalia, and elsewhere.

Consider last year's Christmas Day bombing plot, in which a Nigerian recruit to the Yemen-based al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) almost blew up a passenger airplane landing in Detroit. Yemen has long hosted al Qaeda-linked jihadists, but for most of the last decade they focused on local and regional targets. In 2009, however, jihadists in Yemen and Saudi Arabia announced a merger under the AQAP banner and took on a more global focus: one that included the Detroit plot and this October's plan to blow up two cargo planes as they neared U.S. cities.

The attacks emerging from Yemen have led some U.S. officials to believe al Qaeda's affiliates are more dangerous than the organization's core, isolated as it is in the Pakistani hinterlands. Making sense of this network is key to understanding the threat of terrorism today — and how best to respond to it.

## **How Do I Sign Up?**

Formally joining al Qaeda is a complex process and one that can take years. It is often difficult to tell when a true shift has occurred, in part because al Qaeda does not demand sole allegiance; it supports local struggles even as it pursues its own war against the United States and its allies. So group members can be half-pregnant: both part of al Qaeda's ranks and loyal fighters in their local organization. Zawahiri, for instance, had been part of al Qaeda since its founding in 1988, but for almost a decade he saw EIJ, not al Qaeda, as his primary charge. It took 10 years for Zawahiri to fully sign on to Osama bin Laden's "International Islamic Front for Jihad on the

Jews and Crusaders,” and three more years for his group to fully integrate with al Qaeda. For Algeria’s GSPC, the process took at least four years, and the integration is still incomplete.

During this prolonged courtship, groups often straddle their old and new identities, trying to keep up the fight against the local regime while also attacking more global targets. Often this is a time of infighting, with key leaders pulling the group in different directions. Some seek to stay the course and continue to fight the local regime, while others are attracted by what al Qaeda has to offer. Somalia’s al-Shabab, for instance, appears to be in such a phase today. Some parts of the organization cooperate with al Qaeda, with foreign jihadists playing leading roles in tactics and operations. But others within the movement — probably the majority, in fact — oppose the foreigners’ control, with some even publicly condemning terrorism and even working with international humanitarian relief efforts. Al-Shabab could become “al Qaeda of the Horn of Africa,” but this is not yet a done deal. And if it happens, it could split the group.

After a merger happens, command relationships between the affiliate and al Qaeda’s central leadership vary. When al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula began attacks on Saudi Arabia in 2003, they were done at the direction of al Qaeda’s central leadership, which was eager to strike at the kingdom. But groups like AQIM retain a high degree of independence, working with al Qaeda’s core more as partners than as proxies. Many AQIM attacks still target the Algerian regime, particularly its security forces — an aim more in keeping with the group’s past priorities than al Qaeda’s.

But even these somewhat independent partners change both their targets and methods as they move closer to joining al Qaeda. On the road to becoming AQIM, for instance, the GSPC expanded its primary focus to include France as well as the Algerian regime. When it took on the al Qaeda label, the group struck U.N. and Israeli targets and went after Algeria’s energy infrastructure, none of which were a priority in the past. Suicide bombings, hitherto one of the few horrors the GSPC did not

inflict, grew more frequent, along with Iraqi-style car bombs. In Pakistan, where al Qaeda's influence has spread since 9/11, there were two suicide attacks in 2002; by 2009, there were almost 60.

## **The Rewards of Association**

For al Qaeda's leaders, the appeal of gathering affiliates is manifold. New franchises are both confirmation of the wisdom of their mission — to throw out the Westerners and establish a true Islamic government throughout the Muslim world — and a means of extending its influence. Al Qaeda seeks not only to change the Islamic world, but also to shift the orientation of jihad from the local to the global.

Historically, most jihadi resistance movements have focused on their own territory. Even Zawahiri, during his EIJ days, once wrote that “the road to Jerusalem goes through Cairo” — meaning that destroying Israel, ostensibly the ultimate sacred cause for jihadists, must wait until there is an Islamic government at home. If jihadists did have a foreign focus, it was usually on throwing out foreign troops: for example, fighting the Russians in Afghanistan and, later, Chechnya. But bin Laden has successfully convinced groups that striking the United States and its allies is more important to this victory than fighting more proximate enemies.

Affiliates offer al Qaeda many practical rewards: hundreds or even thousands of fighters, donors, smuggling networks, and sympathetic preachers who offer religious legitimacy. Before the creation of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004, bin Laden and his coterie seemed irrelevant to the struggle against the United States there; it was Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi and his supporters in the Monotheism and Jihad Group who garnered recruits, money, and publicity. Al Qaeda affiliates also offer access to immigrant and diaspora communities — a group like Somalia's al-Shabab, with its connections to the Somali-American population, would be a prize asset. (Mohamed Osman Mohamud, the alleged Portland, Ore. bomb plotter arrested in November, doesn't appear to have any connection to al-Shabab, but demonstrates the potential that such groups see in immigrant communities.)

What do al Qaeda franchises get out of the deal? Most concretely, money — either directly from al Qaeda or from elsewhere in its network. After all, jihad isn't cheap. Buying explosives, paying salaries, providing stipends for the families of imprisoned fighters, arranging travel, and handing out bribes to local governments — it all adds up. (In 1999, EIJ was so broke that Zawahiri blasted a cell member for buying a new fax machine without authorization when the organization's staff was on half salary.) Al Qaeda also has web and media specialists who produce recruitment and fundraising videos, recruiters who try to identify potential new members at mosques and other locations, trainers who teach how to use small arms and make improvised explosive devices, and other experts in its global Rolodex, all available to help a new local franchise. For example, Saleh Ali Nabhan, an experienced al Qaeda commander linked to several attacks in Africa, reportedly trained al-Shabab members in Somalia.

An al Qaeda label is also a potential recruiting boon — it may help a group attract new members who hate the West and the United States but were not motivated by the group's past, more local, rhetoric. Less tangibly, the al Qaeda brand also can give credibility to groups struggling at home. Groups like al-Shabab often have an inchoate ideology; al Qaeda offers them a coherent — and, to a certain audience, appealing — alternative.

## **A Risky Play**

But the post-merger relationship is not all IEDs and roses. Gaining affiliates may raise al Qaeda's profile and extend its reach, but it also poses risks for the group's core. The biggest is the lack of control. Maintaining effective command from remote parts of Pakistan was always difficult; the U.S. drone campaign has made it even harder. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Iraq. As early as 2005, al Qaeda core leaders tried to push Iraqi fighters waging guerrilla war under the banner of al Qaeda in Iraq not to slaughter Shiite Muslims, and especially not Sunni civilians, but to no avail. As the bloodshed rose, al Qaeda funders and supporters pointed their fingers not only at AQI leaders, but also at al Qaeda's core. This left the top al Qaeda officials

in a bind: Should they denounce their most popular affiliate for its excesses, or risk being tarred with its bloody brush? In 2008, years after the merger, Zawahiri was still defending the al Qaeda cause against accusations of brutality and excess. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (known better as Dr. Fadl), a one-time key EIJ ideologue who has since turned against al Qaeda, excoriated the group this year for the “unprecedented atrocities committed ... against the Iraqi people.”

But joining up with al Qaeda is even more risky for the affiliates. By taking on new enemies at al Qaeda's behest, a group gets — well, new enemies. When AQIM declared its intention to take jihad beyond Algeria, the Moroccan government — long hostile to Algiers — became much more willing to cooperate with its neighbor, and French counterterrorism support for states in the region also picked up. The United States, of course, is the biggest new enemy. Even short of drone strikes, Washington can offer its allies intelligence, financial support, paramilitary capabilities, and other vital forms of assistance, creating new headaches for groups that have plenty of them already.

When groups embrace al Qaeda's “far enemy” logic, they are also embracing strategic absurdity. Terrorist groups that succeed politically, like Hezbollah and Hamas, are firmly anchored in local realities and politics, and their success comes in part because their ambitions are limited. Not so with al Qaeda. Al Qaeda may preach that the regimes in Riyadh, Cairo, and Algiers are held in place by U.S. troops and influence, but the reality is that these governments have their own ruthless security services and means of buying off rivals that help them ensure their grip on power even if Washington abandons them.

Because of these risks, the decision to join al Qaeda often angers more sensible group members who retain local ambitions. One of Zawahiri's EIJ compatriots declared the merger a “great illusion,” and in 2001 another member criticized joining bin Laden as

a “dead end,” fuming, “Enough pouring musk on barren land!” The dissenting comrade had it right: EIJ’s cause is dead in Egypt today, and the decision to go global was the nail in the coffin.

It’s not surprising, then, that not everyone in the jihadi camp signs up with al Qaeda. Samir Saleh Abdullah al-Suwailem, a Saudi fighter known as Khattab and for many years the most prominent Arab commander in Chechnya, shared many of al Qaeda’s goals but rejected a formal relationship. At the time, he believed that he was close to defeating the Russians in Chechnya, and that taking on the United States or other new foes would be a distraction. Prominent groups in Egypt, Palestine, and elsewhere also have refused to entertain closer ties to al Qaeda, or have even rejected the organization publicly.

## **Handle with Care**

All this suggests that for all the danger al Qaeda’s growing network of affiliates poses to the West, it also offers opportunities for counterterrorism. Atrocities committed by one branch of al Qaeda can be used to discredit the core, as has happened with AQI. Ties to foreigners can alienate many insurgents, who are often motivated more by nationalism than religion. For example, AQI suffered when it declared its intention to make Iraq an Islamic state: Many of its potential Sunni supporters there came to see AQI as more of a threat to their independence than the United States. Even Somalis — who would seem immune to atrocity and bloodletting after years of conflict — were outraged by the spate of suicide bombings in recent years, blaming foreigners for it and thus undermining al-Shabab’s legitimacy in the country.

Nor are all jihadi groups necessarily as professional as bin Laden’s inner circle. The al Qaeda core represents an unusual set of leaders and operatives: Most are highly skilled, dedicated, well-trained, and meticulous about operational security. Affiliate members, however, are frequently less careful — their organizations often were born amid civil wars, and accordingly have focused more on maintaining a continued

insurgency rather than focusing on pulling off a limited number of high-profile terrorist attacks. Years of fighting in the mountains of Algeria or the wastes of Yemen are not good preparation for infiltrating and attacking targets in the West.

That's the good news. The bad news is that counterterrorism success against locally focused groups can have unforeseen pitfalls. The United States should, of course, want its allies in the Muslim world to triumph over jihadists; even governments like Algeria's, which are hardly close friends, deserve support. But, as was the case for EIJ and GSPC, local failure may prompt some group members to go global, increasing the risk of anti-U.S. terrorism. Counterterrorism is not zero sum, but it would be naive and dangerous to assume that crushing local opponents won't encourage some cells to split off and join al Qaeda.

The most vexing dilemma for U.S. counterterrorism policy, however, concerns groups that may be moving toward al Qaeda but have not yet made the leap. Many al Qaeda affiliates always hated the United States and its allies, but their focus was local for many years. Because the groups had some ties to al Qaeda, George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's administrations began to target them and encourage others to do so. As a result, the groups became more anti-American, creating a vicious circle.

Consider Ethiopia's U.S.-supported 2006 invasion of Somalia, which intended to remove Islamists from power, and in the process splintered them into smaller groups. Al-Shabab emerged from one of the more radical fragments and has since become far more powerful. Angered by U.S. involvement in the invasion and the targeting of al Qaeda-linked individuals in Somalia, the group has become far more anti-American than its Islamist predecessor ever was. In short, U.S. administrations are often damned either way. Ignoring the group allows potential threats to grow worse and risks an attack from out of the blue. But taking them on may mean driving some deeper into al Qaeda's fold — and making the terrorist threat all the more dangerous.



There is no one-size-fits-all strategy. U.S. intelligence and other counterterrorism assets should continue to focus on the core of al Qaeda, which — both alone and in combination with affiliates — remains highly dangerous. For some affiliates — AQAP, for instance — the United States should rely first and foremost on local allies. In other cases, simply cultivating better relations with states at risk — such as Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and others threatened by AQIM — is the wisest strategy. In Somalia, the best that can be hoped for may be simply containing the problem. In all these cases, however, the United States should strive to separate the locals from the al Qaeda core. The organization's merger strategy is a double-edged sword: Al Qaeda has gained from its acquisitions, but it can also be hurt by them.