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AQAP's Role in the al Qaeda Network

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The United States continues to face a threat from the al Qaeda network twelve years after declaring war against it. America's failure to understand the complexities of the terrorist network as it has evolved over the years has led only to tactical successes on the battlefield. The strategy to disrupt the al Qaeda network by killing senior leadership in a "core group" is based on a faulty understanding that overemphasizes that group's importance and the current intentions of affiliates to attack the United States. This strategy has been ineffective in dismantling the network overall. Al Qaeda today bears little resemblance to the network in 2001, yet America's strategy to counter it remains largely unchanged.

The al Qaeda network has moved away from a centrally organized network over the years. Al Qaeda's strength and resilience now lies in the latticed interconnections between regional al Qaeda groups, as well as in the ties between those groups and the center. The most significant inflection point occurred in 2009 when al Qaeda's Yemen-based affiliate, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), established a new model for the role of groups in the al Qaeda network. AQAP focused its efforts on the far war against the United States and began to foster relationships with other groups. The Arab Spring and Osama bin Laden's death in 2011 served as a catalyst for change in the network: other affiliates, too, adapted to AQAP's model and cultivated inter-group connections spanning the region. These connections facilitate broader coordination and cooperation within the al Qaeda network, and have increased its overall resiliency.

Targeting individuals or a specific group within the al Qaeda network will not be effective alone. Such a strategy has allowed al Qaeda's affiliates in Iraq, Syria, and West Africa to expand virtually unchecked and has ignored the growth of associated groups across North Africa, especially in Libya. The al Qaeda network is global and operates on a global level. Many al Qaeda groups operate solely on the local level, but they strengthen the broader network. The United States, therefore, needs a comprehensive global strategy to counter al Qaeda that is tailored down to the local level.

Case Study: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

The most direct threat to the U.S. homeland today emanates from AQAP, which has attempted to attack the United States homeland at least three times since its establishment in January 2009. The affiliate is also behind the threat stream that prompted the unprecedented closure of over twenty American diplomatic posts across the Middle East and North Africa.

AQAP's prominence in the al Qaeda network should not be interpreted to mean that AQAP has risen to replace the core group in Pakistan or that it is directing the network in some way. It must be interpreted within the broader context of the al Qaeda network. AQAP is an extremely capable terrorist group that is a member of a network of other groups all operating in similar manners. Its prominence is a reflection of its capabilities and its prioritization of conducting attacks against the U.S., not the subordination of other groups to AQAP.

Background

A January 2009 video announced the establishment of AQAP as a merger between al Qaeda's Yemeni and Saudi branches. The video identified four AQAP leaders: two former Guantanamo detainees (Said al Shihri and Mohamed al Awfi) and two escaped Yemeni prisoners (Nasser al Wahayshi and Qasim al Raymi). Saudi al Qaeda operatives, including at least five former Guantanamo detainees who had gone through Saudi Arabia's rehabilitation program, had fled to Yemen in the late 2000s to escape the crackdown on al Qaeda in the Kingdom. They began operating with al Qaeda in Yemen, which was on the path to being reconstituted after having been essentially neutralized in 2002-2004. The February

2006 escape of 23 al Qaeda operatives from a Sana'a prison, including Wahayshi and Raymi, revitalized al Qaeda in Yemen.

AQAP's rapid ascendancy in Yemen profited from the expertise of individuals who had been active in the al Qaeda network for years and from the relatively free environment in which these individuals could operate. The senior echelon of AQAP's leadership structure had decades of combined experience. Many of the senior leaders had trained at al Qaeda's al Farouq training camp or elsewhere in Afghanistan, some were members of Osama bin Laden's direct human network, and nearly all had been active in the al Qaeda network before the 9/11 attacks. Yemen's weak central government, then headed by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, did not exert direct control over its territory and in August 2009 dedicated scarce security resources to fighting the sixth iteration of a rebellion in the north.[1] The Yemeni government also prioritized putting down a rising secessionist movement in the south over counterterrorism operations against AQAP. The permissive security environment along with the leadership's experience facilitated al Qaeda's full reconstitution in Yemen in 2009.

The group continued the small-scale attacks that al Qaeda in Yemen had been carrying out. But it also began to focus on external operations against Saudi and American targets. AQAP's first major external operation targeted the Saudi deputy interior ministry in August 2009. Ibrahim al Asiri, the group's top bombmaker, designed an explosive device that was concealed as a suppository in his brother's body. The remotely detonated bomb failed to kill the Saudi official. A second plot to hit Saudi targets failed in October when a firefight with Saudi border patrolmen killed Yousef al Shihri and Raed al Harbi, who were smuggling explosives in to Saudi Arabia.[2] AQAP became the first affiliate to target the U.S. homeland in December that year. Asiri modified the design for Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who conducted the December 2009 attack. Asiri concealed Abdulmutallab's bomb in his underwear. The device passed successfully through airport security, but failed to detonate.[3] The attack shone a spotlight on the al Qaeda affiliate and within a month, the U.S. designated AQAP, Wahayshi and Shihri under Executive Order 13224.[4]

The al Qaeda affiliate was capable of maintaining two lines of operations by 2010. It continued to pursue attacks on American targets, evidenced by the October 2010 parcel plot. It also increased its focus on fighting the Saleh government, which, under U.S. and international pressure, had begun to intensify its operations against AQAP.[5] The retraction of the Yemeni central state into the capital, Sana'a, due to the political unrest in winter 2011 opened up space for AQAP. The group fielded an insurgent arm operating under the name "Ansar al Sharia" in spring 2011 that seized and held territory in south Yemen. AQAP briefly governed in certain areas, but more significantly, expanded its area of operations outside of its historical terrain. AQAP continues to have a presence in many of these regions, though it has not held territory since spring 2012. Its operatives have also regularly targeted Yemeni political and military officials for assassination, a strategy employed in 2010 and resumed as of 2012.

AQAP poses the most direct threat to the U.S. homeland out of the al Qaeda network. It incorporated lessons learned from the experience of al Qaeda in Iraq in building popular support when its insurgent arm, Ansar al Sharia, tried its hand at governance in 2011 and 2012 (though it ultimately failed). It has responded to shifting conditions on the ground and has attempted to appeal to Yemen's various anti-government groupings. It has innovated in the design of its explosive devices and repeatedly attempted, with success, to penetrate American national security defenses. Though the affiliate is extremely capable in its own right, it must be examined in the context of the entire al Qaeda network.

New Model for al Qaeda Affiliates and Associates[*]

A major inflection point for the al Qaeda network occurred with the establishment of AQAP. The Yemen-based affiliate created a new model for the role of groups in the al Qaeda network by the end of 2009. The previous model held that groups in the network were subordinated to a "core" group. That core group, which was the al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan, maintained command and control over its regional affiliates and directed external operations. AQAP is the first known example of an affiliate or an associate directing an attack against the U.S. homeland, an effort the group has continued to prioritize. It also provided training and shared resources with al Qaeda associates in a manner characteristic of bin Laden's group in the 1990s and early 2000s. The new model indicates that the network is no longer centrally organized or directed, but continued relations between the "core" and AQAP indicate a continued advisory role for the central group.

The December 2009 attack on Detroit-bound Northwest Airlines Flight 253 was the first attack from the al Qaeda network on the U.S. homeland directed by an affiliate, as previously mentioned. U.S. court documents related to the case against the underwear bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, provide the details of the plot.[6] Abdulmutallab sought out Yemeni-American cleric and AQAP senior operative Anwar al Awlaki in Yemen, and, after getting in touch through an intermediary and submitting a letter to Awlaki, spent three days with the cleric. Awlaki connected him to the bombmaker, Ibrahim al Asiri, who explained the plan. Abdulmutallab received specialized training on the explosive device and basic military training at one of AQAP's training camps. He then received orders from Awlaki to detonate the bomb over U.S. airspace and Asiri provided him with the bomb itself. Osama bin Laden mentioned the AQAP-directed attack in a message directed at President Barack Obama, but did not claim credit for it.[7] AQAP's deputy leader, Said al Shihri, claimed credit for the attack in February 2010.

The Yemen-based affiliate has attempted to attack the U.S. homeland at least two more times since December 2009. It shipped two explosive devices disguised as printer cartridges in October 2010. The bombs were only discovered with the assistance of Saudi intelligence. AQAP tried again in May 2012 when it innovated on the underwear-bomb design. That plot was uncovered and thwarted by American and foreign intelligence agencies. It is likely that AQAP leadership still seeks to attack the U.S. homeland.

AQAP has fostered relations with other groups in the al Qaeda network. (See figure 1.) It has an established relationship with al Shabaab, al Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia. It provided explosives and basic military training to at least one al Shabaab operative in 2010 and 2011.[8] AQAP also facilitated al Shabaab's communications with al Qaeda "core," though al Shabaab also appeared to have a line of communications that ran outside of Yemen as well.[9] Multiple sources document the movement of fighters across the Gulf of Aden.[10] The Arab Spring presented AQAP with the opportunity to develop additional relationships. It purportedly supported the establishment of an al Qaeda-linked cell in Egypt under the leadership of Mohamed Jamal Abu Ahmed by sending him fighters and funding.[11] Mohamed Jamal, a former member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, knew AQAP leaders Nasser al Wahayshi, Adil al Abab, and Qasim al Raymi.[†] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Jamal's group was connected to the September 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya.[12]

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[*] Al Qaeda affiliates are groups that have publicly pledged allegiance to the al Qaeda *emir* and have in turn received public recognition as part of al Qaeda by the al Qaeda *emir*. Al Qaeda associates are groups that exhibit a sufficient number of characteristics common within the al Qaeda network such as shared resources, overlapping fighter or leadership networks, a common signature, and ideological alignment with al Qaeda.
[†] Mohamed Jamal had been imprisoned under Hosni Mubarak's regime, but was released in 2011. He was arrested in 2012 and is incarcerated in Egypt.
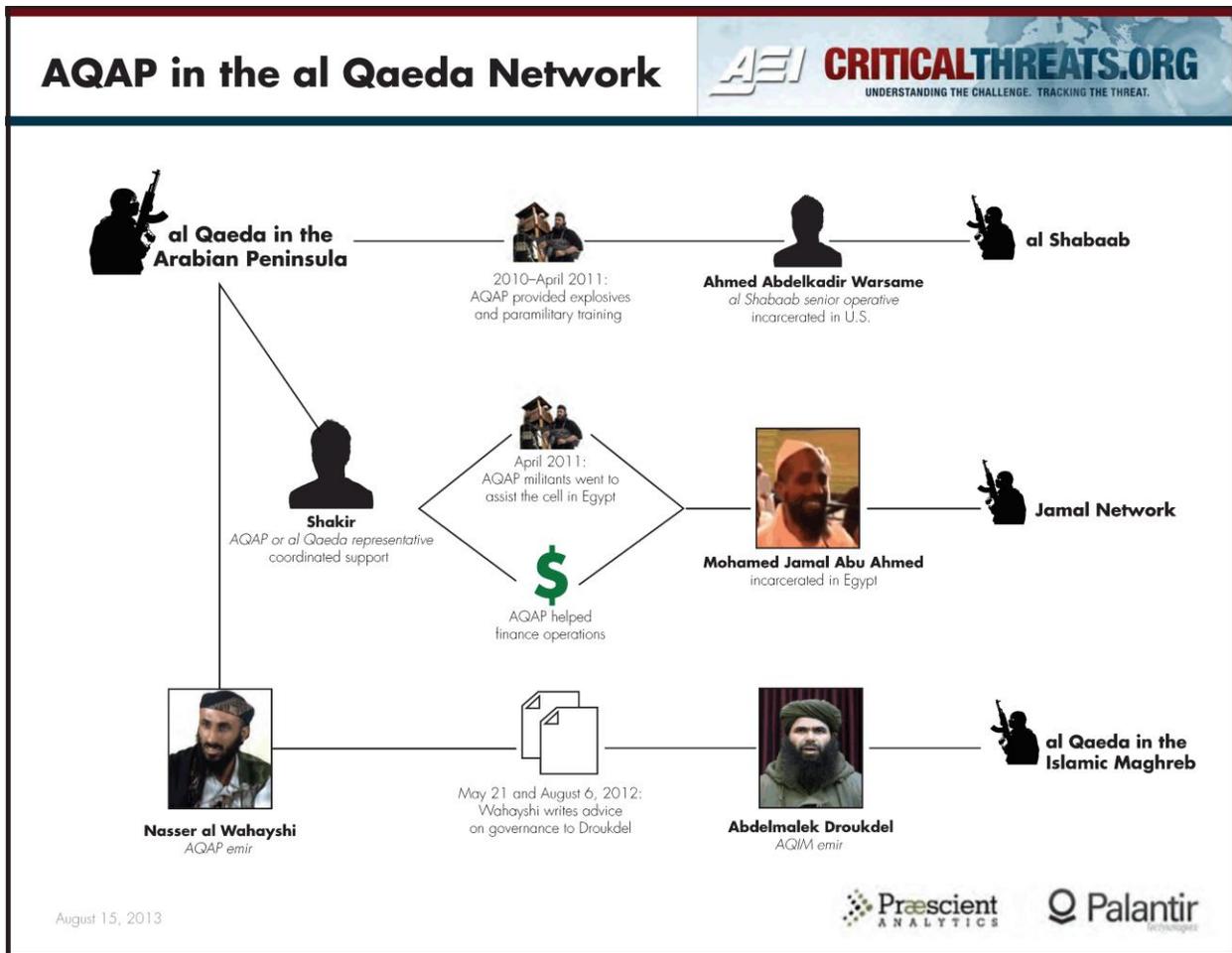
Figure 1: AQAP in the al Qaeda Network
Originally published in Katherine Zimmerman, "The al Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy."

Nasser al Wahayshi, AQAP's *emir*, was also in direct contact with Abdelmalek Droukdel, AQIM's *emir*, and the al Qaeda core leadership in Pakistan, in addition to al Shabaab's leadership. Two separate letters recovered in a document cache in Timbuktu, Mali, reveal Wahayshi's counsel to Droukdel.[13] In his first letter, dated May 21, 2012, Wahayshi congratulated Droukdel on his progress in Mali and compared AQIM's relationship with Ansar al Din (an ethnically Tuareg militant Islamist group) with AQAP's Ansar al Sharia. He advised Droukdel that AQIM could generate support by providing basic services and fulfilling daily needs, like food and water. In his second letter, dated August 6, 2012, Wahayshi explained AQAP's loss in south Yemen against the Yemeni security forces and cautioned Droukdel against declaring an emirate when he would not be able to fulfill the role of a state.[‡] Wahayshi also mentioned he held communications from the core group for Droukdel.

Today, AQAP continues to seek to attack the United States and to nurture lateral connections with other groups in the al Qaeda network. It is believed that a credible threat stream from the Arabian Peninsula, where AQAP operates, instigated the closure of diplomatic posts across North Africa and the Middle East. Like other groups in the al Qaeda network, AQAP preferred its local fight against the Yemeni government during the Arab Spring, but it was also able to sustain a second operational line devoted to

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[‡] Osama bin Laden offered Wahayshi similar advice, but it appears to have been ignored in Yemen.

attacking the United States. Other al Qaeda groups follow the model established by AQAP today, though many have yet to develop the capabilities to conduct an attack against the U.S. and to support such efforts.

The implications for this new model for al Qaeda groups are far-reaching when studying the al Qaeda network. First, there is no group at the heart of the network. The core group in Pakistan maintains a mediatory or advisory role, but it no longer issues directives. Therefore, operations specifically targeting a single group, including AQAP, would have a limited overall effect on the network. Second, the lateral connections—relationships between al Qaeda groups—create a latticed structure that adds to the resiliency of the network. This latticed structure is what gives the network its strength. And finally, the entire al Qaeda network, including groups operating solely at the local level, must be considered when devising any strategy to counter the network because of the existence of the latticed structure.

Countering the al Qaeda Network

The strategy in place to counter al Qaeda today remains largely consistent with that adopted by the Bush administration in 2001. That strategy emphasizes the killing of senior leadership in the core group as the means by which to disrupt the network. Under this strategy, the U.S. also pursues localized train-and-assist programs to enable local militaries to counter the growth of al Qaeda-linked groups. The network model around which this strategy was designed is one that holds there is a central group at the heart of the network. In 2001, this group was the one Osama bin Laden led directly, and it is often referred to as al Qaeda core. The Obama administration grouped AQAP in with this central group after the December 2009 attack and began targeting both AQAP and al Qaeda core senior leadership. The same occurred after the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) May 2010 Times Square bombing. The recent appointment of AQAP's *emir* Wahayshi to *ma'sul al 'amm* (general manager or al Qaeda's no. 2 position), has even led to assertions that AQAP has replaced the core group.

The U.S. has been extremely successful at killing al Qaeda, AQAP, and TTP senior leadership. The U.S. has killed four of the top five al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan in the past three years, including Osama bin Laden, Sheikh Said al Masri, Atiyah Abd al Rahman, and Abu Yahya al Libi.[14] In Yemen, it has killed senior leader Anwar al Awlaki, *USS Cole* bombers Abdul Munim al Fathani and Fahd al Quso, AQAP senior operative Mohamed Said al Umdah, spiritual leader Adil al Abab, and deputy leader Said al Shihri. The same is true for the TTP. AQAP and the TTP have both been able to regenerate leadership, limiting the long-term impact of U.S. operations. Al Qaeda core is decimated, but such an effect required the dedication of significant U.S. military and intelligence assets and resources, and still, there are al Qaeda senior operatives active today that are capable of leading the group. Partners' successes against al Qaeda groups have been mixed, but overall, the network has expanded since the outbreak of the Arab Spring.

The strategy to counter AQAP relies on American direct action operations targeting AQAP leadership and on Yemeni counterterrorism operations to combat the group on the ground. As noted, U.S. targeted strikes have killed a number of AQAP's leaders. America's partner in Yemen has had limited success. Yemeni troops, partnered with local militias, re-captured territory under AQAP's control in the beginning of 2012. Yemen's security forces have not, however, been able fully clear the territory of AQAP's local network. They are also riven with low-level instances of insubordination, which may limit their overall effectiveness. Many of the conditions that created a permissive environment in Yemen remain in place, including grievances against the central government and local conflict over access to resources such as water. It is not clear that this strategy will be effective against AQAP.

America's tactical successes against al Qaeda have not succeeded in weakening the overall network and probably will not have the desired effect. Instead, al Qaeda is more expansive than it was at the beginning of 2011 and of 2001. Al Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq has resurged and is conducting operations in both Iraq and Syria, for example.[15] It also supported the establishment of Jabhat al Nusra, al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. The strengthening of these affiliates has strengthened the overall network. The targeting of a single group or select senior leadership has not disrupted the network, and only in Pakistan has it effectively weakened the al Qaeda group. The failure to understand properly how the al Qaeda network is operating today has confused U.S. strategy to counter it.

Al Qaeda has evolved since 2001 and the network today is much more complex and resilient. The heart of the network is now its latticed structure, which is composed of the interconnections among al Qaeda core, the affiliates, and the associates.[16] The relationships among al Qaeda groups facilitate inter-group cooperation and the sharing of resources. The network is global, and therefore the U.S. needs a comprehensive global strategy to counter it. Al Qaeda groups operate on the local level, though, and have proven to be responsive to minute shifts in local conditions. America's strategy to counter al Qaeda must not only be global, but it also must be tailored locally to respond directly to the local conditions. Only then will the U.S. be able to neutralize effectively the threat from the al Qaeda network.

Looking Forward: the al Qaeda Network in 2014

Afghanistan is extremely important to al Qaeda and the global *jihad* movement because of its history. The *mujahideen's* fight against the Soviets was the birth of the global *jihad* movement and brought together the future senior leaders of what would come to be known as al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden's first major alliance was with the Pashtun warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani, who offered sanctuary to bin Laden's forces and shared in bin Laden's vision. There, bin Laden founded al Qaeda and he would return in 1996 to Haqqani's sanctuary with the Taliban's approval when he lost favor in Sudan.

President Barack Obama announced plans to draw down forces in Afghanistan and said that U.S. troop levels would be at 34,000 by February 2014. The American force posture in Afghanistan in the second half of 2014 and beyond remains unclear, and the bilateral security agreement discussions for a long-term American military presence in Afghanistan are formally suspended. Regardless of its shape, the reduced American military footprint will limit U.S. counterterrorism operations capabilities in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. Considerations extend beyond America's own military capabilities to those of the Afghan government: it must be able to sufficiently govern its territory to prevent civil war, the return of the Taliban, or significant power vacuums.[17] If not, there is the risk that progress made in Afghanistan will be reversed.

Retreat from Afghanistan in any form will be a victory for al Qaeda and will feed into its propaganda. Al Qaeda's objective in Afghanistan has been to defeat the American military the way that the *mujahideen* defeated the Soviet military in 1989. The Soviet-supported Afghan government, under Mohammed Najibullah, faced a continued insurgency and collapsed in 1992, opening the space for the eventual rise of the Taliban. It is probable that today's insurgency in Afghanistan would continue after the withdrawal of American and international troops and would challenge the survival of the Afghan government. Afghanistan's political elite is also increasingly consumed by the upcoming presidential elections in April 2014, the outcome of which will determine the longevity of the country's constitutional system.[18] These conditions set the stage for the possible return of al Qaeda to Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda's return to Afghanistan would have a resounding effect on the network. Al Qaeda associates in Afghanistan such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, weakened by the American and international military presence, would probably resurge and destabilize the region. Jalaluddin Haqqani's son, Sirajuddin, who heads the Waziristan-based Haqqani network, would likely seek to regain territory in Khost, Paktika, and Paktia provinces in Afghanistan and would almost certainly maintain his group's partnership with the Afghan Taliban, possibly positioning the Haqqani network to extend beyond its previous territories. The Haqqani network would also probably maintain its ties with al Qaeda given the Haqqanis' ideological sympathies and trajectory of supporting the group over the past twenty-five years.[19] Such a relationship may translate to support for al Qaeda in Haqqani-controlled territory. The al Qaeda-run training camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s churned out leaders of militant Islamist groups in Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, among others. Today, these groups are members of the al Qaeda network. Though freedom of movement for al Qaeda operatives is more limited now than in the past, the resumption of militant training and religious indoctrination in Afghanistan would be a significant boost to the overall al Qaeda network.

Conclusion

The U.S. still faces a significant threat from the al Qaeda network. One of the reasons for this is that American strategy to counter al Qaeda did not change as the network evolved. Tactical successes in Yemen or Pakistan will not lead to victory, and may be reversed should pressure on groups be removed. Understanding the latticed structure that forms the heart of the al Qaeda network will more fully develop a picture of how the entire network is operating. Locally focused al Qaeda groups, currently dismissed and at times ignored, are extremely important to the al Qaeda network because of how they support the efforts of such groups as AQAP. Any strategy to counter the al Qaeda network must recognize the role of these local groups in strengthening the network. Including them as part of the network does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the U.S. must deploy forces or invest heavily in military assets where the al Qaeda network is active. It does require that policymakers invest in a substantial effort to develop a global strategy with local solutions to counter the entire al Qaeda network.

We must fully understand the al Qaeda network, and then, and only then, will we be in the position to craft a strategy to defeat it.

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