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The Continued Expansion of Al Qaeda Affiliates and their Capabilities

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The war against al Qaeda is not going well. Afghanistan has seen the most success, since Coalition and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have been able to prevent al Qaeda from re-establishing effective sanctuary in the places from which the 9/11 attacks were planned and launched. The killing of Osama bin Laden has not been followed-up in Pakistan with disruption to the leadership group there on the scale of operations that preceded the Abbottabad raid. Al Qaeda affiliates in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and West Africa have dramatically expanded their operating areas and capabilities since 2009 and appear poised to continue that expansion. Progress against al Shabaab, the al Qaeda affiliate in Somalia, is extremely fragile and shows signs of beginning to unravel. New groups with al Qaeda leanings, although not affiliations, are emerging in Egypt, and old groups that had not previously been affiliated with al Qaeda, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, appear to be moving closer to it. Current trends point to continued expansion of al Qaeda affiliates and their capabilities, and it is difficult to see how current or proposed American and international policies are likely to contain that expansion, let alone reduce it to 2009 levels or below. Americans must seriously consider the possibility that we are, in fact, starting to lose the war against al Qaeda.

What Is al Qaeda?

The policy debate about al Qaeda has been bedeviled by competing definitions of the group and, consequently, evaluations of the threat it poses to the United States, as Katherine Zimmerman shows in a major paper that will be forthcoming from the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) in September. Whereas the Bush Administration saw the group as a global network of cells, the Obama Administration has focused narrowly on the "core group" in Pakistan around bin Laden and, after his death, around his successor, Ayman al Zawahiri. The current administration has also labored to distinguish al Qaeda franchises that have the intent and capability to attack the United States homeland from those that do not, implying (or sometimes stating) that the U.S. should act only against the former while observing the latter to ensure that they do not change course.

Parsing the al Qaeda network in this way yields two sets of groups: al Qaeda "core" in Pakistan and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (in Yemen) are the only two formal franchises that have declared their intent to attack the American homeland and demonstrated the capability to do so. Al Qaeda in Iraq, Jabhat al Nusra (in Syria), al Shabaab (in Somalia), al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (in West Africa), and the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus (in Chechnya and Dagestan, Russia), have not announced their intentions to attack the U.S. homeland and have not attempted to do so. In the Obama Administration's view, therefore, these groups are of far less direct concern to the U.S. and their gains, while worrying, are not necessarily immediate threats to American national security.

This relatively sanguine view of al Qaeda rests on a number of assumptions whose validity is highly questionable. It assumes that franchises that do not now have the intent to attack the U.S. are unlikely to develop that intent in the future (or, alternatively, that it is preferable to wait until they do develop such an intent before taking action against them). It also assumes that the franchises are not mutually-supporting in any important way, such that groups that do not themselves intend to attack the homeland will not provide material support to the franchises that do. The first assumption is highly problematic. Al Qaeda affiliates are fund-raising

organizations as well as terrorist groups. They depend on attracting donations from like-minded supporters around the world, but particularly in the Persian Gulf area. They shape both their operations and their media around selling their product--terror--in ways that they think will be most attractive to those supporters. Attacking the American homeland is unquestionably a fund-raising hit, so the fiscal incentive is for trying to do so. The al Qaeda ideology itself, of course, is also fundamentally anti-American and tends easily, although not inevitably, toward attacking us.

The second assumption is demonstrably false. Al Qaeda affiliates definitely move fighters and other resources around, and those that are not actively aiming to attack the U.S. do not shun those that are. Both al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al Shabaab actively support al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, for example, and the "core group" in Pakistan reportedly receives financing from its affiliates.

Prioritizing groups within the network according to whether they are actively working to attack the homeland makes some sense; ignoring or downplaying the significance of those not currently engaged in that endeavor does not. Let us briefly consider, therefore, the state of play in some of the major theaters in which an al Qaeda affiliate is now operating.

Afghanistan

American airpower supporting local Afghan militias drove al Qaeda from its training bases near the major Afghan cities of Kandahar and Jalalabad in 2001, but the group retreated to mountain fastnesses near (but not over) the Pakistan border. Since there is now some debate about the wisdom of introducing American ground forces into Afghanistan in the first place, it is worth remembering that only the operations of those (very limited) ground forces we deployed in 2002 actually drove al Qaeda out of Afghanistan almost entirely. Although limited al Qaeda cells and individual (generally low-ranking) leaders have remained in Afghanistan (primarily in the extremely rugged and remote areas of Afghanistan's northeast), the leadership group never returned, nor have new training camps or bases been established. The continued limited al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan and periodic statements by the group, however, indicate that it has not abandoned the desire to re-establish itself in its former strongholds. Continued success in Afghanistan therefore requires ensuring that the ANSF remains strong and coherent enough to prevent al Qaeda from returning after the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces.

Pakistan

The death of bin Laden was a major blow to al Qaeda, but not as major as one might have hoped. Analysts had differed before the raid about the likelihood of a smooth succession and had considered the possibility of fracturing and power struggle, since Zawahiri, bin Laden's obvious successor, is an Egyptian (bin Laden was Saudi) and far less charismatic. But Zawahiri took the reins with relatively little ado and seems to have established his control not merely over the "core group" in Pakistan, but also over the global movement. Affiliates in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia have all appealed to him on various matters, including leadership, internal disputes, and affiliate prerogatives regarding other affiliates. It was reasonable to conjecture that killing bin

Laden would cleave a wedge in the group's leadership, but things have unfortunately not evolved in that direction thus far.

President Obama's courageous and correct decision to put "boots on the ground" briefly in bin Laden's compound offered the hope of a more decisive blow against the organization of another variety. The vast trove of information reportedly pulled from bin Laden's home could have contained the data needed to conduct targeted strikes rapidly against other key al Qaeda leaders around the world, potentially decimating the group's top echelon. Although a number of such strikes were reported after the Abbottabad raid, they did not comprise anything like a decisive blow. The diplomatic fallout from the raid was so severe, moreover, that the pace of targeted strikes in Pakistan has reportedly fallen dramatically from its pre-bin Laden peak. It may be, as administration sources suggest occasionally, that there are not many worthwhile targets left because the "core group" is functionally decimated. Let us hope so--since we cannot have a meaningful discussion about this matter without access to highly sensitive classified materials that the administration is rightly reluctant to make public--because the alternative is simply that the "core group" is no longer under the kind of pressure it faced before bin Laden's death.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Almost all analysts agree that AQAP poses a direct and immediate threat to the U.S. homeland for the excellent reason that it has already attempted attacks against us on three separate occasions. The group was formed in 2009 as the result of a merger between al Qaeda in Yemen and the remnants of the original Saudi al Qaeda group driven out of the Kingdom after the Saudis began a major crackdown against the group in 2006. It began to increase its operations against Yemeni forces and foreign targets within Yemen almost immediately (in addition to conducting the very-nearly-successful "underwear bomb" attack on Christmas 2009). It seized upon the arrival of the Arab Spring in Yemen in 2011, creating an insurgent wing (Ansar al Sharia). As Yemeni Security Forces were drawn toward the capital to deal with the threat to President Ali Abdullah Saleh's power, AQAP forces seized two key provinces along the southern coast, began expanding into others, and threatened Aden, Yemen's second city, with isolation and a growing car-bomb campaign.

The U.S. and Saudi response was initially focused on negotiating a resolution to the Yemeni Spring (which ultimately led to the departure of Saleh) and, secondarily, on a combination of a very limited number of targeted strikes against AQAP leadership and limited support to the Yemeni Security Forces (YSF) gradually redeployed to retake their land. As AEI's Critical Threats Project's Katherine Zimmerman and Sasha Gordon have described in detail, the initial YSF counter-offensive was largely successful. Yemeni forces drove AQAP out of the provinces it had taken, broke the partial siege of Aden, and established local fighting groups to help keep AQAP from returning while allowing some YSF troops to redeploy. Some have pointed to the "Yemen model" as an example of the right way to conduct operations against al Qaeda franchises--some even advocate transplanting that model to Afghanistan.

But the "Yemen model" is already breaking down in Yemen. As Sasha Gordon has reported, the YSF is gradually dissolving as the political crisis remains unresolved and current President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi tries to root out the remnants of power broker patronage networks from

within the armed forces. There have been well over 20 mutinies in Yemeni brigades and other tactical formations, including in elite units. One brigade formerly in Yemen's (now-disbanded) Republican Guard was effectively dissolved in place with soldiers taking their weapons home or selling them. The popular committees that had been initially successful in holding ground against AQAP had reverted to tribal fighting, to fighting with the YSF, alienating the local population, and even to fighting with each other by the start of this year, although we have not seen reports of such conflicts since May. Although many YSF troops and popular committees do continue the struggle against AQAP valiantly, AQAP has begun its own counter-offensive into the lands from which it had been expelled and also resumed its targeted assassination campaign. It is likely that the Yemeni fight against AQAP has passed its zenith and that AQAP will, in fact, gradually reclaim operating space and even territorial control over parts of the country--at least, that is the current trajectory.

Iraq and Syria

Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had been driven from almost all of its strongholds in central and western Iraq, retaining a limited foothold in Ninewah Province and isolated outposts around Baghdad by the beginning of 2009. Its support in Syria was limited to logistical facilitation permitted and overseen by the Assad regime. Today, AQI has regained control of many of its former staging areas in and around Baghdad and has reconstituted its ability to launch weekly waves of multiple car bomb attacks as the work of Jessica Lewis and Ahmed Ali at the Institute for the Study of War has shown. The group is expanding its capabilities at an accelerating rate, and the Iraqi Security Forces appear to be unable to contain it, despite numerous offensive and defensive operations.

AQI is benefitting from two phenomena--the inability of the ISF to maintain adequate pressure on the group without the enablers and support it had expected to receive from the United States after 2011, and the increasingly sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki, which have driven a considerable portion of the Sunni Arab population away from the political process and toward a renewal of insurgency. The re-mobilization of Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias is accelerating sectarian conflict in a cycle reminiscent of 2006 after the al Qaeda bombing of the Samarra mosque.

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria has allowed the al Qaeda in Iraq support nodes to evolve into a fully-fledged combat franchise. Ayman al Zawahiri, in fact, recently recognized Jabhat al Nusra (JN) as an al Qaeda affiliate independent of AQI and reporting directly to him. That decision created tension with AQI's front organization, the Islamic State of Iraq, and has led to the declaration of a broader Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (Levant). Distinct from Jabhat Nusra, this group is actively conducting operations in Syria against both the regime and the moderate opposition functioning under the rubric of the Free Syrian Army. Despite the tensions caused by Zawahiri's recognition of Jabhat al Nusra, AQI continues to cooperate with and support JN, which provides support to the fight in Iraq in turn. JN has benefitted from the active support of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, although the latter has ceased and Riyadh is now attempting to strengthen the moderate opposition against JN. The moderate opposition has received extremely limited external support, leaving JN fighters often better armed and better trained than other opposition troops, which, in turn, has allowed JN to gain leverage over the moderate

opposition and even the tacit support of local pockets of Syrian population. JN and ISI are attempting to set up Islamist states in areas under their control, with the panoply of "morality police" and Salafist regulation that we have seen in other areas dominated by al Qaeda and affiliated groups.

The entry of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters directly into the Syrian conflict--numbering in the thousands--has at least for the moment given the Assad regime the advantage, allowing it to regain ground around Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. These regime gains are likely to radicalize the opposition further, as al Qaeda and associated groups around the Muslim world have announced their intention to send fighters to Syria. Groups of fighters from the Caucasus have been identified in Syria, and the emir of the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus, Doku Umarov, recently reversed his opposition to the movement of fighters from his region to Syria. The Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) has also recently claimed that it has sent (or is sending, or will send) fighters to Syria--although we do not assess that it has done so or will do so for a variety of reasons. Its announcement makes clear, however, that Syria has become a clarion call for Salafists around the world, who are reinforcing the al Qaeda affiliates in that conflict even as the West continues to dither about providing any assistance to the moderate opposition. If this trend continues, we can expect to see the Syrian opposition continue to radicalize to the great benefit of several al Qaeda affiliates, which are not only gaining operating space, but are also gaining respect and admiration in the Salafist world. Over time, they may even gain respectability in the eyes of some Sunni who are more concerned with the sectarian fight against Assad's 'Alawite (Shi'a) group than with the fact that they dislike the Salafist worldview. Nothing succeeds like success, after all.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

AQIM was formed in Algeria on the basis of Salafist groups that have been fighting the Algerian government for decades. Algerian forces had reduced the group to a fringe organization notable mainly for the kidnapping-for-ransom operations it conducted (and from which it derived a considerable profit) rather than for its ability to conduct terrorist strikes. But the fall of Moammar Qaddafi's regime and the disorder that followed flooded the Sahel with weapons and encouraged alienated minorities like the Tuaregs to take up arms. As a result, two al Qaeda associates in Mali--Ansar al Din and the Movement for Tawhid (Unity) and Jihad in West Africa (known by its French acronym, MUJAO)—took control of northern Mali and began a drive on southern Mali that ultimately drew French forces into the fight to prevent them from gaining control of the routes to Bamako, Mali's capital. French forces, supported to a limited extent by Malian and other African Union troops, retook the population centers of northern Mali, but have only driven the Salafists into the hinterland. French forces have already begun withdrawing, furthermore, and it is not likely that the AU forces with which they are theoretically to be replaced will be able to sustain, let alone expand their gains. Mali is also becoming a magnet for Salafists in Africa, and AQIM has seized the opportunity to expand its reach across the Sahel and back into Algeria in a couple of dramatic terror attacks. Violence is also spreading to Mali's neighbors, including uranium-producing Niger.

Conclusion

Al Qaeda affiliates have unquestionably expanded their operational reach and capability, and even the amount of territory they actively control and de facto govern, dramatically since 2009. These affiliates are not simply localized groups with local grievance that happen to be flying the al Qaeda flag, moreover. Neither are they new—they all spring from groups that have been active for at least a decade and, in many cases, several decades. They all actually adhere to the al Qaeda ideology, they all have founders and/or current leaders who fought with bin Laden or his associates against the Soviets in Afghanistan or with the Taliban in the 1990s. They are by no means all actively working to attack the United States at this time, and some have denied that they intend to attack the U.S. at all. But how much stock can we put in those facts?

Virtually no one believed that AQAP posed a threat to the U.S. homeland before the Christmas Day underwear bombing attempt. No one believed that the Pakistani Taliban posed a threat until the Times Square bombing attempt. No one thought that the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus was of any serious concern, yet it appears that the Boston Marathon bomber received encouragement, if not active support, from that group during his visit to Dagestan in 2012. We cannot be certain--and should not be comfortable assuming--that AQI, JN, and AQIM will not decide to attack the U.S. homeland as their counterparts in the al Qaeda movement have already done. We can be certain, however, that they will have much more extensive resources and capabilities than any group that has yet tried to attack us, if and when they do.