Opportunity Costs or Costly Opportunities? The Arab Spring, Osama Bin Laden, and Al-Qaeda's African Affiliates

by Alex S. Wilner

Abstract

There is little doubt that Al-Qaeda faces twin challenges in the “Arab Spring” sweeping North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) and in the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. Al-Qaeda’s violent narrative has come under immense pressure following the toppling of Arab regimes by largely secular and peaceful protest movements while the removal of bin Laden robs the organization of a charismatic and unifying figure. Yet for Al-Qaeda’s most prominent African affiliates — Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Somalia’s Al-Shabaab — the political upheaval sweeping the MENA region also creates opportunities for growth. And while the elimination of Al-Qaeda’s founding leader will certainly sting, bin Laden’s exit is unlikely to greatly influence AQIM’s or Al-Shabaab’s aspirations, tactics, or strategies. This paper offers a critical overview of the costs and opportunities to Al-Qaeda’s African allies in light of the Arab Spring and bin Laden’s death.

In January 2011, long-simmering political, economic, and social discontent in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) finally boiled over. Individual acts of desperation—including self-immolations—turned into street demonstrations and collective protest, which in turn rapidly evolved into widespread (and for the most part non-violent) dissident movements. Few regional governments—and fewer Western governments—properly anticipated what was to follow. To date, the resulting “Arab Spring” has toppled two dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, has likely mortally wounded three more in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and has shaken the political status quo in several other countries, notably in Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. In Tunisia and Egypt, unprecedented political change is currently taking place, with free and open elections expected in the coming months. In Libya, a NATO-led and UN-mandated offensive is underway to help a ragtag rebel alliance wrest control of the country from Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s forces. And in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, status quo powers have used fear, imprisonment, and deadly military force in the hope of regaining control over their increasingly restless citizens. While these battles are ongoing and political uncertainty hangs in the air, there is little doubt that unparalleled shifts in political power are taking place in the Arab and wider Muslim world.

And then there was the death of Osama bin Laden on 2 May 2011. The Al-Qaeda leader was killed in a dramatic and daring covert operation carried out by US Special Operations forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan, a small city 50 miles north of Islamabad. Just after midnight local time, two dozen members of the United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group (popularly
known as SEAL Team Six) dropped into bin Laden’s compound from specially designed stealth helicopters. In a systematic search of the compound’s various buildings, the team engaged with members of bin Laden’s small entourage, killing him along with three other men (including one of his sons and two trusted operatives) and one woman. The SEAL team retrieved bin Laden’s body (which was later buried at sea after it was biometrically and genetically identified) and collected a trove of data stashed on diaries, hard drives, and some 100 digital storage devices. In an operation that lasted just 40 minutes, the United States finally succeeded in its decade-long promise to locate, track, and kill or capture the reclusive Al-Qaeda leader responsible for the death of nearly 3,000 individuals on September 11, 2001.

At the time of this writing, the combined repercussions of the Arab Spring and of bin Laden’s death on political developments in the Arab/Muslim world, on global counterterrorism efforts, on US policy vis-à-vis Pakistan, Afghanistan and other countries, and most importantly, on Al-Qaeda, its global and regional affiliates, branches, and ideological sympathizers, are poorly understood. Events on the ground are still unfolding and open-source information remains limited and at times murky. Yet one thing is certain: 2011 has already been marked by a multitude of major events that will have long-lasting ripple effects on a number of critically important and inherently interconnected global issues.

This article offers a tentative assessment of just one of these issues: how Al-Qaeda’s jihadi-salafist affiliates in Africa will be affected by these recent global developments. Using the political upheaval in North Africa and bin Laden’s demise as backdrops, the article focuses primarily on Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Somalia’s Al-Shabaab, offering an overview of various and competing projections concerning both movements. The article is structured accordingly: section one offers a brief overview of AQIM and Al-Shabaab while sections two and three highlight the effects the Arab Spring and bin Laden’s death may have on Al-Qaeda’s leading African affiliate groups.

Al-Qaeda’s African Allies: The Rise of AQIM and Al-Shabaab

Of the many and varied violent non-state African groups that share some of Al-Qaeda’s ideological principles and practical goals, two currently stand out: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Shabaab. Other prominent regional organizations, like the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), al-Itihaad al-Islaami (AIAI), Hizbul Islam, or the Armed Islamic Group (popularly known by its French name Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA) have largely been destroyed, disbanded, or rolled into other groups. While it is plausible that remnants of these organizations will regroup in the future or that new terrorist organization will be formed, the focus of international counterterrorism in Africa today rests primarily on combating and containing AQIM and Al-Shabaab.
Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) traces its roots to Algeria’s radical Islamist movement and the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. [1] During that conflict, a number of violent Islamist groups took up arms against the Algerian military in hopes of toppling the government and establishing an Islamist state. The most prominent group, the GIA, carried out a devastating domestic terrorism campaign against the Algerian government and also internationalized its campaign by targeting foreigners and France (Algeria’s historical colonizer) both in North Africa and in Europe. By the late 1990s, however, and primarily as a result of the unprecedented brutality the GIA conducted against civilians in Algeria, domestic support for the organization evaporated and the group eventually fractured. One splinter, the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (Le Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC) eventually rose to prominence in 1998. Bin Laden is suspected of having personally encouraged its formation. [2] With a pledge to nominally avoid purposefully targeting civilians, the GSPC continued to harass the government but its efforts were successfully countered and it was eventually reduced to two pockets of territory, the mountainous and coastal region of north-eastern Algeria (the Kabylia) and the southern stretches of the Saharan region. In the early 2000s, the group also suffered from a bout of severe in-fighting over strategy and over divisions concerning its loyalty to Al-Qaeda and global jihad. Despite further losing ground to successful Algerian, American, and European countermeasures following 9/11, the GSPC finally declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Between 2006 and 2007, the GSPC formally tied itself to global jihad (rather than restrict itself to regional jihad) and officially changed its name to AQIM.

With its rebranding, the GSPC/AQIM changed its modus operandi, placing emphasis on large-scale terrorist attacks using explosive devices within a much wider and expanding field of operation spanning parts of Mauritania, Mali, Southern Algeria, Niger, and Chad. In fact, between 2005 and 2007, bomb attacks attributed to GSPC/AQIM nearly quadrupled in number (from 22 to 78) and the region suffered its first wave of suicide bombings. [3] Likewise, AQIM increasingly targeted foreigners and Westerners in North Africa and the Sahel region.

Major attacks attributed to AQIM include multiple assassination attempts on Algeria’s President, the 2007 double-car bombing of the UN office in Algiers and the Algiers’ Constitutional Court, a rudimentary attack in 2008 on Israel’s embassy in Mauritania, and a 2008 car bombing of a police academy just east of Algiers. More recently, in early February 2011, Mauritanian security forces intercepted three AQIM car bombs reportedly carrying 1.5 tons of explosive, including one that was destroyed in the capital, Nouakchott. It appears that AQIM had intended to assassinate the Mauritanian President. [4] And though it denied responsibility, AQIM was also blamed for the April 2011 attack on a café in Marrakesh, Morocco, in which over a dozen Western citizens were killed. The organization has also carried out dozens of bombing attacks and ambushes against security personnel and police, killing and injuring hundreds, and has been involved in dozens of abductions and murders targeting Western tourists, diplomats, and foreign...
workers in the Sahel region. Despite these successful attacks, it appears that AQIM is increasingly “sliding into criminality”, with the abduction racket and drug trade overshadowing its zeal for political insurgency. Andrew McGregor goes so far as to suggest that AQIM is turning into “the North African version of the Philippine’s Abu Sayyaf movement,” intent on using the “rhetoric of Islamism” to justify its criminal activity. [5] Perhaps, but the foiled February 2011 attack in Mauritania suggests AQIM has yet to abandon its jihadist ideology.

Al-Shabaab, like AQIM, traces its roots to a civil war. [6] Somalia has resembled a failed state for over two decades and at times various militant Islamist groups have risen to prominence and have controlled parts of Somali territory. And like in North Africa, Al-Qaeda appears to have been active in Somalia, beginning in the early 1990s. It claims to have trained some of the Islamists who took part in the 1993 “Battle of Mogadishu”, in which 18 US servicemen were killed and to have used Somalis to coordinate its 1998 bombing of two US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Other indigenous Islamist groups were also active in Somalia in the 1990s. The most prominent, the AIAI, gained a foothold in eastern and western Somalia and sought to establish a Shari’a-based emirate. Its ranks included a number of Somali fighters who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. [7] By 1996-97, however, the AIAI suffered a series of setbacks in confrontations with the Ethiopian military and was largely destroyed as a functioning entity. Some surviving leaders, preying on the continued lack of central government and relying on kinship and clan relations, went on to establish small, autonomous, and locally-organized Islamic courts. Eventually, desperate courts and various militias came together under the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and managed to impose Shari’a law over parts of Somalia. Al-Shabaab emerged from within the UIC in 2003/4, led by former AIAI member Aden Hashi Farah “Ayro” (who was later killed in a US targeted strike in 2008). [8] With the assistance of Al-Shabaab, the UIC greatly expanded its control in southern and central Somalia and by 2006, successfully wrested control of Mogadishu from the Western-backed Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG). It then established a governing coalition under the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts (SCIC). But the SCIC was short-lived. Ethiopia, with US assistance, invaded Somalia in December 2006, destroying the SCIC and reinstating the TFG in Mogadishu.

Ethiopia’s occupation was a rallying cry for Al-Shabaab. It sought to overthrow the TFG, remove international forces from Somali territory, institute Shari’a law, and establish a larger East African Islamic Emirate that would include all of Somalia (including Somaliland and Puntland), parts of eastern Kenya, Ethiopia’s Ogaden region, and Djibouti. Al-Shabaab quickly regrouped and led a successful and bloody insurgent and terrorism campaign against the TFG, Ethiopian troops as well as Ugandan and Burundi peacekeepers supporting the African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Al-Qaeda and other foreign salafi-jihadist groups took notice, and sought to “globalize Somalia’s conflict” by supporting al Shabaab with foreign fighters, equipment, and finances. [9] Sophisticated attacks, including suicide bombings — which had never been used in Somalia before—were imported from Iraq and Afghanistan. Under fire,
Ethiopia pulled back its forces in January 2009, leaving AU troops to bear the brunt of propping up the TFG. By then, Al-Shabaab had gained control over large swaths of southern Somalia and Mogadishu. More problematic, it was also attracting foreign recruits (including “hundreds” from the Somali diaspora living in the West) \[10\] and strengthening its ties to the global jihadi movement.

While some Al-Shabaab fighters retain their clan-based loyalties, the group’s ideology is aligned with the transnational jihadi movement. Like past groups (i.e. the AIAI and UIC) Al-Shabaab believes that strict “religious governance is the solution to Somalia’s ills.” Yet it diverges from these groups by espousing an internationalist perspective and actively seeking to replace Somalia’s historical “clan structure” with a pan-Islamist one. \[11\] It has had a natural inclination, then, to support Al-Qaeda’s global efforts and actively sought closer ties with the organization in 2008. At the time, Al-Shabaab’s Muktar Robow stated that “Al Qaeda is the mother of the holy war in Somalia … Most of our leaders were trained in Al Qaeda camps. We are negotiating how we can unite into one.” \[12\] That alliance was officially forged in February 2010 with Al-Shabaab declaring that it was connecting “the horn of Africa jihad to the one led by al Qaeda and its leader Sheikh Osama Bin Laden.” \[13\]

In terms of terrorism, Al-Shabaab has repeatedly proven its willingness and ability to coordinate mass-casualty attacks. It has targeted Somali, Ethiopian, and AU forces along with Somali and foreign government officials and civilians. Some of its most devastating attacks include a suspected 2007 missile strike on an AU cargo plane taking off from Mogadishu; a 2008 attack in Puntland that killed dozens of Ethiopian immigrants; simultaneous suicide attacks in 2008 in Puntland and Somaliland targeting the UN, an Ethiopian Consulate, the President’s palace, and the Puntland Intelligence Service; \[14\] a 2008 attack on an AU base that killed and injured over 25 Burundi peacekeepers; a 2009 hotel bombing in Beledweyne that killed 20 people, including Somalia’s security minister and former ambassador to Ethiopia; a 2009 attack on an AU base in Mogadishu that killed 17 soldiers, including AMISOM’s deputy director; a 2010 attack on a commencement ceremony for medical students in Mogadishu that killed over 25 people, including four TFG ministers; and a 2010 attack on a mosque in Mogadishu, that killed and injured over 100 people.

Despite the brutality and frequency of these and many other attacks, Al-Shabaab began to be of concern among Western security officials primarily as a result its “out of theatre” engagements. There are tangential links between Al-Shabaab and a foiled 2009 terrorist plot in Australia, and Westerners from Canada, the US, and Europe have travelled to Somalia to train with Al-Shabaab. \[15\] While some have died fighting in Africa, officials fear others will return home to wreak havoc. In January 2010, for instance, a Somali man with suspected links to Al-Shabaab was shot by Danish police as he tried to attack political cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard. And in July 2010, after uniting with Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab carried out its first bombing attack outside Somalia,
killing and injuring nearly 150 people watching the FIFA World Cup in Kampala, Uganda. Given the continued absence of any central authority in Somalia and given its meteoric rise since 2007, Al-Shabaab has become a major regional and international terrorist threat.

The Arab Spring: Shifting Narratives, Newfound Opportunities

“We watch with you this great historic event,” stated Osama bin Laden “and we share with you joy and happiness and delight and felicity … We are happy for what makes you happy, and we are sad for what makes you sad. So congratulations to you for your victories.” [16] It may have taken several months, but bin Laden finally got on the record with an audio recording specifically focused on the Arab uprising—even though the recording went public two weeks after his death. Bin Laden followed Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahay al-Libi and other ideologues in tacitly approving the popular (and mostly secular) movements sweeping the MENA region. Starting in early 2011, al-Zawahiri—who replaced bin Laden as Al-Qaeda’s number one—released a series of five recordings, three of which specifically addressed the protest movements. [17] “Your jihadi brethren,” he exclaims, “are confronting alongside you the same enemy, America and its Western allies, those who set up … Husni Mubarak, Zein al-Abidin b. Ali, Ali Abdallah Saleh, Abdallah b. Hussein and their ilk to rule over you.” [18] In trying to connect Al-Qaeda’s longstanding and violent struggle against the secular (and “apostate”) regimes of Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Jordan, al-Zawahiri’s objective is to paint the enemies of the Arab Spring and the enemies of Al-Qaeda as one and the same. And yet, despite a narrative that purposefully attempts to unite the popular movements with Al-Qaeda, it is clear that the actors involved in each struggle (i.e. a secular and generally non-violent youth movement versus a violent Islamist jihadist movement) and their respective goals (presumably, a secular and democratic system versus an Islamic system of governance), are intrinsically opposed. There is only so much Al-Qaeda can do to credibly recast and reshape these two competing narratives in its attempt to hijack the evolving Arab and Muslim political movement.

Instead, there are good reasons suggesting why the popular uprising has weakened Al-Qaeda and its branches, offshoots, and supporters active in Africa and the Middle East. For starters, in Egypt and Tunisia, a handful of technologically-savvy youths spurred a popular movement that was able to do in weeks of peaceful protest what Al-Qaeda and its allies could not accomplish with violence over several decades. Al-Zawahiri, for instance, has been seeking President Mubarak’s removal and the establishment of an Islamic state since before he took over Egyptian Islamic Jihad in the mid-1980s. That change has finally come to Egypt and Tunisia (and likely, to Libya, Yemen, and Oman, too) as a result of popular and generally peaceful movements is an embarrassment to Al-Qaeda, whose entire script has been predicated on the idea that violent overthrow is the only way forward. And even if only the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions “prove successful,” explains Michael Ryan, “a major part of the Arab world will have unfurled
the banner of modernization and democracy … which could become a new beacon for a large part of the Arab Middle East.” [19] Suddenly, there appears to be another, gentler, way to achieve change, a way that appeals to a much broader popular base, does not alienate potential supporters with excesses in violence, and has, until now, proven successful at least twice. The challenge facing Al-Qaeda is to properly repackage its own brutally violent and perpetually ineffective methods so as to remain a viable option to would-be supporters who now appear to have other options to choose from.

In a similar vein, Al-Qaeda has long relied on the autocratic MENA regimes themselves to help it resonate with its prospective popular base. As Nelly Lahoud recounts, “the jihadist narrative enjoyed greater credibility under the autocratic regimes,” where endemic corruption, economic and political malaise, and brutality fed the flames of popular despair. [20] In the wake of this despair, Al-Qaeda picked out and assembled recruits. It offered those who would listen an alternative to the existing system, suggesting that by violently overthrowing these regimes and by establishing pure Islamic governance in their stead, Muslims and Arabs would reconstitute their historical greatness vis-à-vis the West. But now that more than a few of these regimes have been mortally wounded, Al-Qaeda’s message appears to have been called into question. Not only was Al-Qaeda barely visible during the revolutions, but with the toppling of its target regimes it has also lost its power of juxtaposition. One might even ask whether Al-Qaeda is still needed at all, given the initial success of the protest movements.

This is why al-Zawahiri, after congratulating the masses, immediately called for the establishment of pure Islamic governance, warning that without it, these recent popular achievements would be lost. The future, he cautioned, would resemble the past and Al-Qaeda’s struggle would continue. It is in these warnings that we catch a glimpse of how the Arab Spring may, over the long run, come to help—rather than hurt—Al-Qaeda and its African affiliates.

Cleverly, Al-Qaeda has placed itself in a position to once again gain traction among disaffected Arabs and Muslims if and when these experiments in people power fail. What if democracy does not ameliorate or alleviate social, political, and economic grievances? What if democracy proves unstable, unworkable, or chaotic in Egypt and Tunisia? What if tomorrow’s leaders turn out to be just as corrupt as past leaders? “In reality,” explains Juan Zarate, Al-Qaeda’s leaders “are banking on the disillusionment that inevitably follows revolutions to reassert their prominence in the region.” [21] The transition from dictatorship to democracy can be a long and messy affair. [22] New institutions need to be established; a new political culture must take root; and the power vacuum produced by outgoing elites needs to be filled. All of this takes time. The process of building social and political cohesion may require a level of patience not common among Arab revolutionary movements.
Thus, it is in the chaos that has followed the revolutions that Al-Qaeda’s African allies may find opportunities to regroup, recover, and reemerge. As Philip Mudd illustrates, an opening of the democratic space and the establishment of competing political parties in the MENA region might lead to “ethnic and religious fissures that turn violent.” [23] Think of Lebanon or Iraq. Already, attacks against Egypt’s Christian communities are on the rise and sectarian lines are being drawn. [24] Furthermore, in the time it takes for political stability to return, crime and economic stagnation remain a distinct possibility. In fact, it could take years to consolidate the market reforms that will be needed to liberalize and improve MENA economies. It will also take time for the proper democratic institutions to be built and for civil-military relations to be revamped. Until then, millions of individuals will remain unemployed, underutilized, and undervalued, potentially easy prey for a resurgent Al-Qaeda.

From this perspective, what matters now is the management of political, social, and economic expectations. The greater the level of post-revolution optimism is among Arabs and Muslims, the greater the risk of exceptionally high levels of disillusionment, resentment, and anger if and when things go sour on the ground. If the uprising’s popular base cannot achieve noticeable improvements to their collective lot, than Al-Qaeda’s narrative stands to gain a second inquisitive look and renewed interest. A “surge” in support for Al-Qaeda’s allies is a possibility. [25] And if MENA economies continue to limp along in 2013 and 2014, if new leaders prove ineffective in addressing existing grievances, and if internecine violence and fear, rather than political stability and hope, take root, Al-Qaeda’s narrative will have been given another chance to resonate with disaffected communities.

Importantly, Al-Qaeda does not have to passively watch the drama unfold. It can take active steps in Africa to consolidate its base and improve its position as the upheaval unfolds. Lorenzo Vidino writes—pointing to the “ungoverned areas” of Pakistan, Iraq, and Yemen—that “jihadist movements could gain traction in newly formed pockets of instability” currently spreading over the landscape in North Africa. [26] For instance, the AU’s African Center for Terrorism Research noted in May 2011 that AQIM “sleeper cells” were actively “recruiting and doing field work” in Africa. [27] Taking advantage of the ensuing chaos and the shifting security environment in the region simply makes sense. Political prisoners, held as suspected extremists in Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan (and Yemeni) jails, have been freed; some might be especially susceptible to Al-Qaeda’s advances. And domestic instability will provide increasingly porous and under-defended borders, easing the movement of people, contraband, and weapons between and within African countries. Civil wars, Daniel Byman reminds us, have offered opportunities for jihadists before, who first pose as supporters of the opposition only to “spread their vitriol” and attract recruits to their cause over time. [28]

Herein, Libya poses a unique opportunity for AQIM and others. Islamist militants are suspected of having joined the rebels fighting the Gaddafi regime, and in so doing, might be able to carve
out a regional foothold while attracting supporters. [29] There have also been numerous accounts suggesting that AQIM has taken advantage of Libya’s civil war to help itself to Colonel Gaddafi’s weapons stockpiles, “liberated” by anti-government forces. In April 2011, Idriss Deby, the President of Chad, noted that he was “100 percent” certain that AQIM had pillaged military caches in eastern Libya and had acquired heavy weapons, including sophisticated surface-to-air missiles. [30] If so, a repeat of Al-Qaeda’s 2002 Mombasa attack, in which two shoulder-launched missiles were fired against an Israeli-owned charter plane taking off from Moi International Airport, remains a distinct possibility. As for Al-Shabaab, it simply has to look north, over the Gulf of Aden and into Yemen. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula stands to gain as the Yemeni government falters. Al-Shabaab, already suspected of having close links to AQAP, would catch a windfall as a result.

**OBL’s Demise: From 9/11 to 5/2**

On the cover of its May 7-11, 2011 edition, The Economist titled its coverage of bin Laden’s death with: “Now, Kill his Dream”. The title is an apt one. It implies that even in death bin Laden’s vision retains its power and that though the man himself can no longer participate in terrorism, his ideology will continue to spur others towards violence. When gauging the meaning and possible effect bin Laden’s death will have on Al-Qaeda’s African supporters, this dichotomy — between facilitating terrorism and inspiring terrorism — proves useful.

In practice, bin Laden was not only Al-Qaeda’s primary figurehead. He led the organization for 23 years, laid out its strategic goals, secured religious approval for its tactics, oversaw its regional expansion, and was involved in planning many of its spectacular attacks. He was both operationally and strategically active. What is less certain is the degree of control bin Laden retained over Al-Qaeda’s sprawling structure in the decade following 9/11 and especially after its safe haven in Afghanistan was removed. The debate in recent years has pitted terrorism experts who have observed a “leaderless” Al-Qaeda movement of loosely affiliated groups and individuals sharing a common ideology against those who maintain that Al-Qaeda’s core leadership — including bin Laden — retained an important role in directing the organization’s international and regional efforts despite the loss Afghanistan. [31] The truth — as most of the time — probably rests somewhere in the middle: bin Laden (and Al-Qaeda’s central leadership) both directed Al-Qaeda-sponsored attacks while also legitimizing Al-Qaeda-inspired attacks in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and the West.

Even from his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan, bin Laden appears to have been well connected with Al-Qaeda and may have even directed some of its recent efforts. [32] That does not mean, however, that Al-Qaeda’s supporters, franchises, and offshoots relied on the group’s central leadership to plan, finance, and orchestrate their attacks. They did not. Al-Qaeda’s affiliates have
always retained a degree of autonomy and have used that freedom accordingly. While they have
signed on to Al-Qaeda’s global venture, they have largely controlled their own destinies. That Al-
Qaeda in Iraq’s leader Musab al-Zarqawi was apparently personally chastised by al-Zawahiri in
2005 for having so blatantly alienated Iraq’s Sunni and Shi’a communities with his violent
excesses, speaks volume. Clearly, Al-Qaeda had little operational control over its Iraqi franchise
even though Zarqawi had declared allegiance to bin Laden and nominally sought to advance Al-
Qaeda’s global ambitions.

Arguably, though bin Laden’s removal is a defining and monumental event in American and
global counterterrorism, his death may have limited effect on AQIM, Al-Shabaab, and other Al-
Qaeda allies. While bin Laden’s charisma, inspirational importance, and historical significance
will be impossible to replace, in practical and operational terms, his death will not greatly
impede Al-Qaeda’s regional franchises from planning further attacks and consolidating their
regional gains. They did so while bin Laden was alive and will continue now that he is dead. So
while bin Laden’s death may send a deterrent message to current and would-be terrorist leaders
that the US will, in due time, find a way to kill or capture them, and while Al-Qaeda may suffer
power vacuums, fractures, and internecine feuding until (and unless) a strong leader steps in, Al-
Qaeda’s African allies will nonetheless continue to survive as they did under bin Laden’s tenure.
[33]

This is not to suggest that bin Laden’s death will have little effect on their behavior. It is possible,
as McGregor writes, that “the elimination of al-Qaeda’s core leadership will result in the
inevitable localization of the ‘global jihad’; or in jihadist terms, a refocus on the ‘Near
Enemy’ [local regimes] over the ‘Far Enemy’ [the US and the West].” [34] Others agree,
suggesting that depending on who takes over leadership of Al-Qaeda, its allies may decide to
concentrate on conducting “less risky” regional attacks rather than target the West and absorb the
inevitable retaliation. [35] In this case, groups allied with Al-Qaeda might revert to their regional
agendas, tailoring their attacks to affect change in their immediate spheres of influence rather
than launch far-flung attacks against the US, UK, or France, a strategy they adopted when
declaring allegiance to bin Laden. They may also become even more autonomous, expressing
continued fealty to Al-Qaeda while also paying more attention to local financial, social, and
human dynamics. [36]

Of course, the opposite alternative is possible, too. In the case of AQIM, Camille Tawil posits, if
al-Zawahiri is accepted as the new emir of Al-Qaeda, the organization may have a greater role in
shaping AQIM’s behavior. Not only was al-Zawahiri instrumental in getting the GSPC under the
Al-Qaeda umbrella, but he also personally asked AQIM to limit its operations in Libya in hopes
of placating a faction of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). [37] Under al-Zawahiri’s
leadership, Al-Qaeda may reengage its relationship with AQIM and other jihadists in North
Africa. But even then, to date, Al-Qaeda’s African supporters have lacked the ability to launch
international attacks like those carried out by AQAP in 2009 and 2010. While AQIM tries to link its kidnapping of Westerners in Africa as part and parcel of its global war against the West, it has difficulty masking the economic incentives it has to keep these hostages alive in order to trade them for cash. And even though AQIM has greatly expanded its operations into West Africa, it has rarely successfully attacked Western targets therein and even vociferously denied involvement in the latest attack in Morocco, which did kill over a dozen westerners. As for Al-Shabaab, while it has attracted many westerners to join its local efforts, its only successful attack outside of Somalia was the 2010 Kampala attack. Even then, that attack was carried out for local reasons (i.e. to punish Uganda for participating in AU efforts and try to force it to leave Somalia) rather than to conform to Al-Qaeda’s global mantra. In sum, while AQIM and Al-Shabaab may strive to continue carrying bin Laden’s internationalist agenda, there are good reasons to suggest why they may revert to local programs instead.

A Future in Flux

It is clear that the Arab Spring and bin Laden’s death will leave a mark on Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Africa. Not only has the organization scrambled to rebrand itself in the light of the dramatic changes sweeping through its strategic backyard, but the death of its charismatic leader robs the organization and its allies of a preeminent and guiding force. At the same time, it is a mistake to put too much emphasis on these twin shocks. Political upheaval provides Al-Qaeda, AQIM, and Al-Shabaab with new opportunities, especially if socio-political and economic grievances are not properly met. And while bin Laden will surely be missed, Al-Qaeda has never been chiefly about one man. In its May 6, 2011, statement confirming his death, Al-Qaeda reminds us that “Sheikh Osama did not build this organization to die with his death.” [38] Though weakened, Al-Qaeda and its African affiliates will march on.

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Notes


[38] Quoted in J. Binnie, "Dead Man's Shoes", op. cit., 8.