

## **Is the Revival of al-Qaeda a Legitimate Phenomenon or a Flash-in-the-Pan?**

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The evolution of al-Qaeda has transformed the once centralized organization into disparate groups with different goals. These groups appear to be a new breed for an organization that was in disarray. Is this revival of al-Qaeda a legitimate phenomenon or a flash-in-the-pan? The answer will affect policy decisions in a host of nations as well as that of regional and global organizations. Experts have been divided about al-Qaeda's strength for years and this new look to the group is no exception. Some argue that this is the most dangerous al-Qaeda has been since days before September 11th, citing unrest in the region and al-Qaeda's ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Others contend that we are seeing the localization of al-Qaeda, something to monitor, but also nothing to overreact to as local support remains low. I will argue that, while this is a legitimate phenomenon, their short-term goals are inherently local. If given the opportunity to flourish in ungoverned territory, however, they could potentially pose a serious long-term threat. I will discuss what the new al-Qaeda looks like, with a focus on Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). I will present a brief history of the group, organizational goals, amount of support it enjoys throughout the region while considering how much of a serious threat it poses to global security.

Under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda was a centralized organization with distinct goals. He conceptualized and implemented the strategy of attacking the far enemy (the West). His death brought uncertainty for al-Qaeda, which had only known one leader since its inception. Instead of a new, charismatic leader stepping forward (Ayman al-Zawahiri has accepted leadership, but is far from charismatic or inspiring), multiple groups have emerged without a unified goal. They have risen in a variety of areas, from North Africa to the Middle East and South Asia. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is based in the Sahel and is currently in conflict with French and Malian forces. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operates out of Yemen and currently has the closest ties to al-Qaeda Central out of any of the others. In Syria where civil war rages, al-Qaeda operates under a different name: Jabhat al-Nusrah. Iraq and Egypt also have budding organizations with ties to al-Qaeda. This is a very different picture than before, when we understood the goals and structure of al-Qaeda under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. Each group has its own leader, its own goals and its own means to achieve those goals. Zawahiri offers guidance, but he does not hold direct power over any of these groups. They operate much more diffusely.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) began as a strictly Algerian organization that was founded to oppose secular leadership in Algeria in the 1990s. It even had a different name. It wasn't until 2006 that the group formally pledged support to al-Qaeda. Even directly after 2006, AQIM was more notorious for smaller, criminal activities such as kidnappings than it was for a

broad global jihad. Much like any other opportunistic organization, it capitalized on the Arab Spring, particularly Muammar Gaddafi's fall. It raided munitions sites and sought ties with other groups in the Sahel, such as Ansar Dine. It has moved beyond kidnappings and its goals now include the removal of "apostate" rulers across the Sahel. The group's numbers are unknown, but the Council on Foreign Relations estimates about several hundred.

Members of the AQIM have spouted jihadist rhetoric not dissimilar to bin Laden's al-Qaeda. The question that the international community needs to answer is how much of a threat does AQIM pose and how strong is the organization? Bruce Riedel of Brookings considers AQIM to be a serious threat. He argues that al-Qaeda has gone through two revivals since its initial founding. The first occurred after September 11th, when Pakistan saw an infusion of jihadist sentiment. What we are seeing with these aforementioned diffuse groups is the third. He contends that 'al-Qaeda 3.0', as he labels them, poses a very significant threat to the global community. He says that the Arab Spring created instability in a variety of countries which invited opportunistic groups such as these to take advantage. He advises that al-Qaeda is an organization that is excellent at adapting to different situations; one reason that we should be fearful.<sup>1</sup> Fawaz Gerges at The London School of Economics and Political Science disagrees: "They might share a similar ideological worldview, a similar rhetoric, and sometimes plot attacks against Western targets, but they are intensely local and dedicated to the overthrow of 'renegade' Arab and Muslim rulers rather than external enemies."<sup>2</sup> Gerges makes a very important distinction. While bin Laden's al-Qaeda was ideologically based against the far enemy, these groups instead are inherently local who just happen to adopt the name. By aligning with al-Qaeda the brand, these groups can attract donors and recruits as well as strike fear in the local populations. Philip Mudd is also of the mind that dangers from these groups are overblown. Where Riedel highlights the Amenas gas facility incident as a reason to be fearful, Mudd concludes that it emphasizes the opposite: "The lessons we have learned, from a war that has endured for longer than both World Wars combined, should lead us to view the incident at the Amenas gas facility not as an indicator of the rise of a regional or even international threat, but instead as a sign of how far the jihadist movement has fallen since its apex 12 years ago."<sup>3</sup> Mudd argues that al-Qaeda has had opportunities to win Muslim hearts and minds and has failed every time. In the end, it caused too many civilian deaths and these new groups are no exceptions. Al-Qaeda in Iraq is foremost example of Mudd's argument. By setting out to create a sectarian civil war, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi essentially rang the death knell for the regional organization. Mudd is confident that local populations will not support these groups and they will fail once again.

While Riedel, Gerges, and Mudd disagree about the severity of the threat from the new al-Qaeda, they all consistently agree on one point, the local threat. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, while

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sometimes voicing global jihadist rhetoric, is focused solely on the Sahel. At this point it is clear that they are not planning extensive international operations, but instead are concerned about holding ground in Mali, Nigeria, Algeria and Libya. There is and should be concern from the international community, however. While AQIM is inherently local now, if left to flourish and grow, global ambitions could be in its future. France has begun leading against the future threat. Seth G. Jones of RAND has a three-step process on what the global community can do to prevent these groups from flourishing. First, he argues for a light-footprint approach that weighs heavily on special operations teams and covert intelligence. Secondly, he contends that fragile governments in these regions, such as Mali, need help establishing and enforcing basic rule of law. Finally, he advises to capitalize whenever al-Qaeda murders innocent civilians. As Mudd has said, al-Qaeda has and will again commit atrocities against civilians, which will anger Muslims not only in the region but worldwide. Jones recommends that these brutalities need to be highlighted by the international community to expedite the waves of disapproval.

In the end, I tend to side with Gerges and Mudd about the intensely local focus of the evolved al-Qaeda groups. While sometimes espousing global jihadist rhetoric, the evidence is strong that they are primarily focused on the near enemy. However, I do agree with Jones about the means of combating this new enemy. Their short-term focus is local, but that could change if given the opportunity to build up in ungoverned territory. The international community needs to be mindful of this and look to France's actions in Mali as a primer for future operations.

## Notes

[1] Bruce Riedel, "Al Qaeda 3.0: Terrorism's Emergent New Power Bases", Brookings Institute, December 3rd, 2012 "<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/12/03-al-qaeda-terrorism-reidel>"

[2] Bruce Riedel, "New Al-Qaeda Generation May Be Deadliest One", Brookings Institute, January 24th, 2013 "<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/01/24-al-qaeda-riedel>"

[3] Bruce Riedel, "The Al Qaeda Menace in Africa", Brookings Institute, January 21st, 2013 "<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/01/21-al-qaeda-mali-riedel>"

[4] Jonathan Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)", Council on Foreign Relations, January 24th, 2013 "<http://www.cfr.org/north-africa/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-aqim/p12717>"

[5] Fawaz Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of al-Qaeda*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pg. 129

[6] Philip Mudd, "Algeria Attack Represents al-Qaeda's Dying Gasp", The Daily Beast, January 24th, 2013 "<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/01/24/algeria-attack-represents-al-qaeda-s-dying-gasp.html>"

[7] Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows, The Pursuit of Al Qaeda Since 9/11*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012) [Amazon Kindle E-book version, location 7898 - 7939]