

# Does al-Qaeda Control Its Affiliates?

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## Introduction

In the last decade, the role of the “original al-Qaeda”<sup>1</sup> in a jihadi decision making process over its affiliated groups<sup>2</sup> has noticeably declined. Moreover, along with the expansion of operational independence of al-Qaeda’s affiliated and inspired terrorists, al-Qaeda Central (AQC)<sup>3</sup> has been unable to exert full control over those who call themselves al-Qaeda or who pledge the loyalty to the organization.<sup>4</sup> It can be claimed that al-Qaeda reinforced its presence and expanded its operational access across Muslim world relying on its affiliates.<sup>5</sup> It was feasibly due to al-Qaeda’s innovative approach which drummed up fundamentalists working on a license in the system of franchise.<sup>6</sup> However, over time it turned out that al-Qaeda’s affiliates have their own local goals and are barely focused on the Western targets.<sup>7</sup> Thus, this paper argues that the emergence of al-Qaeda affiliates paradoxically caused strains for the core leadership and instead of consolidating the position of al-Qaeda as a brand among Muslims, affiliates tend to be out of control hampering the achievements of the original al-Qaeda.

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## **Cognitive Obstacles**

When exploring the insubordinated activities of al-Qaeda affiliates, it seems necessary to understand the relationship between the core leadership and affiliates, because the qualities of al-Qaeda membership remain elusive.<sup>8</sup> As al-Qaeda “confidential secretary” Harun described in his manuscripts,<sup>9</sup> collaboration with al-Qaeda did not indicate membership; in practice, collaboration often has been based on mutual agreement to conduct joint actions.<sup>10</sup> He explained that not all jihadi bodies met the required standards by al-Qaeda: “we (original al-Qaeda) do not accept those who are intent on sullying jihad with their unlawful actions”; and he underlined that “most of the operations that have been carried out following the 9/11 attacks lack the authorization of Sheikh Osama (bin Laden) or the central leadership of al-Qaeda”.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, “Letters from Abbottabad”<sup>12</sup> and Harun’s manuscripts have revealed that al-Qaeda leaders preferred dedicated and disciplined jihadists and “did not wish to cede control of their brand” to those “who did not share their worldview and could not be controlled”. In effect, bin-Laden and al-Zawahiri were not exhilarated witnessing the spread of regional jihadi bodies and the employment of operational methods.<sup>13</sup> It can be argued that the abovementioned statements present cognitive difficulties according to the al-Qaeda recognition and hamper an exact explanation of the affiliated group’s.

## **Tense Relations**

Unfortunately for the original al-Qaeda, the organization became a victim of its affiliates, exerting little control over them. Despite the fact that AQC did not encourage bloodshed among Muslims, there have been ascribed ruthless actions to the brand of al-Qaeda. The most striking example of disobedience comes from Iraq, where al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, nowadays known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) has damaged the organization as a brand which in perception of Iraqis has been responsible for sectarian violence.<sup>14</sup> The lack of control over al-Zarqawi’s<sup>15</sup> escalated violence risked in alienating organization from the Muslim world and gaining more

enemies.<sup>16</sup> A fact of great importance is that al-Zarqawi's group was the only regional body admitted by bin-Laden. Nevertheless, in 2007 bin-Laden announced severance of himself and al-Qaeda "from any unlawful acts in Iraq".<sup>17</sup> Moreover, after bin-Laden's death, al-Zawahri failed to nullify the influence of al-Baghdadi (the ISIS leader) in Syria to sustain Jabhat al-Nusra as a preferred actor.<sup>18</sup> After the brutal campaigns of ISIS in Syria, al-Zawahiri disowned this organization affirming it "is not a branch of the al-Qaeda group" and "does not have an organizational relationship with it".<sup>19</sup>

Another revelation demonstrating indocility towards the original al-Qaeda derives from Somalia and Kenya, where al-Shabab "acting on the basics of their own judgments and initiatives" is not claimed as an organic group to al-Qaeda but as a "undisciplined imitator".<sup>20</sup> According to Harun's account, the al-Shabab members took orders from its commanders not from Sheikh Osama (bin-Laden), who couldn't supervise the process of al-Shabab emergence and influence it.<sup>21</sup> Justification for this may be seen in the lack of funds from leadership, not to mention the limited contact with the al-Qaeda leaders.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, due to rigid administration and political immaturity of al-Shabab, al-Qaeda leaders hesitated to embrace this organization publicly.<sup>23</sup> In 2010 bin-Laden in a letter to the leader of al-Shabab ordered to stop killing Muslims.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, bin-Laden denied al-Shabab courtship from the union with al-Qaeda and later on ordered Harun to depose al-Shabab's leaders and replace them.<sup>25</sup>

It can be argued that AQC always had tenuous relationship with North Africa affiliates. Bin-Laden was reluctant to recognize and ally with the prior body of al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, whereas al-Zawahiri having better interaction with this organization was a keen supporter of emergence of AQIM.<sup>26</sup> Despite that fact, Ajman al-Zawahiri did not hesitate to set limits on where AQIM is allowed to operate.<sup>27</sup> Al-Qaeda's disaffection towards AQIM was caused by a "kidnap-for-ransom strategy" and executed attacks with no previous approval from the core leadership. Nonetheless, Camille Tawil argues that

leadership of al-Qaeda requested AQIM to play greater role in North Africa.<sup>28</sup>

Recent reports<sup>29</sup> suggests that the original al-Qaeda with al-Zawahiri “still exerts something like control over the organization's Yemeni affiliate, AQAP”<sup>30</sup>—al-Qaeda in Arab Peninsula. Nevertheless, in the past Harun was disturbed by series of attacks in Saudi Arabia and emphatically claimed that the original al-Qaeda had not issued authorization of internal fighting in Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, he also maintained that Yemeni jihadists were completely independent in their decision making.<sup>32</sup> Despite that fact bin-Laden complimented Abu Basir, the leader of AQAP, as a “qualified and competent”, he advised (again by letter) him to target US instead of Yemeni security forces or government.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, the leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was chastised for ruthless actions against Muslims, which hold “clear legal errors and dangerous lapses”.<sup>34</sup> In private letters, al-Qaeda leaders forcefully encouraged TTP's leader to suspend group's campaigns of indiscriminate attacks on “mosques and markets, which was killing hundreds of Pakistani civilians”.<sup>35</sup> American al-Qaeda spokesman Adam Gadahn incisively criticizes the tactics of TTP and ISIS and keenly encourages al-Qaeda to separate itself from those groups.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to the abovementioned affiliates, Jabhat al-Nusra “doesn't tarnish the al-Qaeda brand by using brutal tactics against fellow Muslims”.<sup>37</sup> This organization has learned from mistakes of AQI and is devoted to al-Zawahiri. Al-Nusra allows the original al-Qaeda to remain germane at a global level, but it is vague who exactly hold the reins in the linkage between AQC and al-Nusra. One can say that Jabhat al-Nusra without the al-Qaeda can achieve its goals in its own way; a good example is providing a social service (bread and electricity) to Syrian civilians, in a Hezbollah-like manner. Those measures undoubtedly underpinned al-Nusra's position among Syrians. Therefore, as Berger claims, “al-Nusra doesn't really need al-Qaeda, but al-Qaeda desperately needs al-Nusra”—to strengthen its position in Syria and the Muslim world.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The above analysis proves that the original al-Qaeda exerts little control over its affiliates which due to the local goals and gained autonomy frequently act against the core leadership, tarnishing al-Qaeda's eminence. As demonstrated in this paper, bin-Laden and the people close to him were aware of the extreme approach of its affiliates and strongly disapproved vicious attacks causing unnecessary deaths of innocent Muslims. Floundering into regional jihad was seen as an enormous mistake which has distorted "the image of the jihadists in the eyes of the umma's general public".<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, due to increasing operating independence and operational capabilities of its affiliates the original al-Qaeda was obliged to make concessions. As it was proved, even for bin-Laden it was hard to guide and convince al-Qaeda allied groups regarding Global Jihad, especially when he was forced to rely on letters when he was trying to contact with affiliates. Today, al-Zawahiri is losing control over the organization and the movement even further. He has no leverage to enforce his ideology, and it is hard for him to stop morphing terrorist attacks into overt military campaigns on local grounds. As it was shown, local objectives of affiliates has remained in contradiction to the global goals of the original al-Qaeda. In conclusion, al-Qaeda's affiliates' activities set an evident example of disobedience, it can be argued that the original al-Qaeda has lost control over them and that they now represent autonomous bodies being merely affiliated with al-Qaeda by name.

## References

<sup>1</sup> N. Lahoud, “The Merger of Al-Shabab and Qa`idat al-Jihad”, CTC Sentinel, February 2012, p. 4. In this paper, the “original al-Qaeda” is a term used to distinguish al-Qaeda from other jihadi groups, including those who insert “al-Qaeda” in their names.

<sup>2</sup> Such as: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other linked groups as Haqqani Network, Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), Al-Shabab, Boko Haram and Jabhat al-Nusra.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Qaeda Central is identical to term “original al-Qaeda”.

<sup>4</sup> N. Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, CTC Harmony Program, June 2012, p. 5; A. Moghadam, B. Fishman, “Debates and Divisions within and around Al-Qaeda”, in *Self-Inflicted Wounds*, ed. A. Moghadam, B. Fishman, CTC Harmony Project (2010), pp. 15-17.

<sup>5</sup> “Al-Qaeda’s Five Aspects of Power”, CTC Sentinel, January 2009, p. 4; C. Tawil “How Bin Ladin’s Death Will Affect Al-Qaeda’s Regional Franchises”, CTC Sentinel, May 2011, pp. 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, pp. 52, 76; G. Kepel, *Fitna*, Warsaw 2006, p. 132; How al-Qaeda innovates, see: A. Moghadam, “How Al Qaeda Innovates”, *Security Studies*, Routledge Jul-Sep 2013, p. 468.

<sup>7</sup> D. L. Byman, *Breaking the Bonds between Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliate Organizations*, Analysis Paper, Brookings: Washington 2012, pp. VII, 32.

<sup>8</sup> J. B. Cozzens, “Approaching Al-Qaeda’s Warfare”, in *Mapping Terrorism Research*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp, Routledge: London and New York 2007, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> F. Harun, “Al-Harb ‘ala al-Islam: Qissat Fadil Harun” volume 1-2, February 2009. He was a key planner of the 1998 bombings that targeted the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. He issued two-volume autobiography, plainly describing al-Qaeda’s working.

<sup>10</sup> Harun, vol. 2, p. 426.

<sup>11</sup> Harun, vol. 1, p. 235.

<sup>12</sup> “Letters from Abbottabad” contain 17 de-classified documents captured during the Abbottabad raid on bin-Laden’s hideout.

<sup>13</sup> Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>14</sup> Byman, *Breaking the Bonds*, p. 33; M. Azzam, “Al-Qaeda Five Years On: The Threat and the Challenges”, Chatham House: London 2006, pp. 3-4

<sup>15</sup> Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, he was Jordanian militant Islamist who formed al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in 1990s, later on rephrased to Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn known as al-Qaida in Iraq. He was responsible for spreading violence in Iraq including hostage executions and suicide bombings.

<sup>16</sup> Tawil, “How Bin Ladin’s Death Will Affect”, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 77; D. Ressler, et al, *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?* CTC Harmony Program, May 2012, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> A. Y. Zelin, “Al-Qaeda Disaffiliates with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham”, <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-disaffiliates-with-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham#.UvBDT3YolHM.twitter>> [accessed February 4, 2014].

<sup>19</sup> A. Baker, “Why al-Qaeda Kicked Out Its Deadly Syria Franchise”, <<http://world.time.com/2014/02/03/why-al-qaeda-kicked-out-its-deadly-syria-franchise/>> [accessed February 3, 2014].

<sup>20</sup> Lahoud, “The Merger of Al-Shabab and Qa`idat al-Jihad”, p. 3; Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> Harun, vol. 2, pp. 189-90; Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Harun, vol. 2, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> SOCOM-2012-0000010, 5; Lahoud, “The Merger of Al-Shabab and Qa`idat al-Jihad”, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> P. Bergen, “A terror group too brutal for al Qaeda?” <<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/04/opinion/bergen-al-qaeda-brutality-syria/index.html>> [accessed February 5, 2014].

<sup>25</sup> Somalia Report, “al-Shabab Leader Arranged Fazul’s Death,” <<http://www.Somaliareport.com/index.php/post/973/>> [accessed June 16, 2011].

<sup>26</sup> G. D. Porter “The Impact of Bin Ladin’s Death on AQIM in North Africa”, CTC Sentinel, May 2011, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Tawil, “How Bin Ladin’s Death Will Affect”, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Tawil, “How Bin Ladin’s Death Will Affect”, pp. 8-9; Porter, “The Impact of Bin Ladin’s Death”, pp. 10-11.



<sup>29</sup> E. Shmitt, M. Mazzetti, “Qaeda Leader’s Edict to Yemen Affiliate Is Said to Prompt Alert”,

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/06/world/middleeast/qaeda-chiefs-order-to-yemen-affiliate-said-to-prompt-alert.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/06/world/middleeast/qaeda-chiefs-order-to-yemen-affiliate-said-to-prompt-alert.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)> [accessed February 5, 2013].

<sup>30</sup> C. Watts, “What if there no al-Qaeda preparing future terrorism”, <<http://www.fpri.org/articles/2012/07/what-if-there-no-al-qaeda-preparing-future-terrorism>> [accessed July 2012]; J.M. Berger, “War on Error”,

<[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/04/war\\_on\\_error\\_al\\_qaeda\\_terrorism](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/04/war_on_error_al_qaeda_terrorism)> [accessed February 5, 2014].

<sup>31</sup> Harun, vol. 2, p. 408; vol. 1, p. 555.

<sup>32</sup> Harun, vol. 1, p. 249.

<sup>33</sup> SOCOM-2012-0000016; SOCOM-2012-0000019, pp. 26-27.

<sup>34</sup> SOCOM-2012-0000007, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Bergen, “A terror group too brutal”.

<sup>36</sup> SOCOM-2012-0000004.

<sup>37</sup> Bergen, “A terror group too brutal”.

<sup>38</sup> Berger, “War on Error”; Bergen, “A terror group too brutal”.

<sup>39</sup> SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 4.