



In this monograph, Dr. Jarret Brachman delves into al-Qaeda's crumbling global movement and its internal struggles, including its attempts to remain relevant in the shadow of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Brachman cites various internal writings of al-Qaeda's past and present leaders, thinkers, and supporters. It becomes clear that this once dominant terrorist organization has changed in the post-bin Laden era, is becoming fractured, and is taking a backseat to ISIL. Brachman analyzes letters, blog posts, and social media comments from various ranks within al-Qaeda that show the discontent, frustration, and confusion the once prominent terrorist organization has faced in recent years. Although struggling, al-Qaeda remains a serious threat and maintains a global footprint. But as ISIL gains more publicity, al-Qaeda has more trouble competing for followers, funding, and attention. This monograph explores al-Qaeda's recent efforts to make sense of itself.

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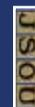


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The War Within: A Look Inside al-Qaeda's Undoing

Brachman



JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY



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Contents

Foreword.....	vii
About the Author.....	ix
Preface	1
Introduction.....	5
1. Insights From Abbottabad	13
2. After bin Laden.....	29
3. Al-Qaeda’s Uncertain Future	43
Conclusion.....	53
Endnotes.....	57

Foreword

Dr. Jarret Brachman's *The War Within: A Look Inside al-Qaeda's Undoing* delves into al-Qaeda's crumbling global movement and its internal struggles, including its attempts to remain relevant. While at one time not a day would go by without al-Qaeda being mentioned in the news, media coverage is now much more focused on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has dominated al-Qaeda in terms of strategic messaging, recruiting, funding, and more.

Brachman cites various internal writings of al-Qaeda's past and present leaders, thinkers, and supporters. It becomes clear that this once dominant terrorist organization has changed in the post-bin Laden era; it is becoming fractured, and it is seemingly taking a backseat to ISIL. But despite these and other problems in recent years, al-Qaeda remains a serious threat across the globe. With splinter groups, including al-Shabaab, and terrorism plots and attacks in many Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African nations, it is clear they cannot be ignored. Although they are focusing more now on local gains rather than a global agenda, they still have a significant global footprint. But Brachman questions, "whether today's incarnations of al-Qaeda retain any of the same attributes that helped al-Qaeda's general command originally rise to prominence."

Brachman analyzes letters, blog posts, and social media comments from various ranks within al-Qaeda that show the discontent, frustration, and confusion the once prominent terrorist organization has faced in recent years. He gives an overview of the creation of the Islamic State and the tensions that erupted between them and al-Qaeda, as well as al-Qaeda's lack of ability to adapt to the new era of mobile social media, which ISIL has seemingly mastered. While still a threat, al-Qaeda is struggling for survival in the Islamic State's shadow, attempting to compete for resources, followers, and attention—and it has not had great success in these endeavors.

The first section of this monograph examines the 17 letters found in Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound, which highlight a vast range of bin Laden's grievances and concerns about al-Qaeda's struggles with recruiting, communication, and myriad other issues. The second section addresses how Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda's remaining senior leadership sought

to understand their role in the world following bin Laden's death. The section also explores shifts in al-Qaeda's policies and then analyzes al-Zawahiri's failure to control Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the emir of ISIL. The third section examines debates among al-Qaeda's regional affiliates, online personalities, and others close to the organization to better track the kinds of internal grievances being articulated across the movement.

This monograph has value to the military and beyond. It is not only an in-depth look at one of the most infamous terrorist organizations in the world, but its value lies within the first-hand accounts from al-Qaeda's leaders and followers alike. Taking this information that has come 'straight from the horse's mouth' can help SOF operators, enablers, and conventional forces better 'know their enemy' so they can exploit al-Qaeda's struggles and weaknesses, and eventually defeat them.

Kenneth H. Poole, Ed.D.

Director, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

About the Author

Dr. Jarret Brachman is an internationally recognized specialist on al-Qaeda strategy, ideology, and propaganda. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Delaware. During his graduate work, he served as a doctoral fellow at the Central Intelligence Agency's Counterterrorist Center in 2003. Dr. Brachman went on to serve as the first Director of Research at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) from 2004 to 2008. In that role he oversaw numerous sponsored research projects for agencies across the Department of Defense and intelligence and law enforcement communities, and directly oversaw the establishment of the *CTC Sentinel* publication.



In 2008, Dr. Brachman returned to his hometown of Fargo, North Dakota, where he now teaches at North Dakota State University. He published his first book, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, in 2008 with Routledge Press and has published numerous articles on academics and policy. He is currently directing a security and training center at North Dakota State University. His research is regularly featured across international media outlets including, NPR, CNN, Associated Press, *Washington Post*, and *New York Times*.

Preface

Despite Ayman al-Zawahiri's numerous pronouncements calling for unity among al-Qaeda's ranks since formally becoming emir in June 2011, he has been unable to squelch the internal discord and dissension plaguing al-Qaeda's global movement. The degree to which his followers are expressing confusion, concern, and bitterness has only grown more acute since al-Zawahiri assumed the reins. With the Islamic State's meteoric rise and strategic messaging dominance over al-Qaeda's general command and its various regional affiliates, the militant Islamist space has only grown more fractured and factionalized.

The increased levels of internal discontent are better understood as happening in spite of al-Zawahiri's efforts, not because of them. In the immediate aftermath of Osama bin Laden's death, American counterterrorism analysts filled the airwaves with commentary about al-Zawahiri's supposed lack of charisma or ability to effectively inspire al-Qaeda's target audience. For al-Qaeda's adherents, charisma has always mattered far less than perceived ability to demonstrate success on the battlefield. The al-Qaeda global movement has been so handily eclipsed by the Islamic State, today's militant Islamist landscape, because it has repeatedly failed to demonstrate relevance or influence to its global audience, particularly when compared with groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or the Islamic State.

The global al-Qaeda movement's post-bin Laden evolution has been heavily influenced by the al-Qaeda general command's geographic isolation and an increasingly assertive regional affiliate leaders. On the ground, groups taking up the al-Qaeda banner have turned inward, shifting their focus to local matters. They draw on what they believe makes the most sense for their unique situations, not what al-Qaeda's general command orders them to do from thousands of miles away. If anything, it is the Islamic State, not the general command, that is providing the new Northern Star that is setting the new standard for the look, feel, and behavior of regional affiliate groups.

The elimination of most of the global al-Qaeda movement's persuasive senior leaders and prominent clerics, the closure of its numerous online discussion forums, decline of first-rate propaganda and high-visibility terrorist attacks around which to rally, and the dilution of al-Qaeda's remaining

Internet support base across a variety of social media platforms, has led to a cacophonous, undisciplined, atomized movement that is struggling to understand what al-Qaeda is anymore. Militant Islamist supporters have retreated to the easiest point of entry that requires the least amount of intellectual work: online social media.

Try as he might, al-Zawahiri has simply been unable to authoritatively and effectively wrestle al-Qaeda's regional affiliates and global adherents back into line when they stray. He has also shown little ability to take al-Qaeda's message viral in an era of mobile phones and mobile apps. A role that had been once shared across a cadre of senior leaders now falls almost entirely on the back of al-Zawahiri, who simply is not able to play the role of persuasive communicator, largely because he lacks the bureaucratic mechanisms with which to police his own movement. Since the general command now has so few resources to offer their movement as carrots for compliance, and since they have virtually no sticks other than public shaming, al-Zawahiri has become virtually irrelevant.

Between the questions over why al-Zawahiri's orders were publicly disobeyed by the head of al-Qaeda's Iraq affiliate to the open letter sent to al-Zawahiri from a senior al-Shabaab commander pleading for assistance to quell in-fighting, al-Qaeda's global following continues trying for small wins, or marginal propaganda successes in an otherwise dysfunctional series of messes. Those espousing the al-Qaeda ideology today are strategically confused, and questioning whether the Islamic State offers more legitimacy in the eyes of hardline jihadist adherents. This report analyzes al-Qaeda's internal discussions—from official al-Qaeda releases to think-pieces penned by al-Qaeda's intelligentsia to online postings by rank-in-file followers—in order to better gauge the movement's perception of internal cohesion. This report shows that a high degree of rancor and consternation persists within al-Qaeda's ranks, but not regarding the types of issues that divided the movement just several years ago, most notably the killing of Muslim non-combatants by groups acting in alignment with al-Qaeda's global brand. Rather, there remains a high degree of frustration today about perceived lack of unity and coordination within the general command and across the regional affiliates. The affiliate leaderships remain preoccupied with defending themselves and their reputations against internal critics, backbiters, and discouragers.

The persistent rumblings within al-Qaeda's movement could be viewed as a positive step for America's war with the global jihadist movement. The more time the al-Qaeda support community spends bickering with one another about internal issues, the less time they are innovating dastardly plots or fueling the fires of online radicalization. These quarrels have very real consequences in terms of creating misgivings, mistrust, and ill will among leaders, groups, and forums. It may also lead to growing fatigue among al-Qaeda's online participants as they watch the movement for which they so desperately want to cheer cannibalize itself.

On the flip side, al-Qaeda's undisciplined and relatively ungoverned global movement remains unpredictable and keenly intent on proving their organizational competence to the world.

Introduction

In July 2009, al-Qaeda's senior religious authority, Sheikh Abu Yahya al-Libi, issued a stern warning to the global al-Qaeda movement against "backbiting." For al-Libi, the notion of "backbiting," understood as the unfounded public criticism by one Muslim of another, "is worse than defamation" because that criticism "damages relationships between Muslims," according to al-Libi. Backbiting does more than just chip away at the movement's morale or contribute to operational dysfunction, al-Libi contended. This practice of public shaming, he argued, fundamentally destroys the fabric of trust within al-Qaeda's global movement as well as between al-Qaeda and the broader Islamic world to which it is appealing for support.¹

Abu Yahya al-Libi preached that backbiting and the internal fractures that flow from it are not only prohibited in the Quran, Hadith, and by the Prophet, but "is a chronic disease" that, if allowed to spread, "will divide [society] and tear apart what ties it has. It leads to conflicts, hatred, and enmity. It makes the human, the Muslim, spiteful of his Muslim brother and makes him push him to fall into what he hates." Although al-Libi was al-Qaeda's most outspoken voice on the dangers of infighting, his admonitions have been carried forward by the few remaining senior al-Qaeda leaders as they have struggled to maintain unity and coherence in recent years, largely because of how prescient his warnings seem to have been.²

What remains of today's al-Qaeda stands at a precarious crossroads. The general command's public face is now a shadow of its former self, with Ayman al-Zawahiri and Adam Gadahn being the most visible spokesmen. To compensate for losses across the senior ranks, As-Sahab has brought out senior thinkers, including; Husam Abd-al-Ra'uf (aka Abd-al-Hadi Mustafa), Abu Dujanah al-Basha (aka Muhammad Bin-Mahmud al-Bahtiti),³ Maulana Asim Umar, the head of al-Qaeda's sharia committee in Pakistan; Ustad Ahmad Farooq, al-Qaeda's chief propagandist in Pakistan; and Abu Khalil al-Madani.⁴

Al-Qaeda's primary affiliates have turned inward and are concentrating more on making territorial gains locally, appealing to the local populous and consolidating themselves through low-level criminality than they are on advancing al-Qaeda's grandiose global agenda.

Al-Qaeda's global support base, connected mostly via the Internet, is now fractured across a host of sporadically available online channels and platforms. But adherents with more longevity supporting the movement remain active primarily on Internet discussion forums, which were the mainstay of mid-2000s support. Al-Qaeda's media products still find ample reception in the forum community. Newer generations, however, have turned away from the forum structure, instead interfacing with militant Islamist content via their mobile phones. Al-Qaeda has yet to crack the code on doing social media right, virtually ceding the entire space to the Islamic State.

Despite this somewhat bleak depiction of al-Qaeda's state, terrorist plots and attacks connected in some way to the al-Qaeda movement persist everywhere from Iraq to Pakistan, Kenya to Yemen, Mali to Jordan, and beyond.⁵ To say that al-Qaeda is no longer a serious threat to the world, however, would be simply incorrect. Its global footprint is more expansive than ever before. The question remains, however, whether today's incarnations of al-Qaeda retain any of the same attributes that helped al-Qaeda's general command originally rise to prominence.

Al-Qaeda observers are questioning the very premise of a war with al-Qaeda if that which is known as al-Qaeda has fundamentally changed. Steve Coll, for example, in 2013 noted that certainly, "jihadist violence presents an enduring danger. Its proponents will rise and ebb; the amorphous threats that they pose will require adaptive security policies and, occasionally, military action." But at the same time, Coll disputes that this reality is any grounds for maintaining such a robust focus with a war on al-Qaeda. Indeed, Coll contends that, "the empirical case for a worldwide state of war against a corporeal thing called al-Qaeda looks increasingly threadbare. A war against a name is a war in name only."⁶ To Coll's point, with the rise of the Islamic State, the world has again found a corporeal entity against which to declare a state of war, so by contrast, what remains of al-Qaeda seems to be even more threadbare.

This report explores al-Qaeda's own efforts to make sense of itself. It will seek to identify the attributes of the al-Qaeda brand that differentiate it from that of other jihadist movements, particularly the Islamic State. And the report attempts to clarify whether there are meaningful distinctions among the various groups that retain the al-Qaeda mantle. Rather than attempting to analyze al-Qaeda's supposed strengths and weaknesses as other counter-terrorism studies have done, this report begins by peering behind al-Qaeda's



Figure 1. Former al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (left) and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, sit in a hideout in Afghanistan in 2001. Following bin Laden's death in 2011, al-Zawahiri was named al-Qaeda's new leader. Source: Newscom

curtain, drawing on the words of their own leaders and thinkers. It sought to make sense of al-Qaeda from within rather than imposing typical external analytic categories upon it as many counterterrorism studies do.⁷

Although this report began as a project exploring strategic fissures and ideological wedges that could be potentially exacerbated and exploited, it became clear that these kinds of issues no longer fuel the fire of al-Qaeda's internal debates. Rather, in light of the rise of the Islamic State and the intellectual degradation of al-Qaeda's new generation of followers, it devolved into personal grudge matches.

The report finds the same insights that many al-Qaeda analysts have intuitively known all along: al-Qaeda's internal dialog over recent years shows a global movement plagued by factionalism, infighting, and backbiting. It is a war within that al-Qaeda's own leaders and thinkers used to keep quiet, fearful that reports of such internal wrangling would only further alienate the movement from the broader Islamic world.

But today, because of both the proliferation of Internet channels through which al-Qaeda's adherents can communicate and the dearth of clear guidance from the senior ranks, al-Qaeda's global movement is now pleading

to their own movement for semblance of unity and direction. The lack of definitive, authoritative voices beyond Ayman al-Zawahiri and a handful of others, has led to devolution of ideological and strategic influence within al-Qaeda's global movement to the point that concerns about internal back-biting becomes an existential threat for its leadership.

What this report attempts to show is how contemporary discussions about the nature of the threat posed by al-Qaeda are inherently problematic because they continue to use this static label to refer to a dynamic structure. Since al-Qaeda entered the global lexicon in the late 1990's and early 2000's, its personnel, operational capabilities, geographic presence, approach to messaging, and more have undergone numerous evolutions and incarnations. Today's al-Qaeda is so vastly different from the al-Qaeda the world had come to know, that one must ask at what point the term mischaracterizes the phenomenon.

At its core, al-Qaeda is a collection of men who believed they could leverage the intersection of global technology and local politics to change the world. Al-Qaeda's top brass wanted to remake the Islamic world in their image. Operating from the margins for decades, this class of ultra-orthodox Islamist revolutionaries, spearheaded by bin Laden's cult of personality, unconvincingly sought to advance their case to the world through ruthless terrorist attacks aimed at civilian populations.

Time and again, the Islamic world rejected al-Qaeda's numerous attempts to market itself. Offering little but wanton bloodshed and megabytes of empty rhetoric, even al-Qaeda's cast of media savvy personalities were powerless to generate the global revolution that bin Laden had hoped he could incite through the 11 September 2001 attacks. Rather, al-Qaeda lost its place in the global spotlight, returning once again to the margins. Since 2001, the centrifugal nature of al-Qaeda's internal dynamics has been borne out. Among the senior ranks, al-Qaeda's top leaders have quarreled and quibbled about everything from office supply budgets to major strategic issues. Al-Qaeda's regional groups have similarly faced challenges, many of which they caused through their own actions. They have disagreed with one another, as well as with the senior leadership, about a host of issues.

Al-Qaeda's Internet support movement has not been free of internal disputes. To the contrary, al-Qaeda's online adherents are some of the most quarrelsome personalities in the movement, aggressively disagreeing with each other about nearly everything. In some ways, al-Qaeda's attempt to

make sense of itself is no different than one might find when surveying the populous of a given country or employees at a multi-national corporation about their attitudes and satisfaction. It is this continued internal discussion that helps drive an organization forward.

In al-Qaeda's case, the lack of internal agreement about who they are and what that means has had disastrous consequences. Individual leaders have defined the bounds of al-Qaeda's mission differently than others, granting themselves autonomy that far exceeded what had been originally envisioned by the organization's senior leadership.

Al-Qaeda's foundational challenge continues to be that, in the minds of most of its global movement, it was inextricably tied to one man, bin Laden, and his criticism of Islam's failing to counter the onslaught of internal and external enemies. The senior leadership, particularly Ayman al-Zawahiri, has assiduously sought to reign in the differing internal perspectives of what al-Qaeda should be. Repeated broadcasts defining the boundaries of what is possible, appropriate, and necessary have done little in practice, however, to dispel the varying application of the al-Qaeda idea on the ground. As a consequence of the loss of most of al-Qaeda's historical senior leadership, a messaging vacuum began to emerge within al-Qaeda's global movement. Al-Qaeda's best known media celebrities, including bin Laden, Abu al-Layth al-Libi, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Atiyatallah al-Libi, Abdallah Saed, and Khalid al-Husainan, offered not only content for their media productions but characters with whom the global al-Qaeda movement could associate.

As these al-Qaeda senior leaders were killed, the frequency and innovation of al-Qaeda's media releases deteriorated. The organization was losing its brainpower and clerical sources of ideological authority. Equally important was deterioration of the personal connectedness that al-Qaeda's online global support movement had with the senior leadership.

A strong *esprit de corps* is imperative for any virtually connected movement, particularly one premised on convincing their membership to break laws, kill people, and potentially sacrifice their lives for a cause. That sense of a personal relationship that the senior leadership propaganda helped to foster between themselves and their global movement was critical in maintaining forward momentum. Its senior leaders were able to more readily enforce their ideological agendas with their globally dispersed, virtual support movement.

Either due to a lack of vision, ineptitude, dearth of quality replacements, or out of strategic calculus, al-Qaeda did not backfill those media personalities by introducing new voices. Not only had al-Qaeda lost most of its well-known media personalities, leaving its global following with fewer inspirational role models, but since al-Qaeda was not backfilling these personalities, the general command seemed to be dwindling right before the eyes of its followers. In the absence of a robust messaging core from al-Qaeda's senior leadership, the door was opened for one of the regional affiliates to step into the vacuum and assert their dominance as al-Qaeda's new torch bearer.

The most likely candidate was al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a group that had demonstrated its ability to both target and message locally, regionally, and globally. Through a consistent releasing of both Arabic-language and English-language media products, AQAP's visibility increased worldwide. Their messaging did not, however, catapult them into any role as first among equals with regard to al-Qaeda discourse. Whether it was because AQAP offered no compelling personality behind which the global al-Qaeda movement could rally—at least after the death of Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki—or because their pledge of loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri as al-Qaeda emir necessarily subordinated them to al-Qaeda's senior leadership is unclear.

What is clear, though, is that despite al-Zawahiri's concerted efforts to capture the imagination of the global al-Qaeda movement through numerous media releases, he has been unable to do so. Although his media releases are generally met with fanfare and celebratory reactions, they tend to have a short shelf-life on the jihadist discussion forums, provoke little substantive conversation, receive a moderate number of views, and do not seem to result in the kind of discursive or behavioral shifts for which he aims.

With no single focal point of authoritative messaging behind which the global al-Qaeda movement can exuberantly rally, the movement has been devolving into a centrifugal state of local/regional foci. In other words, what had been a more or less coherent global discourse, ruthlessly guided by a cadre of highly visible and vocal senior al-Qaeda commanders, has since transformed into a cacophonous marketplace of individuals, shadowy media outlets, and a multiplicity of media products.

Despite whatever internal challenges the global al-Qaeda movement faces, the world continues to witness attacks conducted in the name of

both al-Qaeda as well as that of the Islamic State, leaving militant Islamist watchers and policymakers torn about how serious of a threat these movements continue to pose outside of the Middle East region. As one researcher recently wrote, “Islamist groups—some of them affiliated with al-Qaeda, others not—are far from defeated. They still have considerable capacity to wreak carnage and, given the weakness of regimes that are fighting them across the Middle East and Africa, they can make substantial inroads into failed states.”⁸

This report draws almost entirely on the internal writings of al-Qaeda’s leaders, thinkers, and supporters. The first section examines the 17 letters found in bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound that were publicly released in 2012 by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point. They highlight the range of bin Laden’s grievances spanning from concerns about new hires to regional affiliate messaging to internal communication challenges and much more.

The report’s second section addresses how al-Zawahiri and the remaining senior leadership sought to understand their role in the world in the wake of bin Laden’s death. The section explores shifts in al-Qaeda’s policies, including making al-Shabaab an official al-Qaeda affiliate in the immediate aftermath of bin Laden’s death. The section then analyzes al-Zawahiri’s inability to control Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the emir of the Islamic State of Iraq, in a situation reminiscent of his previous inability to control Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

The third section examines debates among al-Qaeda’s regional affiliates, online personalities, and pundits to better track the kinds of internal grievances and fissures being articulated across the movement.

1. Insights From Abbottabad

In May 2012, the CTC at West Point released the contents of 17 letters that were found in the raid on bin Laden's Abbottabad, Pakistan, compound one year prior.⁹ The letters, which are reportedly just a sampling of the extensive collection of documents captured in the raid, offer breathtaking insight into the mind of bin Laden and those around him during his later years. Although the extent to which these letters are representative of the other material collected is unknown, they open a window previously unknown to researchers about the candor with which al-Qaeda's senior leaders considered their own failings.

Most broadly in the years leading up to his death, bin Laden arguably became preoccupied with three major issues:

1. **A War of Attrition.** Bin Laden seemed to fully understand the extent to which al-Qaeda's bench had been depleted. He pressed remaining leaders of al-Qaeda's general command to relocate to an area outside of the tribal areas in order to salvage what little was left. The challenge was that al-Qaeda's regional affiliates were no longer responsive to the senior leadership's advice, much less their orders. Al-Qaeda, in bin Laden's eyes, was coming unglued.
2. **A War of Words.** Bin Laden seemed to believe the Obama Administration's decision to stop employing bellicose and polarizing rhetoric, such as phrases like 'War on Terror' had reduced the effectiveness of al-Qaeda's propaganda, particularly within the Islamic world. Al-Qaeda had to rebrand themselves in the midst of this changed rhetorical reality. This required communication, coordination, and foresight, none of which al-Qaeda's remaining leaders seemed to appreciate. In fact, al-Qaeda's regional affiliates seemed to only further alienating themselves from their target audiences.
3. **A War for Hearts and Minds.** Years of savage attacks by al-Qaeda fighters within the Middle East and South Asia had disgraced al-Qaeda within the eyes of the broader Islamic world. The regional affiliates' prioritization of parochial concerns and personal agendas threatened to undermine the entire al-Qaeda project, in bin Laden's perception.

The 17 letters surprised the counterterrorism community on primarily two fronts. First, far from being an absentee organizational emir, the documents gave the impression that bin Laden was meticulously trying to wield bureaucratic control over the global al-Qaeda movement. Media headlines covering the document release painted bin Laden as a “micromanager,” holed up in his Abbottabad compound doing little but plotting America’s destruction and obsessing in letter form to anyone who would listen about al-Qaeda’s cratering popularity.¹⁰

The second insight was the degree to which bin Laden’s internal missives were being ignored by the actual al-Qaeda movement. The idea of bin Laden shouting into the darkness was not the dominant narrative among most open source counterterrorism researchers before these letters were revealed. Neither was the extent to which he relied on the Libyan, Atiyah abd al-Rahman, as a sort of consigliere to transmit his grievances to the broader al-Qaeda ranks.¹¹

A number of key insights can be gleaned pertaining to his attitude about certain leaders, groups, and trends. In many ways these documents upend much of the traditional thinking about al-Qaeda as a cohesive, singular global entity. To the contrary, if bin Laden’s thinking in these letters is any reflection about the broader perspectives held by al-Qaeda’s senior leaders, the group had far more internal fissures than had been previously understood.

Somalia

The nature of al-Qaeda’s relationship with the Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen militant organization in Somalia has been one of great concern in the West. Neither al-Qaeda’s senior leaders nor al-Shabaab did much to help clarify the nature of this relationship while bin Laden was still alive. In February 2009, al-Qaeda’s official media organization, for example, As-Sahab Media, issued a video titled, “From Kabul ... To Mogadishu” prominently featuring Ayman al-Zawahiri discussing a range of geopolitical priorities for al-Qaeda.

In the video, As-Sahab also excerpted an interchange with Hasan “Turki” Abdullahi Hirsi, an early senior al-Shabaab official, who has faded from the scene in recent years due to a host of ailments.¹² According to Turki:

I am not a terrorist; the terrorists are the Americans, and Bush and his army who annihilate the peoples of Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, and Palestine. The terrorists are the infidels led by Bush. We are reformists not terrorists. I am a mujahid Shaykh among the scholars of jihad, and my association and affiliation to Al-Qaida is of the same kind as my affiliation to HAMAS or the [Islamic] Jihad, or to the mujahidin in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. The mujahidin are attached to each other, but the infidels and those who denied the signs of God are friends and supporters to each other. The mujahidin are our brothers. Almighty God says: 'The Believers are but a single Brotherhood'. From this perspective, I am a member of Al-Qaida Organization, and Al-Qaida is part of me. To sum up, I do not belong to Al-Qaida as an organization, but we have one common objective which is the jihad against the enemies.¹³

For Turki, making that distinction between the global ideology for which groups like al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab claimed to fight and the al-Qaeda organization itself was imperative. Bin Laden implored al-Shabaab's leadership to maintain that distinction for their own good as well as for helping avoid any further damage to al-Qaeda's reputation by reigning in who could claim to be conducting operations under the al-Qaeda banner.

According to the letters released by the CTC, bin Laden maintained correspondence with al-Shabaab's leader, Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr. Concerned about potentially negative fallout among the broader Somali people of such an alliance with al-Qaeda, bin Laden counseled against a formal alliance. In a letter dated 7 August 2010 from "Zamarai" (likely, bin Laden) to al-Zubayr, bin Laden responds to a letter he had previously received from al-Zubayr, who was requesting official unity with al-Qaeda.¹⁴

Bin Laden argued in that letter that "there should be a practical working emirate on the ground," the al-Shabaab leadership should avoid "declaring it in the media or confirming it in any paperwork, in order to avoid these documents leaking out to the enemies – should it happen for any reason."¹⁵ Any attempt to publicly unite the two organizations would be a mistake, bin Laden argued. Rather, any collaboration should be done through "unannounced secret messaging," bin Laden advises. But bin Laden's concern for operational security causes him to raise the issue of al-Shabaab members potentially "talking about their relationship with al-Qaeda, if asked."

Instead of denying or embracing a clearly delineated status, bin Laden advocated a kind of strategic ambiguity, offering that “it would be better for them to say that there is a relationship with al-Qaeda which is simply a brotherly Islamic connection and nothing more, which would neither deny nor prove.” Bin Laden offered two reasons for discouraging any form of public connectedness.

First, he wrote that any announcement or leak of a formal alliance between the two organizations “would have the enemies escalate their anger and mobilize against you,” which is what he saw as being the downfall of al-Qaeda’s efforts in Iraq and Algeria. Second, bin Laden seemed to recognize that al-Qaeda’s brand name had become much more of a liability than a benefit. In the case of Somalia, bin Laden’s apprehension was that any formal (or visible) alliance between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda would shrink potential donor funding to Somalia as a consequence. Bin Laden wrote to al-Zubayr:

The matter is that some Muslims in Somalia are suffering from immense poverty and malnutrition, because of the continuity of wars in their country ... Therefore, by not having the mujahidin openly allied with al-Qaida, it would strengthen those merchants who are willing to help the brothers in Somalia, and would keep people with the mujahidin.¹⁶

The Somali people, who bin Laden viewed as being in dire need of foreign aid and investment, might come to blame al-Qaeda for the disappearance of that aid. Loss of popular support would scuttle any chance of building long-lasting and widespread support in the country for al-Qaeda. According to Ahmed Sheikh Hussein, a political analyst who tracks al-Shabaab, bin Laden had never been keen on making al-Shabaab an official organizational affiliate, even when the group swore its allegiance to him in 2009. “This may have been because of his belief that al-Shabaab’s performance was lacking and that it was too strict in enforcing Sharia law, not to mention the increasing internal divisions within its ranks,” he told Sabahi news.¹⁷

A second letter believed to have been composed in December 2010, sheds further light on the issue.¹⁸ Although the author is unknown, the letter was likely written to bin Laden from a colleague based on the familiarity with which it is written. Referring to “our friend’s letter” and the perspective of the “brothers ... [who might have been] too concerned about inflating the size and growth of al-Qa`ida,” the author of the document urges the receiver

to “reconsider your opinion not to declare the accession [i.e. formal merger] of the brothers of Somalia ...” The CTC analysts who initially reviewed the letters speculate that if the letter was authored by Ayman al-Zawahiri, then there was serious internal disagreements about this strategic issue. If the above letter was indeed penned by al-Zawahiri, then it suggests that he held a starkly different perspective than bin Laden on the wisdom of formally aligning with al-Shabaab.

Yemen

Perhaps the most of the globally visible and arguably operationally effective of the affiliates is AQAP, which is based in Yemen. AQAP has been one of the most active al-Qaeda regional affiliates. Its interests in targeting locally, regionally, and globally have become increasingly clarified during recent years through a series of brazen attempted attacks against targets in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.¹⁹

The introduction of two American Jihadists, Imam Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, drastically upgraded the group’s ability and interest in attacking Western targets, particularly the United States.²⁰ With al-Awlaki and Khan’s deaths, AQAP’s interest in pursuing Western targets must be questioned because it is unclear whether their deaths mean the group will maintain the capacity or commitment to direct attacks against the United States. AQAP has been making global headlines because of the group’s embrace of the American-Yemeni imam, Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki; its establishment of an English-language propaganda magazine, *Inspire*, aimed at radicalizing and operationalizing Western Muslims; and a series of terrorist plots and attacks it has directed at the American homeland.

Prior to bin Laden’s death, al-Qaeda’s senior leadership had been completely silent in its public pronouncements about al-Awlaki and the series of attacks inspired by or directed by AQAP. That may have been because of how strongly bin Laden believed that AQAP was making fundamental errors in their activities. In another released letter that was addressed to “Abu Basir” (Nasir al-Wuhayshi, leader of AQAP) from an unidentified author, who the CTC believes is most likely bin Laden or his trusted lieutenant, Sheikh `Atiyya abd al-Rahman, the writer sought to redirect AQAP’s efforts away from the near enemies and back on the external enemies. The writer repeatedly called for avoiding any military escalation in Yemen.

According to the CTC's analysis, the letter is in part a response to specific requests for guidance from AQAP's leadership to fundamentally rethink the point of having an open al-Qaeda front operating in Yemen. For bin Laden, the regime's military weakness at the time was not justification for AQAP to overthrow it if they could not ensure that once they controlled Yemen they could maintain it. The United States, he reminds Abu Basir, was able to topple Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan and thus the United States would have little trouble ousting AQAP from control of Yemen.

For bin Laden, the United States would not be willing to see AQAP seize military control over the country, "because of its geographical location, which is in the heart of the Gulf where the largest store of oil is in the world." Therefore, if they were able to rally the people to seize control and then subsequently lost control, the Yemeni "people will not help us the second time." For this reason, bin Laden argued that "Yemen should be peaceful and kept as reserved military for the Ummah." Yemen, bin Laden argued, is best positioned to meet the demand for "reserve military," thereby keeping American military forces "in the open fronts until the enemy becomes weak, where we would be able to establish Islamic State."²¹

Bin Laden used the letter to advance a number of specific recommendations to AQAP's leadership which are paraphrased below:

- Appoint scholars and tribal Sheikhs to accomplish a practical truce among them.
- Avoid military escalation with Yemeni government forces. The goal is not to bring down the regime but to use Yemen as a place to prepare for future campaigns.
- Concentrate on the Yemeni emigrants who come back to visit Yemen and have American visas or citizenship and would be able to conduct operations inside America, expanding operations beyond blowing up airplanes.
- Avoid the killing of anyone from Yemeni tribes.
- Maintain an AQAP leadership presence in southern Yemen.
- Avoid targeting Yemeni military and police officers unless al-Qaeda's senior leadership directly orders such an attack.
- Accept truces from supporters and partners.
- Rigorously vet senior leaders.

In summary, each of these recommendations concern limiting the focus on active militancy in Yemen and rethinking of it as a limited area from which to plan external operations and regroup. Bin Laden's thinking about the nature of al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen could not be any more different from how AQAP's regional leadership was operating.

Another letter, marked SOCOM-2012-0000019, sheds expanded light into bin Laden's concerns about how the AQAP organization was conducting itself in Yemen. According to the CTC's analysis, the letter is authored by bin Laden after the death of Sheikh Sa'id (Mustafa Abu'l-Yazid) in late May 2010 and it is addressed to "Shaykh Mahmud" (aka: 'Atiyya; Atiyatalah) who he designates as Sa'id's successor. In the letter, bin Laden laid out the mistakes he believed al-Qaeda's regional affiliates were committing. In this letter, bin Laden asserted a desire to launch a "new phase" for al-Qaeda aimed at regaining the trust of the broader Muslim world, who he believed had essentially turned against the al-Qaeda brand because of its tie to violence against other Muslims. As we can infer, bin Laden spent a great deal of time focusing his thoughts about Yemen.

Bin Laden also used the letter to chide AQAP's deputy leader, Sa'id al-Shehri, for making a speech demanding the release of a female al-Qaeda member arrested by the Saudis. According to bin Laden, al-Shehri had contradicted al-Qaeda's previous positions by threatening to carry out kidnapping operations against Westerners in that country, members of the Saudi royal family, and the senior security employees in exchange for her release.

Bin Laden also cited the negative coverage that al-Qaeda received on al-Arabiya Television, arguing that it portrayed al-Qaeda as a movement that was uninterested in the Palestinian cause, the blockade in Gaza, and fighting against the Jews, but rather focused on fighting Saudis.

According to bin Laden:

The issuance of [al-Shehri's] speech, especially at this time, conflicted with our policy of focusing on the bigger foe, and concealed our interest in the main issues that were the main reasons in initiating the Jihad. It announced to the people that we are in a fight and argument with the rulers to avenge our brothers, those that were killed and detained far from the cases and interests of the general nation, due to which it held our brothers responsible for the killing and imprisonment. It also gave the Muslims an impression of us

that we were overcome by the region-like command or parties or both; they heard our brother talk about the sister from the Arab Peninsula and from al-Qa'ida organization, but they did not hear him talk about our sister in Palestine – this is contrary to our reality and our general policy, as it weakens our stance when we say that we are an international organization fighting for the liberation of Palestine and all of the Muslim countries to erect an Islamic caliphate that would rule according to the Shari'ah of Allah.²²

Finally, bin Laden expressed specific concern about AQAP's integration and promotion of the American-Yemeni cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki. In SOCOM-2012-0000003, a letter that the CTC believes to have been authored by bin Laden and addressed to Sheikh Mahmud ('Atiyya Abdul Rahman) on 27 August 2010, bin Laden directs the AQAP emir to remain in his position rather than passing it to al-Awlaki.

According to bin Laden, AQAP's embrace of al-Awlaki needed more vetting from the senior leadership than it received. "How excellent would it be," bin Laden penned to Atiya, if the AQAP emir "gives us a chance to be introduced to him more." Specifically, according to bin Laden:

I hope that brother Basir writes me his vision in detail about the situations and also asks brother Anwar al-'Awlaqi to write his vision in detail in a separate message, as well as brother Abu-Sufyan Sa'id al-Shahri, to send his vision in detail and separate.

How excellent would it be if you ask brother Basir to send us the resume, in detail and lengthy, of brother Anwar al-'Awlaqi, as well as the facts he relied on when recommending him, while informing him that his recommendation is considered. However, we would like to be reassured more.²³

From the letters released by CTC, bin Laden's apprehension about the AQAP's decision to cast Yemen as an open military front, their integration of Anwar al-Awlaki and their failure to synchronize their public messaging with the senior leadership's messaging priorities were all major headaches for bin Laden. However, other reporting suggested that bin Laden had more grievances with the Yemeni-based AQAP than is revealed in the CTC's Abbottabad letters.

According to Sebastian Rotella's piece in *ProPublica*, where he cites an unnamed U.S. counterterrorism official, bin Laden had criticized the *Inspire* magazine's bloodthirsty tone, particularly an article that taught readers how to convert a pickup truck into a lethal human mowing machine. According to this official, "bin Laden said this is something he did not endorse. He seems taken aback. He complains that this tactical proposal promotes indiscriminate slaughter. He says he rejects this and it is not something that reflects what al-Qaeda does."²⁴

Bin Laden's criticisms can be taken on multiple levels. Viewing them on a policy level, it could be argued that he was viewing AQAP's media efforts through an outdated lens. But when viewed at a strategic level, bin Laden's anxiety about AQAP's promotion of Anwar al-Awlaki and their prioritization on encouraging disconnected, lone wolf attacks was fundamentally at odds with the overall al-Qaeda methodology and organizational architecture that bin Laden had dedicated decades of his life to building.

Iraq

Al-Qaeda's franchise operation in Iraq has long caused the senior leadership management frustration. In the mid-2000s, substantial counterterrorism focus was placed on the series of letters issued by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Atiyah abd al-Rahman, and Abu Yahya al-Libi to the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq at the time, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The letters were a final effort by al-Qaeda's general command to warn al-Zarqawi about straying from their guidance strategically and operationally.²⁵

After al-Zarqawi's death in June 2006, al-Qaeda's troubles with their Iraqi franchise were far from over. Al-Qaeda's leadership continued to view Iraq as their best bet for a second base so al-Zawahiri pressed for the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which provoked a furious backlash by some in al-Qaeda's global movement. As Steven Brooke wrote in a CTC study on al-Qaeda's internal fractures:

With Zawahiri's prodding, al-Qa'ida in Iraq announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in western Iraq in mid-October 2006. One of the justifications cited by ISI ideologue Uthman Bin Abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi for the establishment of the Islamic State was the need for a secure base for jihadist activity in Iraq and abroad. To many, however, the establishment of an

Islamic State was done abruptly and without fulfilling the necessary theological requirements.²⁶

As Brooke observes, the Kuwait-based cleric Sheikh Hamid al-Ali, and the London-based Abu Basir al-Tartusi were the most outspoken critics from within al-Qaeda's own ranks who questioned the ISI's ability to "control its territory and implement sharia law, as well as the ISI's decision to appoint the relatively unknown Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi as its leader." Hamid al-Ali went so far as to issue a *fatwa*, in which he argued that because the mujahidin do not have "absolute authority" in Iraq, the country does not meet the conditions for establishing an Islamic State. According to al-Ali, the mujahidin needed to first work on "driving the occupation out" and bringing the people together before establishing a state.²⁷

The letters gathered from the bin Laden compound raid in Abbottabad show that bin Laden continued to have issues with the al-Qaeda franchise operating in Iraq. In SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT, a letter believed to be written by Adam Gadahn, it becomes clear the senior leadership was having internal debates about whether the mujahidin fighters in Iraq even ought to be considered al-Qaeda. Gadahn writes:

[Dr. Muhammad al-Misa'ri] was also correct in his analysis about Iraq, in comparison with other Jihadi arenas. To end the suspicion I would say: Whoever read my comments on the Dr.'s book knows that I said something similar to what he mentioned about the forums and the Islamic State of Iraq. All of that before the al-Misa'ri announcement that he issued after the killing of the State Emirs. My comments on the Dr.'s book were two months earlier, so I did not stem my thoughts from al-Misa'ri at all. But, there was some agreement on opinions –only on these two issues ... I would like to emphasize that I was at ease with declaring the State for a long time. I was not at ease with al-Zarqawi's—may God bless his soul—moves, which he took in the name of al-Qa'ida. All of this is known to the Shaykhs Ayman, 'Atiyah and Ubayd (Munir). My stand is not a new one, but I followed the official stand of the organization, being afraid not to create a seduction, and because I used to accuse my own opinion. This is to note now, although I have accepted my own stand, I do not discuss this topic except with the scholars like you and sometimes with my brothers at al-Sahab.²⁸

Gadahh pointed to the 2010 attack on the Catholic Church in Baghdad, which he said “halted” him because he believed it played directly into the narrative being advanced at the time by the Bush Administration:

Here this group in Iraq is telling the Christians (You’re either with us or with the al-Maliki government and there is no space for neutrality. Either you pay the “Jizya” to our fictitious state that cannot defend itself, and has no chance of defending you, or we will destroy your goods). Is this the justice that we are talking about, and that the Shaykh talks about in his statements and messages?²⁹

For Gadahn, such attacks flew directly in the face of previous messages from bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, Abdallah Azzam, and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi about avoiding attacks against Christian communities in the Middle East who were not actively posing a threat to al-Qaeda or Muslims, and not bombing Christian churches. “Strange,” Gadahn griped in the letter, “I swear—the conflict between the statements of our leaders and scholars, and the acts of those allied with them—or you may say: those claiming to follow them!”

For Gadahn, the solution was clear. He states unequivocally in a letter he wrote, most likely to bin Laden, that al-Qaeda ought to officially disassociate themselves with the ISI. He said:

I do not see any obstacle or bad act if al-Qa’ida organization declares its discontent with this behavior and other behaviors being carried out by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq, without an order from al-Qa’ida and without consultation. I see that this is done immediately or lately, favorably sooner. I see that the organization should declare the cutoff of its organizational ties with that [Islamic State of Iraq].³⁰

Such a move would not be as major as it may sounds, Gadahn argues. In fact, the ISI and al-Qaeda’s senior leadership had been estranged for some time. He confirms in the letter that the relations between al-Qaeda and the ISI had been “practically cut off for a number of years.” The reputational damage that the ISI’s attacks were causing the broader al-Qaeda brand name had reached a point where they could no longer be tolerated, Gadahn argued. Al-Qaeda’s only solution was to disassociate from the ISI, “otherwise its reputation will be damaged more and more as a result of the acts and statements of this group, which is labeled under our organization.”³¹

Reputational Damage

One of the more analytically surprising insights from the several hundred pages of released material by West Point's CTC focuses on the written interchanges between bin Laden and his primary confidant, Sheikh Atiyatallah. Bin Laden and Atiyatallah might not seem like natural compatriots, but by examining their personal histories and religious beliefs, the natural affinity these two men shared becomes starkly apparent. Religiously, they were the most vocal in al-Qaeda on the need for sharia-compliant operations.

On a personal level, both men portrayed themselves as humble and merciful servants of God. Shy, reserved, soft-spoken, and somewhat awkward in front of a camera, neither of them was the kind of fiery rhetorician like Ayman al-Zawahiri or an Abu Yahya al-Libi. Ideologically, both Atiyatallah and bin Laden were obsessed with destroying the West. Strategically, they believed in organizational centralization and top-down communication. They had a shared belief in the power of perception and intense fear of negative press. Unnecessary killing of Muslims, they both agreed, should be avoided at all costs.

In al-Qaeda's video commemorating the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on America, which was entitled, "The Dawn of Imminent Victory: The 10th Anniversary of the Blessed Tuesday Raids," a poem written by bin Laden was posthumously read.³² The narrator of that poem was Sheikh Atiyatallah. The Abbottabad documents released by the CTC suggests the decision to have Sheikh Atiyatallah read the poem was not simply made by chance or his available schedule. Rather, it could be understood to be the natural outcome of a close professional and personal relationship that had developed between bin Laden and Atiyatallah over the later years of bin Laden's life.

Jamal Ibrahim Ishtaywi al-Misrati, better known as Sheikh Atiyatallah, first appeared in December 2005, when the CTC had been able to review and release a declassified letter penned by a shadowy figure known at the time only as, "Atiyah." The letter was a surprisingly long and authoritative missive to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda's then field commander in Iraq. "Atiyah" had written to al-Zarqawi in such a way that showed both his deep personal familiarity with al-Zarqawi, but also his senior position within the al-Qaeda command structure.

According to the CTC's analysis:

Atiyah reminds Zarqawi that military actions must be subservient to al-Qa`ida's long-term political goals. Zarqawi's use of violence against popular Sunni leaders, according to 'Atiyah, is undermining al-Qa`ida's ability to win the "hearts of the people."³³

This depiction accurately summarizes how, for Atiyatallah, violence could never be pursued for violence's sake. It could only be a means—one that had to be regulated by sharia proscriptions on killing—not an end in itself. Atiyatallah's nightmare experiences in Algeria during the mid-1990s, according to Chris Anzalone, including a period when he was held captive by the Armed Islamic Group, likely influenced his views on *takfir* and the employment of mass violence against other Muslims—two issues which he later addressed repeatedly in his writings and audio and video statements.

Ayman al-Zawahiri's depiction of Sheikh Atiyatallah's experiences in Algeria is consistent with that research. According to al-Zawahiri:

[Atiyatallah] traveled to Algeria to participate in the jihad of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). He had a bitter experience with this group. He returned to Afghanistan just as the Islamic Emirate was being established. He taught at Kabul's Arabic school.³⁴

Standing witness to the cataclysm that Algeria would become, watching how the mujahidin Muslims "destroyed themselves with their own hands" by slaughtering Muslims. This indelibly scarred him and would shape his outlook on terrorist operations in the Middle East.

Perhaps equally as jarring for Atiyatallah was the collapse of global support the mujahidin faced, both in Algeria and abroad, as a result of that wanton bloodshed. Atiyatallah's letter to Zarqawi hammered on this concern, about not repeating the mistakes of the past. For example, according to Atiyatallah:

I had previously talked with you and with many of the brothers about what happened in Algeria, so do remember that. My brother, what use is it for us to delight in some operations and successful strikes when the immediate repercussion is a defeat for us of our call, and a loss of the justice of our cause and its logic in the minds of the masses who make up the people of the Muslim nation, who are ignorant and simple, and upon whom the afflictions of stultification, misguidance and corruption pile, and increased domination by the

enemies, more oppression, more humiliation visited upon us, and more ills, troubles, loss in capabilities, and wasted opportunities?³⁵

As early as 2005, Atiyatallah was publically arguing that strong and effective senior leadership was necessary for keeping the global movement on the right path and ensuring that individuals avoid conducting acts that, while seemingly tactically effective and perhaps popular in the short-term, would actually prove inadvertently subversive to the long-term interests of al-Qaeda's strategic agenda. He ordered that leaders "abstain from making any decision on a comprehensive issue and on substantial matters until you have turned to your leadership; Sheikh Usama and the Doctor, and their brothers there, and consulted with them." Atiyatallah was adamant about the religious and strategic necessity of consultation and outreach. He argued fervently about the use of taking stock of public opinion from members, supporters, fence-sitters, critics, and even adversaries.

Furthermore, there should even be consultation with good people who are not mujahidin, among which are the people of the country where you are, the Sunnis and the like; even if they are religiously unorthodox at times, or even hypocritical, as long as they are Muslims who agree with us in the resistance and jihad, not standing by the unbelievers. An example would be many of the religious scholars and tribal leaders and so forth. This is because consulting with them (and this does not necessarily mean accepting their opinion every time, or even most of the time) and having them participate in the matter is a wise policy that is supported by evidence from religious law, reason, history, and the knowledge of nations and their experiences.³⁶

Atiyatallah's combination of experiences, relationships, and beliefs led him to prioritize the following themes that would come to define him. These themes were the religious and strategically pragmatic necessity of avoiding the unnecessary killing of Muslims. For Atiyatallah, no violation of sharia could ever be tolerated, particularly when it concerned a Muslim killing another Muslim. Second, alienating oneself from one's host population is just bad policy. In Atiyatallah's mind, excommunication, which was used by hardliners to legitimize their attacks against Muslim population centers, was neither religiously sound nor practically wise.

Atiyya argued that anyone seeking to conduct an attack in the name of al-Qaeda must consult with those who are more religiously knowledgeable and organizationally connected than they were to ensure both the operational soundness of the plan and that it advanced al-Qaeda's strategic and ideological interests. Additionally, he advised, al-Qaeda's command structure would be best poised to leverage any attacks if they were informed about planned operations in advance.

Atiyah did not seem to be alone in his warnings about the reputational damage that would ensue from the wrong kinds of terrorist operations. Gadahn was similarly concerned about the way in which both the Iraqi fighters operating under the ISI moniker as well as the Pakistani Tehrik-i-Taliban. According to Gadahn:

Qa'ida al-Jihad Organization has denounced, more than once, and on the tongue of its Emirs and scholars and symbols and those who speak in favor, any armed operation that targets the Muslims in the places of their gathering, and any operation that does not account for the sanctity of their blood, souls, bodies, belongings or money. This acquittal includes the explosive operations that takes place in the center of markets, streets, restaurants, hotels that are packed with Muslims. It also includes, as a first principal, the detonation of mosques on the heads of the innocent praying public, shattering their bodies.³⁷

One of the most chiding letters to be released from the Abbottabad trove was jointly penned by Abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiyah abd al-Rahman to Hakimullah Mehsud, Emir of Tehrik-i-Taliban Movement in Pakistan (TTP). Referring to the TTP's "clear legal and religious mistakes," the two al-Qaeda Sheikhs chided Mehsud that the TTP's actions are "contrary to the objectives of Jihad and to the efforts exerted" by al-Qaeda's senior leadership. Mehsud needed to understand that he was not "the sole Emir for everyone to swear allegiance to," they demanded. His approach was a "misconception of the real situation, and may cause an inter-Mujahidin fighting," the two senior leaders warned.³⁸

They also focused the negative reputational consequences of his targeting of Muslims, arguing that, "as a result of martyrdom operations that takes place in the marketplaces, mosques, roads, assembly places, and calling the Muslims apostates" is against sharia and not in compliance with al-Qaeda's

thinking about the permissibility of killing human shields. “We want to make it clear,” they demanded, echoing their previous letters to another problem child, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, that Mehsud was in the wrong and needed to “avoid these grave mistakes” in the future, otherwise al-Qaeda’s general command would “take decisive actions” if their warnings continued to be ignored.³⁹

2. After bin Laden

In late May 2010, before bin Laden had been killed in his Abbottabad compound, he penned a letter to Sheikh Atiyah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi (aka, Sheikh Atiyatallah). The letter contained his reflections on the continued mistakes being committed by regional jihadist groups and the disturbing consequences it was having for al-Qaeda's global agenda. Al-Qaeda was losing support from within the Islamic world and many in his movement were questioning the deaths of Muslim civilians.

As a way to alleviate any further self-inflicted alienation from their followers or the broader Islamic world, bin Laden proposed launching a 'new phase' in the way that al-Qaeda sought to market itself globally so that the mujahidin could regain the lost trust of Muslims. Bin Laden directed Atiyatallah to prepare a memorandum focused on centralizing all al-Qaeda media and the operations of the regional al-Qaeda affiliates. Bin Laden spent much of the letter reflecting on the future of Yemen, external operations, and plans for his son Hamza.

After unsubstantiated rumors and rumblings circulated that Sayf al-Adl would be named as al-Qaeda's interim emir, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri was officially announced as bin Laden's successor.⁴⁰ Al-Zawahiri had been seen by most analysts as being the natural choice to replace bin Laden in his official role as head of the al-Qaeda senior leadership. Most Western analysts, however, were dubious about al-Zawahiri's ability to fill bin Laden's shoes in his more symbolic role as figurehead of the global al-Qaeda movement. The dubiousness might be better framed not in terms of personality or charisma, as there is no question al-Zawahiri is widely loved and revered. Rather, the challenge for al-Zawahiri was whether he could persuasively transform the idea of al-Qaeda from one that was inherently tied to bin Laden into a unified global movement that was responsive to his rhetorical leadership and direction.

With far less ability to wield rhetorical authority over the global movement like bin Laden, and with a severely degraded roster of loyal lieutenants to help him keep the regional affiliates on task and in line, al-Zawahiri's job was going to be difficult. Compounding that with the operational pressure that al-Qaeda's senior leadership had been under from an aggressive drone

campaign and the widening geographic footprint of al-Qaeda's regional affiliates, al-Zawahiri seemed to be losing control of his movement.

The degree of attention that al-Zawahiri allocates to various topics in his public statements can be a strong barometer for the concerns of al-Qaeda's senior leadership. A review of al-Zawahiri's statements since the death of bin Laden sheds light on his preoccupation with issues of command and control over regional affiliates, al-Qaeda's irrelevance vis-à-vis Middle East politics and the perceived need to articulate a cogent vision for a post-bin Laden organization.

For example, in the aftermath of bin Laden's death, al-Zawahiri's concerns about the future of the al-Qaeda movement resonated loudly in his June 2011 open statement, "The Noble Knight Has Dismounted." Al-Zawahiri uses the occasion to allay the fears of al-Qaeda's varied constituencies about the continuity of operations in al-Qaeda's corporate headquarters. Above all others, al-Zawahiri made clear that al-Qaeda still deferred to "Amir of the Believers," Mullah Muhammad Omar, by renewing the group's pledge of allegiance to him. Al-Zawahiri went on to reassure "all the mujahidin in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Islamic Maghreb" of the al-Qaeda senior leadership's ongoing support of them and their cause. He counseled "the mujahidin in usurped Palestine" and those "encamped Muslim ummah in Jerusalem" that al-Qaeda remained committed to fighting the United States until Palestine could be freed. He specifically highlighted the people of Pakistan, appealing to them to revolt against the Pakistani military and the country's "bribed politicians" who "converted Pakistan into a U.S. colony." One of al-Zawahiri's chief concerns seemed to be convincing the al-Qaeda global movement to have "cohesion with the people of the Muslim ummah." Far from attacking Muslims, al-Zawahiri re-emphasized the need for al-Qaeda and its like-minded associates to "avoid any operations that might endanger people in markets, mosques, or crowded places."⁴¹

In the decade following the 11 September 2001 attacks, al-Qaeda had alienated itself from the broader Islamic world by targeting predominantly Muslim population centers. Al-Qaeda became perceived by most Muslims as bloodthirsty thugs rather than the kind of Islamic vanguard that they represented themselves as being.

For those who criticized al-Qaeda for forgetting about or ignoring certain battlefronts, al-Zawahiri hoped to mute the sentiment, by trying to "assure

all Muslim people that we are their soldiers, and we will not spare any effort, God willing, to liberate their occupied parts in Kashmir, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, and Palestine.”⁴²

Given al-Qaeda’s complete inability to demonstrate relevance during the so called “Arab Spring” uprisings, al-Zawahiri sought to interject al-Qaeda into the conversation. “We support their blessed uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and the Levant,” he announced, “and we tell them that we are fighting along with them in one battle against the United States and its collaborators.” Al-Zawahiri specifically called to those battling the regimes in Syria, Libya, and Yemen to “continue their struggle, fight, and jihad,” pledging al-Qaeda’s continued support.

In summary, al-Zawahiri was caught in several conundrums at once:

- the structural reality of al-Qaeda’s expanding global footprint,
- creating more open fronts in which to have leadership challenges,
- al-Qaeda’s flattening command and control structure as a byproduct of the operational pressure being placed on the senior leadership,
- the global al-Qaeda movement’s geographic dispersion,
- the lack of the same kind of innate symbolic authority that his predecessor wielded, and
- a global movement of supporters who are turning inward, creating petty rhetorical battles as they lose hope and steam.

Based on his public messaging, al-Zawahiri seems to believe the only cure for this increasingly fractious al-Qaeda is restoring a sense of unity, which is presumably code for deference to his rulings.

This need for unity theme, with cohesion and submissiveness to the senior leadership, surprisingly has not become al-Zawahiri’s most used refrains in his deluge of post-bin Laden messaging. “We should unite to liberate the homelands of Muslims from each aggressor invader and corrupting agent, and support everyone who is wronged in this world,” he proclaimed in his June 2011 eulogy for bin Laden. And it is that same call for unity in the face of internal discord that he has continued to preach.

Somalia

In one of the most decisive first acts of his administration as al-Qaeda’s emir, al-Zawahiri announced on 9 February 2012 the official joining of al-Shabaab with al-Qaeda. In the As-Sahab video titled, “Good Tidings, by

Sheikhs Abu-Zubayr, Amir of the Mujahidin Youth Movement in Somalia, and Amir Ayman al-Zawahiri, May God Protect Them Both,” al-Zawahiri formally designates the al-Shabaab organization as al-Qaeda. According to al-Zawahiri in the video:

Today, I am bringing the glad tidings to our Muslim ummah of good tidings that shall delight the believers and embitter the lives of the Crusaders. Namely, the Mujahid Youth Movement in Somalia will hereby merge into Al-Qa’ida, in order to support the jihadist coalition in the face of the Zionist-Crusader campaign and its agents, the traitorous and betraying rulers.⁴³

The news of al-Shabaab’s official merger with al-Qaeda was generally celebrated across the jihadist Internet spaces although much of the commentary was tempered with expressions of confusion or caution.

To allay some of the concerns that Somali tribal leaders and religious authorities would not support the merger or that the public association with al-Qaeda would sully al-Shabaab’s domestic popularity with the people, al-Shabaab sought to generate excitement in the immediate aftermath by publishing a number of Arabic-language statements covering supposed pro-al-Qaeda rallies across al-Shabaab-held Somali territory.

Al-Zawahiri similarly continued drumming the importance of the Somali front on his end. In November 2012, for example, As-Sahab Media released a video titled, “The Crusader Invasion of Somalia: A New Epic From the Epics of Jihad Against the Crusaders by Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri.” In the statement, al-Zawahiri addresses four primary constituencies: the people of Somalia, members of al-Shabaab, the broader Islamic world, and the senior clerical authorities (*ulema*).

My first message is to our mujahidin brothers in Somalia and their brave vanguards, the Mujahidin Youth Movement [al-Shabaab]. Be not concerned with the numbers and materiel of the Crusaders ... Make them taste the fire and heat of jihad. Pursue them through guerilla warfare, ambushes, and martyrdom-seekers ...

My second message is to the free people of Somalia, its noble ones, its tribes and ulema, its faithful, truthful, mujahidin leaders on the battlefield who refuse humiliation, who delight in death with honor,

and who refuse to live in disgrace. The Kenyan and African forces, the gangs of the hypocrites, came along bringing the world's shame and dishonor upon you. They want to occupy your lands, violate your sanctities, shed your blood, rob your fortunes, alter your religion, and separate you from Islam, Shari'ah, and jihad. Therefore, be the supporters of God and do not be the supporters of America and the Crusaders. Write in the history of Islam a new page of glory and pride, and of rising up with faith ...

As for my third message, it is for the ummah [community of Muslims worldwide] of Islam to support their brothers in Somalia and to stand by them with men, money, weapons, support, and supplication in the face of the contemporary Crusader campaign. Do not forsake them as you will be chewed up and consumed after them.

As for my fourth message, it is for the ulema of the ummah. Where are your fatwas that make jihad against the non-believer invaders obligatory ... So, fulfill the promise that you made and lead your ummah in the face of the Crusader invasion standing against it.⁴⁴

Despite the two-front attempt by al-Zawahiri and al-Shabaab to galvanize supporters around the merger, recently publicized infighting and factionalism within al-Shabaab has stymied the progress they had hoped to make.

Several issues have handicapped al-Shabaab's recent public relations campaign. In April 2013, reports emerged of al-Shabaab leader Sheikh Ibrahim al-Afghani publicly posting an open letter to al-Zawahiri denouncing the policies of al-Zubayr.⁴⁵ The letter, posted on 6 April 2013 to the Global Jihad Network was titled, "I Give a Stark Warning," and published under the auspices of the "Islamic World Issues Study Center."⁴⁶

In the letter, Sheikh Ibrahim appealed to al-Qaeda's senior leadership to intervene and replace al-Zubayr. "We need a talented leader who will attain our objective which is to establish Islamic rule in Somalia." Sheikh Ibrahim also reportedly prodded al-Zawahiri to demand the establishment of an Islamic court which mediates disputes within al-Shabaab.

At the same time, a very public falling out between an American born member of al-Shabaab, Omar Hammami, and al-Shabaab's leader, al-Zubayr, was holding counterterrorism watchers in rapt attention. Hammami, who

grew up in Alabama, joined al-Shabaab around 2006, becoming something of a poster child for the group by 2009 thanks to his unconventional propaganda work. In a 2013 interview with *Wired* magazine, Hammami explained that he grew increasingly frustrated with its leadership, particularly al-Zubayr, who Hammami believed was marginalizing the foreign fighters and levied unreasonable taxes on the locals.⁴⁷ According to the *Wired* article, in late 2011, Hammami confronted al-Zubayr. “I told him every last detail in person,” Hammami told *Wired*, “leading to the beginning of the oppression.”

When asked about the public rift between Sheikh Ibrahim and al-Zubayr during another interview, Hammami responded:

Other grand emirs support this message, although they prefer to remain silent for personal reasons. The truth is that all had hoped for a solution without reverting to this method, but they are disappointed, especially after the death threats from unknown members.⁴⁸

Hammami’s interview covered the broad extent to which infighting seems to have consumed the al-Shabaab leadership. When asked about whether Ali Muhammad Jaydi, a mosque sheikh, had been assassinated by the al-Shabaab leadership, Hammami replied, “Yes, I checked with the senior emirs, who are aware of this story, and they admit that the man was killed after repenting from apostasy in the media and in an official statement by the movement about his embracing Islam. Then, after allowing him to come into Mogadishu, he was assassinated. When the matter was examined, al-Zubayr denied that he had given the order. Later, he admitted that those responsible for the assassination were indeed, his security men.”⁴⁹

When asked about whether Fazul Abdallah Muhammad was assassinated for betraying al-Shabaab’s senior leadership, Hammami answered that “some mujahideen actually do complain that al-Zubayr is involved in it but justify it with his strange interpretations of killing people under the pretext of competing with the emir.”⁵⁰

Hammami shocked the counterterrorism community the next March by breaking his silence to announce that he feared for his life from al-Shabaab’s leadership. For Hammami, quiet attempts to reform al-Shabaab were no longer working and, therefore, he believed that going public with his criticisms “would avert [in-]fighting and [prompt] an intervention by Shaykh Ayman, may God protect him. In the beginning, we tried to do it without

giving out too much detail. The ensuing events forced us to open the matter to the ummah so that similar issues can be avoided on other fronts ...”⁵¹

Hammami’s repeated attempts to pull the curtain back on the reality of al-Shabaab by way of social media were soon halted with his death after months on the run.⁵² According to reports, Hammami was killed by al-Shabaab rivals.

Al-Qaeda’s web supporters responded with predictable confusion. When asked to comment about “his stance toward the sedition in Somalia and killing Sheikh Abu-Mansur al-Amriki and some sheikhs there,” the Network administrator of the Al-Shamukh Forum avoided offering any answer. “I have no comment,” he wrote. “I supplicate to God to protect our mujahidin brothers and to join their ranks.”⁵³

On 20 September 2013, web user, “Mu’assasat al-Zil’i lil-Intaj al-Ġlami,” posted a message to the Global Jihad Network containing links to download an audio statement produced by the Al-Zi’li Establishment for Media Production and attributed to an individual named “Khatab al-Masri,” who the message identifies as “the mujahid brother expelled from the al-Shabaab Movement, and a friend of Abu-Mansur al-Amriki, may God have mercy on him.”

My supporter brothers: We inform you that we demand the imposition of God’s sharia upon the one who assaulted us and sought to kill us. He is known to all, and is acknowledged by the eyes and ears of the people. Without reason, he fired upon my brother Faruq [refers to Abu-Mansur al-Amriki] intending to kill him. For the sake of argument, if we assume that we have laws, then is there not a sharia court [to apply them]? Are these laws in name only? Where is the judiciary? Where is the accountability? Do these only exist in name as well? If there is someone who has been sentenced, should he be killed without anyone knowing?⁵⁴

Al-Qaeda’s Emir vs. Islamic State of Iraq vs. Jabhat Al-Nusrah

One of the most publicly damaging episodes for al-Qaeda’s senior leadership was the triangular rift between al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Iraq, al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, and the senior leadership as represented by Ayman al-Zawahiri. On 8 April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who at the time commanded

al-Qaeda's franchise in Iraq known then as the Islamic State of Iraq, unilaterally announced the merger with Syrian based rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra in an audio statement posted to the Internet.⁵⁵ The al-Nusra organization, which al-Baghdadi referred to as, "an extension and part of the Islamic State of Iraq," would henceforth fall under the umbrella of a newly branded organization he was calling the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.⁵⁶

Although concerns had been appearing across international media about potential linkages between the organizations, the merger announcement was widely seen as a surprising move, but not because it confirmed Al-Nusra's ties to al-Qaeda. In fact, a growing consensus had been emerging within international media reporting on Syria about the fact Al-Nusra's likely ties with official al-Qaeda entities.

As cited in the Long War blog, *The Wall Street Journal* had been previously reporting that the Al-Nusra Front, "was deepening its ties to the terrorist organization's central leadership in Pakistan, according to U.S. counterterrorism officials." These same anonymous officials "said they have seen a growth in communications among operatives from al Nusra Front, al-Qaeda in Iraq and al-Qaeda's central leadership in Pakistan." The *Journal* also reported "growing numbers of al-Qaeda fighters traveling from Pakistan to Syria to join the fight with" Al-Nusra. "The ties to al-Qaeda's central operations have become so significant that U.S. counterterrorism officials are debating whether al-Nusra should now be considered its own al-Qaeda affiliate instead of an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq, as it has generally been viewed within the U.S. government, according to a person familiar with the debate," the article stated.⁵⁷

Al-Baghdadi's announcement did not come as a surprise to most of the counterterrorism world. His message did, however, seem to shock the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani. Just one day after al-Baghdadi's unilateral announcement of his al-Nusra acquisition, al-Jawlani posted his own public denial of al-Baghdadi's merger announcement, stating that absolutely no merger with al-Baghdadi's ISI had occurred. Instead, al-Jawlani unilaterally pledged his support to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the al-Qaeda Senior Leadership, a pledge that usually is made in a jointly produced statement with al-Zawahiri. In al-Jawlani's statement, however, he stated flatly that, "this is a pledge of allegiance from the sons of the al Nusra Front and their supervisor general that we renew to the Sheikh of Jihad, Sheikh Ayman al Zawahiri, may Allah preserve him."⁵⁸

Al-Qaeda's global movement had little idea what to do about this internal fissure. On the one hand, al-Qaeda's widely respected head of the ISI announced a step forward for al-Qaeda's efforts in the Levant that the global movement was eager to celebrate. On the other hand, al-Jawlani's statement suggested that there had been a serious miscommunication between the two groups. At the same time, however, al-Jawlani's official pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda's general command was a cause for celebration and a metric of al-Qaeda having formally expanded.

Al-Qaeda's top intelligentsia, along with their grassroots supporters, came out in droves to make sense of this issue on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and other discussion forums. Some online pundits came out strongly in support of al-Baghdadi's maneuver. Most of the early posts were defenses of al-Baghdadi's declaration of this newly merged organization against critics.

The situation changed again when, rather than backing down to al-Jawlani's frigid pushback against the merger announcement, al-Baghdadi issued a new statement asserting that, "the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant remains, as long as there is blood in our veins and our eyes are blinking ... It remains, and we will not compromise; we will not give up ... until we die."⁵⁹ Al-Qaeda's global movement was again in a state of confusion about what was happening.

In an effort to deal with what was becoming increasingly perceived inside and out of al-Qaeda as a major crisis of leadership, al-Zawahiri sent stern letters to both al-Jawlani and al-Baghdadi on 11 April 2013. In those communiques, Zawahiri explained that he "sought to resolve the dispute by sending a message" and wanted to freeze "the matter as it was before the dispute until the matter could be arbitrated."⁶⁰ After receiving letters back from both al-Jawlani and al-Baghdadi, al-Zawahiri issued another statement on 23 May 2013. Al-Zawahiri had grown angry with the fact that he was not given prior notification of this matter by al-Baghdadi. It was clear that al-Zawahiri felt as if his leadership had been directly undermined and that he recognized the situation was spinning quickly out of his control.

Al-Zawahiri's attempt to resolve this dispute was decisive. "I received messages from both sides and from other sides," he explained in a missive.⁶¹ "Accordingly, after holding consultations with my brothers in Khorasan and outside of it, after asking Allah for guidance, and for support to make me capable of putting out the fire of sedition and dispute between the two

sides, I resolved the issue.” His proposed resolution contained a number of key points. First, al-Zawahiri stated in no uncertain terms that Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was wrong when he announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) without asking permission or receiving advice from al-Qaeda’s general command, much less notifying them in advance. Al-Zawahiri also scolded al-Nusra’s leader, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, who he said was wrong to have announced his rejection to ISIL and formally claiming affiliation with al-Qaeda without first communicating with al-Qaeda’s general command.⁶²

Al-Zawahiri ordered the immediate dissolution of ISIL, for the ISI to continue its work in Iraq under al-Baghdadi under a one-year renewable contract, and for Jabhat al-Nusra to continue as another official al-Qaeda franchise that reports directly to the general command under al-Jawlani, whom al-Zawahiri also offered a one-year renewable contract.⁶³

Finally, al-Zawahiri declared that Jabhat al-Nusra would supply to the ISI, as far as it could, what it needs of fighters, arms, money, shelter, and security, and that the two sides would cease any attack, by words or by deeds, against the other. In other words, al-Zawahiri could not have been clearer: “the Mujahidin [must] stop arguing over this dispute and to stop sedition among the Mujahidin and to seek harmony and unity, along with winning hearts and uniting ranks among Muslims and the Mujahidin.”⁶⁴

Online discussions among al-Qaeda supporters were chaotic during this time. The “general supervisor” al-Qaeda supporter forum Al-Minbar al-I’lami, for example, expressed uncertainty about whether al-Baghdadi’s message was authentic despite the fact that his website advertised the banner for the production on its front page. Other forums chose not to carry al-Baghdadi’s message or future ISI messaging prompting numerous tweets and comments from users. Most of the first tier al-Qaeda forums issued statements that encouraged silence among their users about the issue until it was resolved, which only further enflamed many of the forum users who demanded credible information and wanted to debate the issue openly.

Despite al-Zawahiri’s definitive pronouncements, however, al-Baghdadi publicly raised the stakes by openly defying al-Zawahiri’s dictates. “As for the message attributed to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri,” the ISI issued statement explained, “we have Sharia and methodological objections to it.” After deliberation with his Shura council, al-Baghdadi decided to choose what he called, “God’s command instead of the opposing command in [Al-Zawahiri’s]

message.”⁶⁵ The ISI’s official spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, echoed this statement on 19 June 2013 when he posted a YouTube audio statement titled, “So Leave Them and Their Inventions Alone.”⁶⁶ The audacity of al-Baghdadi’s flat rejection of al-Zawahiri’s pronouncement stunned the global al-Qaeda movement.

On 21 June 2013, Al-Arabiya aired its “Death Industry” program hosted by Maysun Azzam, which presented a panel of regional experts who addressed questions about al-Zawahiri’s degraded influence on his regional affiliates.⁶⁷ Researcher and political analyst, Yusuf al-Dini, joining the program via satellite from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia assessed that if one reviews “reactions that appear on al-Qa’ida sites and in chat rooms, one would find sharp differences among al-Qa’ida members concerning the argument between Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Al-Baghdadi.” He continued, “Judging by what appeared on the Internet recently some 60 or 70 percent of the al-Qa’ida members are of the view that the fighters in Syria should not remain under the spotlight, that the conditions of Syria are different, and that Ayman Al-Zawahiri rather than al-Baghdadi must be obeyed.” Some al-Qaeda supporters, he said, went so far as to demand that “Al-Baghdadi must stand trial” because he “rebelled against the Al-Qa’ida leadership.” According to al-Dini, these inter-al-Qaeda differences are “a new development” that has to be carefully studied.⁶⁸

To his point, throughout mid-June 2013, forum participants on al-Qaeda websites and al-Qaeda Twitter users reacted speculatively to al-Baghdadi’s rejection of al-Zawahiri’s order to dissolve ISIL. Participants offered their thoughts about why the al-Baghdadi audio was not disseminated by the Al-Fajr Media Center, al-Qaeda’s official dissemination outlet. Most of the reactions expressed confusion and concern about what had now become a major rift within al-Qaeda’s global architecture.

One of the most well-known al-Qaeda pundits, “Asad al-Jihad2,” came out against al-Baghdadi’s decision. Writing under the Twitter handle “AsadAljihad2,” he tweeted during September, “As the days go by, it becomes clear that the claims about the deviations and infiltrations of the Islamic State of Iraq’s leadership made by us and other advisers are correct.”⁶⁹ In another tweet, “Asad al-Jihad2” wrote, “The leadership of the Islamic State of Iraq who succeeded Abu-Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu-Hamzah al-Muhajir deviate day after day; they will drive their mujahideen into the abyss!”

Responding to Asad al-Jihad2’s series of blasts against the ISI’s decision, prominent al-Qaeda Twitter user “Abu-Usamah al-Iraqi,” tweeted that Asad

al-Jihad2, “went to Afghanistan more than once before and he met Sheikh Atiyatallah al-Libi. Now he gives people the impression that he is close to the mujahideen and that he is aware of all of their secrets and of what goes on behind the scenes. He suffers from megalomania, as if everyone who goes to Afghanistan becomes a theorist!”⁷⁰ Others accused Asad al-Jihad2 of being a double agent for the Kuwaiti security service.

Some in the al-Qaeda online discussion forums tried to paint the situation in the rosiest light. For example, in a thread titled, “I Swear by God That Our Situation Is Better, God Willing,” forum participant “Al-Jawlani,” wrote that al-Qaeda would not be “harmed if Al-Nusra Front elements or Ahrar al-Sham elements join this State. And we will not be harmed if the remaining Al-Nusrah Front elements stay under the command of Al-Jawlani ... as long as they all fight for the same goal and purpose: implementing the Sharia.” The poster concluded, perhaps naively, that his, “mujahideen brothers in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and Al-Nusrah Front have never and will never fight among themselves because they are the sons of Usama.”⁷¹

Other online supporters, like Abu al-Yazid al-Misri, were less optimistic. “My dear brother,” he wrote, “honestly my heart is torn. I have not felt such worry and sorrow ever in my entire life. O God, unite our ranks, bring us together, and reconcile us.”⁷² Online participant Abu-Waqqar al-Gharib was one of many who expressed concern that al-Baghdadi’s statement was not released through official Al-Fajr channels when he reposted a prior statement from the Islamic State of Iraq’s Ministry of Media advising adherents that the Al-Fajr was the only official dissemination outlet for ISI and Al-Furqan Establishment for Media Production releases.⁷³

Hafid al-Rashid was one of several web users on the Al-Hanein discussion forum who demanded that, “There is no confusion.” According to al-Rashid’s post, “Al-Baghdadi responds to Al-Zawahiri’s resolutions by rejecting them! Because they are contrary to the approach and sharia!”⁷⁴ Internet user Ilias Kashmiri, however, disagreed: “The decision to announce a state in this way was crazy. Secondly, the brothers in the State disparaged Al-Jawlani, arguing he had disobeyed his emir. But what about Al-Baghdadi’s obedience? He is the one who did not abide by Al-Zawahiri’s words. I read the text of Al-Zawahiri’s statement and I did not see any sharia violation in it.”⁷⁵ That post provided other strong reactions, “It is a clear violation of the ummah’s leader Al-Zawahiri,” wrote, user Al-Arabi al-Muslim in the same thread.⁷⁶

The situation again evolved in September 2013 when approximately a dozen prominent Syrian militant groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, formed something known as an Islamic Alliance, which is openly opposed to the Syrian National Coalition. Although Al-Nusra Front supporters have cheered the move under the belief that uniting with other militant factions would strengthen it, supporters of al-Baghdadi were suspicious of the move.

After Ayman al-Zawahiri went to Al-Jazeera television to release a message on 8 November 2013, further waves of divided reactions flooded the al-Qaeda online spaces. Online participants in the Ana al-Muslim forum had much to discuss on the matter. One of the most read threads on the issue criticized al-Baghdadi's "mad desire to gain power and authority."⁷⁷

Online discussion forums have long been a source of intrigue and infighting. Even in 2013, despite the fact that most of the pro-al-Qaeda online forums no longer remain online and those that do are highly security conscious, concerns about maintaining the thematic integrity of the forums persists.

Much of the concern about the trustworthiness of the forums has come in response to multiple forums attempting to avoid conflict by removing and editing user posts, mostly with regard to the leadership disputes in Iraq and Syria. Abu al-Ayna, an administrator with the Shamukh forum, for example, took responsibility for the forum's decisions by posting an explanation.⁷⁸

"It is not easy at all to be driven by the ummah's neglect and the abandonment by talented and scholarly people," Abu al-Ayna bemoans about today's state of online jihad. According to the administrator, the level of online disagreement about the Syria situation, "breaks the hearts and puzzles the minds and arouses a great deal of suspicion," which has forced the Al-Shumukh forum to "not take sides and will remain objective and bring people together and unite the front and the hearts. We will unite not divide ...". Although many on the forums objected to the Shumukh leadership when they "deleted or edited some postings and accused us wrongly, forgetting the words of God almighty," Abu al-Ayna defended the forum, "I swear to God, we did not delete or edit anything for our own self-interest!" In other words, in attempting to mitigate any further infighting, forum administrators inadvertently spiked the level of suspicion, mistrust and ill will on one of the most elite al-Qaeda Arabic discussion forums.

The topic of intentional subversion in al-Qaeda's online spaces has been addressed by many other senior figures. On 22 September 2013, for instance, Dr. Akram Hijazi's Facebook page posted an Arabic-language message titled,

“Provocateurs Are Dedicated to Instigating Strife.” In the message, Hijazi’s center writes that there are parties, “who received orders and instructions to populate Islamic and non-Islamic forums. “They are dedicated to instigating strife and adding fuel to fire, exactly like a poisonous lizard,” he writes. These people are “skilled in looking for the mujahideen’s mistakes, taking these mistakes out of proportion, distorting them, and molding them in a strife-inducing manner that has one goal, which is inciting internal fighting among the mujahideen.” The consequence of these kinds of discussions, the post continues, is to “stir sedition ... under the guise of justice, advice, and promoting jihad.”⁷⁹

To al-Qaeda’s various groups engaged in factionalism and infighting, the forum administrators advised that they, “revert to the Sharia for arbitration in any discord among them.” For al-Qaeda’s global movement more broadly, the administrators warned, “against intolerance and the meddling with intentions and motives, let alone badmouthing and showing disrespect toward the brothers, who disagree with us.”⁸⁰

Between the grassroots supporters, administrators of the discussion forums, the intelligentsia, and official senior leadership, al-Qaeda’s global movement is universally concerned with what may be a fundamental crisis of legitimacy based on factionalism, suspicion, and mistrust. Ironically, the more those individuals discuss it and attempt to mitigate the discord, they seem to inadvertently catalyze the suspicion from an already concerned al-Qaeda populous. Both al-Nusra and al-Baghdadi’s Islamic State seem unwavering in their commitment to their respective positions, and any resolution to this matter in the near term appears unlikely. This situation has left Ayman al-Zawahiri in an impossible position because if he allows al-Baghdadi to flagrantly disregard direct his orders he may lose his legitimacy with other regional affiliates and his global followers. But if al-Zawahiri continues to hammer al-Baghdadi publicly, he also risks alienating the extremely large and dedicated following al-Baghdadi has within al-Qaeda.

3. Al-Qaeda's Uncertain Future

Debates about al-Qaeda's strength, capabilities, and strategies are pervasive within al-Qaeda's online spaces. Not only do al-Qaeda's adherents want to know where the movement is headed, but often they are also just simply clamoring to understand where al-Qaeda is at the moment. Al-Qaeda is having difficulty maintaining momentum, support, and feelings of connectivity with its global support base because al-Qaeda's central leadership has lost the ability to project a unified, guiding voice.

Al-Zawahiri remains both the official emir of al-Qaeda's general command as well as the symbolic figurehead of the global al-Qaeda movement. Nonetheless, he has repeatedly shown himself to have little control over the regional affiliates, particularly as evidenced vis-à-vis ISIL and al-Sham. With regard to his dispersed global followers, al-Zawahiri is revered for his longevity and historic position as bin Laden's chief deputy, but the kind of adoration that online participants show him greatly pales in comparison to other senior leaders, all of whom are now dead. It was those others' ability to skillfully wield their cult of personality that allowed them to keep this inherently chaotic movement relatively cohesive.

At the heart of al-Qaeda's management challenges is the fact the movement itself is trying to exist as an organization, a network of organizations, and a decentralized social movement of global adherents. As researcher Mark Stout has argued, "Given the loose nature of the al-Qaeda-inspired movement, there is no formal assessment body or assessment mechanism. However, the strategic elites do tend to focus on four measures of merit, particularly when speaking privately among themselves."⁸¹

Al-Qaeda's leadership has long been prone to hyperbole, overpromising, and consistently under-delivering. For its dedicated global following of ideological adherents, failure to reproduce the 11 September 2001 attacks, for instance, has been rationalized time and again.

Over time, al-Qaeda's global following has grown perceptibly tired of continuously trying to spin failure into small successes and small successes into existential victory. Al-Zawahiri has been most notoriously grandiose in his language and arguably out of touch with reality in his arguments.

Stout has said al-Qaeda's online intelligentsia now focuses their attention on four metrics of success, at least in internal discussions, as a way of identifying where they are along their path toward global domination. Stout's first measure of effectiveness is the degree to which Muslims around the world express their feelings of discontent with their local governments, the United States, and Israel. This need to awaken Muslims worldwide has long been a tenet of al-Qaeda's messaging and attacks, therefore expressions of those grievances is viewed as potential susceptibility to the al-Qaeda ideology.

Stout argues that the al-Qaeda movement would gain a better sense for the degree to which they might still have global support by taking inventory of the size of communities who openly support them. Stout's broader point is that they need to integrate their vanguard revolutionary movement as seamlessly as possible with the broader Islamist movements. Stout notes that, like all terrorist groups, al-Qaeda is similarly faced with the need to balance conducting attacks with prioritizing other necessary activities including recruitment, fundraising, and marketing. In light of the rise of the Islamic State and shrinking organizational resources, this need to negotiate between maintaining a low profile for security reasons and needing to stay visible for propaganda reasons has never been more important for al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda's intelligentsia could also use territorial control as a useful indicator of where they stand on their strategic campaign. According to al-Zawahiri, "it is the cause of unifying the Islamic action toward the word of monotheism" that he considers "the most important cause for the Islamic Ummah nowadays." For al-Zawahiri, "the spread and growth of the jihadist awakening in the abode of Islam from the African Sahel to Turkistan in the east, from Chechnya to Somalia, and after the repeated heroic steadfastness of our people in Palestine," is a clear metric of success. The fundamental challenge with that logic, as al-Qaeda is witnessing first-hand, is that the more geographically dispersed, dependent on local leadership, and removed that the senior leadership becomes, the more pervasive this problem is likely to become for al-Qaeda.⁸²

Unity

A theme that most dominates al-Qaeda's contemporary discourse is that of the dire need for unity. For al-Zawahiri, and al-Qaeda more broadly, the unification of jihadist groups under a single umbrella has become something

of an existential mandate. It is difficult to see how that unity can be forged without a structural change of circumstances wherein al-Qaeda's general command comes into a wealth of new resources and ekes out greater operational breathing space in which to leverage them. Otherwise, al-Zawahiri and the general command leadership will be forced to boomerang around the regional affiliate leaders and appeal directly to the foot soldiers, inculcating into them a need to defer to the senior leaders.

Al-Qaeda's senior leaders in its general command, particularly al-Zawahiri, are well aware of the historical problems that infighting, factionalism, and parochialism have caused similarly styled violent Islamist movements. It is with that historical perspective at the forefront of his mind that al-Zawahiri seems to have doubled down on this call for global unity among the various associated, affiliated, and ideologically like-minded organizations and movements since the death of bin Laden.

In April 2013, al-Zawahiri's audio statement elevated this call for unity as the primary issue with which al-Qaeda's followers need to be concerned.⁸³ In fact, he used the unity theme as basis on which to articulate a framework for which the global al-Qaeda movement can advance. According to al-Zawahiri, "all parties should focus on combining their forces and unity" and "all parties should be aware of the objectives of this unity and accord." All the gains that Islamist revolutionary groups had made, he argues, have been squandered "due to the lack of awareness of what the ummah and the Islamic groups should hold on to in order to maintain victory and to avoid losing the triumph."⁸⁴

Al-Zawahiri's criticism of the ummah on this count is multidimensional. He made an opportunistic argument about the need for all Islamist revolutionary groups to operate off the same playbook, the one that he advanced as being legitimate. By forcing all global affiliates, associates, and inspired movements to subordinate to al-Zawahiri's ideological and strategic guidance, he believed that he could ensure the status of al-Qaeda's senior leadership.

Additionally, al-Zawahiri's adamant calls about the need to shore up the al-Qaeda ranks were not just being driven by internal concerns. He consistently expressed his fear that the West was strategically leveraging a divide-and-conquer strategy to weaken the Islamic world, ever weakening its ability to rise up through violent revolution. According to al-Zawahiri, "[the West has] imposed on us secular, nationalist, and ethnic regimes, which divided

us into more than 50 countries after we had enjoyed one caliphate. Every country has had a separate flag, national anthem, government, international airport, and a seat in the United Nations.”⁸⁵

For al-Zawahiri, the temptation for al-Qaeda styled revolutionary groups to turn to their local issues, falling into the trap of accepting the legitimacy of these externally imposed national boundaries, fundamentally undercuts the value of the al-Qaeda brand as a transnational uniting force. Scattered revolutionary groups in Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, parts of North Africa, and so on, is not a global movement, even if they all claim to be waging their jihads under a common banner. Unless those movements are linked and operating under the same unified, central command structure, al-Zawahiri would argue, they will eventually be picked apart and collapse.

As another attempt to assert itself as the head of the regional affiliates and global movement, al-Qaeda took an unprecedented step in June 2013 by having Sheikh Husam Abd-al-Ra’uf, editor-in-chief of al-Qaeda’s *Vanguards of Khurasan* magazine, making his first public statement on As-Sahab Media. The statement was a telling reminder to the global al-Qaeda movement about the level of seniority the general command still had among its ranks. Al-Ra’uf is widely revered for his work with the magazine. But his decision to go public at this point after years, decades even, working in the shadows, shows that al-Qaeda’s general command felt enormous pressure.

Al-Ra’uf’s message echoed al-Zawahiri’s previous messaging that it was in the general command—one that was inherently multinational and multi-ethnic—that separated al-Qaeda from most other Islamist movements, which were focused on local and national objectives. “We are a group of Muslims from all different professions, levels of learning, and academic and professional specialties who have rallied around the religion of Islam and the creed of monotheism,” al-Ra’uf proclaimed in his statement. “As for our leaders,” he added, “they concern a group of the ulema, the students of religion, and the faithful leaders of their religion and their ummah.” The message was clear: the al-Qaeda general command possesses superior level of intellect, experience, and wisdom over the regional affiliates and should be followed based on that fact alone.⁸⁶

Al-Zawahiri has, therefore, continued trying to find ways to ensure that all of al-Qaeda’s adherents are operating from the same guidelines and policies. In September 2013, he issued his, *General Guidelines for Jihad* in Arabic, English, and Urdu versions, which offered one of the clearest and

most cogent articulations of al-Qaeda's goals and methods.⁸⁷ For al-Zawahiri, these were the guidelines under which anyone claiming to be "al-Qaeda" needed to operate. Al-Zawahiri has not been alone in terms of his calls for unity. Other senior pundits and Sheikhs continue making similar calls to the global movement to come together. The pro-al-Qaeda Kuwaiti cleric, Sheikh Hamid al-Ali, has issued numerous statements about the need for greater unity within al-Qaeda, both in terms of operational cooperation and the elimination of the ideological backbiting.⁸⁸

If it were in my hands, I would gather the jihadist groups in Iraq and others also. I said Iraq since it is unfortunately the most disputable to put an honor agreement in which everyone confirms the slogan 'all guns are directed toward the enemy' and the Islamic fraternity spirit prevails, the callers for sedition, and the provokers of disputes and division spirit are expelled by spreading challenges, filing accusations, and noting mistakes.⁸⁹

Senior cleric Abu Qatada published a 6-page document titled, "A Timely Message to the Mujahideen in the Levant." Despite the fact that there have been numerous, "successful jihadist operations," which he says, "pleases every believer," the amount of discord is tearing the global movement apart. All progress made in Syria and elsewhere may be lost, he implores, "due to rifts and conflict" among groups. The longer it takes for the leadership to resolve their differences, he continued, "the more dire the consequences" for al-Qaeda's reputation and strategic goals.⁹⁰

Reflecting just how concerned the global al-Qaeda movement's informal intelligentsia has about the current level of discord, a jointly published statement hit the al-Qaeda forums at the beginning of October 2013, laying out a set of prescriptions and proscriptions. The listed co-authors of the statement is a veritable who's who of senior al-Qaeda pundits, including, Abu Sa'd al-Amili, Mu'awiyah al-Qahtani, Gharib al-Ikhwan al-Shami, Nasir al-Qa'idah, Abu-Abdallah Anis, the poet Shaybah al-Hamd, Abu-Dujanah al-Kinani, Qalam Muwahhid, Al-Nadhira al-Ariyan, Sahnun Atallah, Muhammad al-Zuhayri and Abu-al-Ayna al-Khurasani. The 8-page document was published and disseminated jointly by the Fursan al-Balagh Media Establishment and Al-Ma'sadah Media Establishment.⁹¹

The statement discusses the "duties" that "fall upon the shoulders of the supporters" given that "the open fronts against our ummah have multiplied"

around the world. As al-Qaeda supporters, the authors write, they must “be the first to expose” any groups that seek to ignite strife among the mujahideen. Online participants must “work to encourage unity instead of encouraging division,” the authors urge, which includes avoiding “verbal wars” with opponents, and instead “focus on supporting your brothers and awaiting the fruits of their jihad in order to publicize them.”⁹²

Realizing the gravity to which discord threatens to undermine the very legitimacy of al-Qaeda’s global enterprise, these authors create a situation wherein they deem, “everyone who seeks to divide the mujahideen” as being “certainly one of Satan’s followers.”⁹³

According to Mark Stout, those who subscribe to al-Qaeda’s ideology, “exist along a continuum of commitment to instrumental thought.” At one end, he observes, are:

Warriors who see participation in violent jihad as an expression of identity and faith. For these expressive warriors, the question of victory is remote. Theirs is a micro-level war oriented around issues such as maintaining solidarity with their friends, demonstrating bravery, and getting martyred.⁹⁴

At the other end of Stout’s spectrum, he contends, are:

Soldiers or strategists who see participation in violent jihad as an instrumental act that can bring a desired end state closer. Not all of these individuals are leaders, though this class of people is disproportionately represented in the leadership. While they also see engagement in jihad as an expressive act, they nonetheless feel obligated to seek victory: the reform of Islam back to what they view as its pure roots and the restoration of an Islamic super-state.⁹⁵

Al-Qaeda’s intelligentsia has taken their own stab at mapping the terrain of their rank-in-file supporters and adherents. One of the most prolific and respected online writers within al-Qaeda’s Internet discussion forums is Abu Asma al-Kubi, an essayist about whom little is known other than he claims to be writing from the Arabian Peninsula. On 9 May 2012, al-Kubi posted an essay to the Internet discussion forums titled, “What Type of Jihadist Are You?”⁹⁶ On its face, the essay was al-Kubi’s effort to offer a schema for understanding the kind of al-Qaeda supporter. But when viewed in the broader context, it stands as an important attempt by a senior member of al-Qaeda’s

intelligentsia to add a greater semblance of structure and higher standards to an otherwise chaotic mess.

Al-Kubi suggests there are “four types of mujahidin” within al-Qaeda’s global movement, all of whom are necessary for a successful campaign. The first, he explains, are the positions of leadership. According to al-Kubi, leaders are “rare” as they have a set of unique qualities including, “courage, wisdom, psychological skill in dealing with soldiers, experience in how to put soldiers in their correct positions, bravery against the enemy, firmness in issuing orders, ability to bear the psychological and practical costs of war, and knowledge in religious rulings and how to apply them on the reality.”⁹⁷ For al-Kubi, there are actually two forms of leadership that need to be understood by global al-Qaeda adherents: “General Leadership,” which he says represents the senior leaders like the general command who think globally and strategically, and “Specialized Leadership,” which he explains may be either functional (bomb making, for instance), or includes the regional affiliate leaders who are focused on more limited goals and territory.

Al-Kubi’s second kind of al-Qaeda mujahideen is what he terms the “Jack of All Trades,” which he calls “the rarest one” in jihadist posts. This kind of mujahid, he writes, “has a great personality that has very high capabilities in understanding all jihadist works, and he is a substitute for everyone. If the emir is absent, he can become the emir, if a guard is absent, he can become a guard, if a field commander is absent, he can replace him, and you will find him in any work.” People with this personality, he explains, play “a role in linking between soldiers and leadership, and it is rare that this personality is affected by psychological effects.”⁹⁸

Al-Qaeda has lost a great number of these personalities over the past decade, which, if al-Kubi is correct in his assessment of these individuals serving as the intangible glue that hold a personality- and idea-based movement together, helps to explain the current state of affairs. Abu al-Laith al-Libi fits this category perhaps better than anyone else.

Al-Kubi’s third category are the “Worshippers,” whom he calls the “lamps of jihad” who “are the lions of battlefields” that form the backbone of al-Qaeda’s global efforts. The fourth category, which he calls “The Moody People,” best highlights al-Kubi’s frustration with the broader global al-Qaeda movement. For Al-Kubi, the bulk of al-Qaeda’s supporters are “moody,” some are “nearer to goodness” while others are “nearer to evil.” These may be the kinds of supporters known within al-Qaeda online forums as the “sitters” who,

al-Kubi says “do not comply with the toughness of jihad and orders issued by Emirs, unless they are permanently reminded.” These are the people who, “if they are ordered to follow things that contravene their desires, they interpret them in their own way and carry them out in such a way that meets their desires.”⁹⁹

The moody supporters who al-Kubi says are nearer to evil because these are the internal backbiters and critics. “It is useless to remind those people,” he notes, “and you cannot win them by good manners and treatment because those people think that having good manners is a point of weakness and they are naturally disposed for being stubborn.” He cannot understate “the evil and harm caused by those people,” which he says, “affects their brothers due to their bad manners, dirty words, and insults against their brothers, the emirs, and leaders.” They “cause trouble” and “cause division.” Al-Kubi says they are the “fuel of all seditions.”¹⁰⁰

Al-Kubi’s thoughts on the challenge posed to al-Qaeda from within its own ranks are not unique. Even Adam Gadahn expressed as much in a private letter obtained by the CTC at West Point.

As for the Jihadi forums, it is repulsive to most of the Muslims, or closed to them. It also distorts the face of al- Qa’ida, due to what you know of bigotry, the sharp tone that characterizes most of the participants in these forums. It is also biased towards (Salafists) and not any Salafist, but the Jihadi Salafist, which is just one trend of the Muslims trends. The Jihad Salafist is a small trend within a small trend.¹⁰¹

Abu Yahya al-Shinqiti, member of the sharia committee of AQIM, has been on a similarly motivated virtual campaign advocating for unity among the mujahidin. For example, his no-holds-barred article in the fifth issue of the Al-Balagh magazine titled, “When Sun of Justice Sets,” taking on what he called a “relentless war waged by some writers against their Muslim brothers” on social media websites. This phenomena, according to the writer, is a war that its “rockets are curses and insults and its shells are accusations and judgmental intentions and purposes.” The problem with this war, al-Shinqiti writes, is that it is being, “waged at a time when the Muslims are in dire need for unity and for closing ranks.”¹⁰²

Several months later, he published an online tract urging al-Qaeda adherents to unite “under the sharia of God, away from hateful prejudice and

ill-guided desires.”¹⁰³ If they resist, he warned, they would become “consumed by minor issues” and exaggerate them in large part because of those who “spread your secrets and the shortcomings of your brothers on social media sites, which pleases the enemy” and “discourages supporters and weakens their will.” Spreading online rumors, he contends, is the “enemy’s way to exaggerate disputes among Muslims, destroy their unity, and create barriers between the mujahideen and righteous people of knowledge.”¹⁰⁴

As the few remaining al-Qaeda senior leaders struggle to remind their ranks of the importance of unity, what they actually desire is a greater level of discipline and deference to authority. Al-Qaeda’s general command leadership seems to appreciate why and how they lost influence over their affiliates and their global movement. Thus, as the Islamic State continues to dominate global headlines and online social media, these leaders will likely continue pressing on any angle they can to try and slow that tide by appealing to what initially made al-Qaeda the primary group in this space: a clearly articulated ideology. The challenge is that there are so few individuals left within al-Qaeda’s global movement who can effectively command attention or wield influence against the backdrop of the Islamic State.

Conclusion

Since their brazen attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001, al-Qaeda has been locked in two existential battles. In its rise to global notoriety, al-Qaeda found incredible traction defining itself against its adversary: a so-called coalition of Christians and Jews waging an all-out war against Muslims using every instrument of national and cultural power available. This approach worked until al-Qaeda's organizational structure was so shattered that attempts to build its own reputation up by tearing its adversaries down found little resonance.

Al-Qaeda's organizational capability can wax and wane; particularly given how much it is now being overshadowed by the Islamic State. It is thus al-Qaeda's second existential battle that will likely shape its long-term viability: its efforts to maintain a semblance of internal coherence and continuity in the absence of any clear advantage vis-à-vis its peers. Al-Qaeda is no longer the most extreme global jihadist organization. It has extremely limited operational capacity. Its leaders have failed to galvanize popular support within global jihadist circles much less the broader Muslim community.

Al-Qaeda itself is historically rooted in deep factionalism and oppositional viewpoints about the methodology for advancing the lethal mix of extreme religious zealotry and vicious militancy for which al-Qaeda has become known. Since bin Laden's death, al-Qaeda has been forced to again re-conceptualize itself. Al-Qaeda's followers can no longer rest on thinking of itself as the organizational extension of a single man, nor a continuation of a single attack. With the loss of its best public relations officials, al-Qaeda's few remaining senior leaders have sought to find other ways to convince their global following to maintain their allegiance and support.

Al-Qaeda is attempting to rebrand, however, in an environment with new players and very different rules. When juxtaposed against the Islamic State, both in terms of the Islamic State's operational successes and sheer dominance in recruiting via the Internet, al-Qaeda looks almost defunct. Drawing on old methods, such as the launch of its English-language magazine, *Resurgence*, to the establishment of its new al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, al-Qaeda's leaders are doing what they know to focus global attention again on its approach to militant Islamism. So far their efforts have

had little impact, largely because these efforts are being viewed as inferior copies of a far superior original product, that being the Islamic State.

Al-Qaeda's global footprint has atomized and its leadership has fractured. With affiliates on multiple continents adopting al-Qaeda's namesake, symbols, ideology, and methods, the importance of brand management for al-Qaeda's senior leadership has never been more critical. Al-Qaeda's senior leadership is far weaker than ever before in terms of its ability to exert command and control over its affiliate organizations and global adherents. This declined capacity has allowed al-Qaeda's affiliates, associates, and adherents to turn inward and pursue more parochial agendas. Today, al-Qaeda is becoming synonymous with activities that its founding fathers would never have approved. These internal debates have led to more than just acerbic debates in the al-Qaeda discussion forums. Rather, with Forum Administrators removing threads, participants are now fundamentally questioning the very validity or sharia compliance of the regional affiliates and al-Zawahiri himself.

As the most dominant militant Islamist organization in the Sunni terrorism space, the Islamic State has made its position vis-à-vis al-Qaeda starkly clear. On 11 May 2014, one of the Islamic State's official media outlets, Al-I'tisam Establishment, published a message from Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, the official spokesman of the Islamic State, titled, "Pardon, Emir of al-Qa'ida." In the message, al-Adnani addressed al-Zawahiri:

Today, you and your Al-Qa'ida have no more than two options: Either you stubbornly and obstinately carry on with your wrongdoing, and in turn, the rift and infighting among the mujahideen all over the world continues or you admit to your slip and mistake, and then redress it.¹⁰⁵

Al-Adnani accused al-Zawahiri of having "dispersed, ripped, and torn apart" the unity among jihadist movements that had been forged by bin Laden.

Although the in-depth substantive grievances were not widely discussed by Islamic State supporters, the broader thrust of his message—that al-Zawahiri had failed to effectively lead its followers and was willing to collaborate, compromise, and stand-down—was clearly understood. Today, although there remains a general reverence for the historic contribution that al-Qaeda's senior leaders, including al-Zawahiri, had made to the global jihadist

movement, a steady drumbeat of messages from the Islamic State and its supporters arguing that al-Qaeda now stands in the way of real progress has become the predominant line of thinking among supporters.

Al-Qaeda's senior leadership will have extreme difficulty overcoming this narrative. Al-Qaeda's senior leaders are older and do not innately appeal to the younger demographic forming much of today's online jihadist support movement. Meanwhile, the collective memory of today's jihadist movement is increasingly forgetting the contributions of al-Qaeda's general command. As an intellectually-grounded movement, al-Qaeda will likely run into more trouble appealing to new generations of Islamic State supporters. These youth have shown they are largely driven by graphic and brutal propaganda, and use territorial control as a measure of effectiveness far more than longevity or scholarly credentials.

This report summarizes a qualitative academic research dive to informally gauge the current level of coherence or incoherence of al-Qaeda's global movement. At this strategic juncture, al-Qaeda's general command seems likely to fade into the background, ceding its role as the vanguard of a global jihadist ideology to the Islamic State supplants. Parochial politics and cults of personality will likely fuel this centrifugal motion, forcing al-Qaeda's online supporters to choose between the Islamic State, or panoply of more localized sub-groups and personalities to support. ↑

Endnotes

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