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Al Qaeda at 25: “No Point in Fighting Them Since They Themselves are Fighting Each Other?”¹

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Just before another anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Al Qaeda (AQ) turned 25. Although after more than a decade of the war on terrorism the so called Al Qaeda Central is far from thriving operationally, it still advises and inspires jihadists around the world. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring AQ Central affiliates and allies have re-constituted themselves and are growing in various parts of Northern Africa and the Middle East. Nonetheless, de-centralisation of the world's counter-terrorism effort, with the focus not on AQ Central but on its “subordinates,” may in the longer term lead to a serious disruption of the totality of the organisation, already riddled with internal contradictions.

Introduction

Al Qaeda (AQ) is a very special organisation. It has survived far longer than most of its contemporary terrorist peers, and this August marked the 25th anniversary of its founding in Pakistan.³ Throughout its history, as some commentators have claimed, AQ graduated to the status of a “different kettle of fish from traditional terrorist groups” because of its global reach, standing and unique organisational arrangements that amounted to “a central leadership functioning as figurehead and inspiration [with] the day-to-day logistics [becoming] the domain of the field commanders.”⁴

¹ The quote refers to the 7th century Islamic radicals (“kharijites,” literally “those who went out”) who rebelled against the Caliph. Their later fate was sealed by their internecine feuding. The history of the kharijites is often invoked when discussing the evolution and potential end-state of Al Qaeda. For more, see: N. Lahoud, *The Jihadis' path to self-destruction*, Hurst, London, 2010, p. 89.

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³ P. Bergen, P. Cruickshank, “Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 35, issue 2, 2012, p. 3.

⁴ A. B. Atwan, *The Secret History of al-Qaeda*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006, p. 220. Quoted in M. Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, pp. 3-4.

Consequently, seasoned AQ watchers argued that the organisation's true potential could be measured by the condition of its "subsidiaries" led by the "field commanders." Back in 2011, this led some to conclude that AQ was stronger at that time than on 9/11.⁵ However, Osama bin Laden's killing in May 2011, the events of the Arab Spring, which seemingly undermined AQ's violent ideology, and the subsequent surge of optimism related to the organisation allegedly being "on the run" theoretically nullified pessimistic views on its potency.⁶ It is true, however, that AQ has recently been growing and currently possesses not only "affiliates" (organisations whose leaders have pledged loyalty to Al Qaeda's leadership) but also "allies" (groups not formally aligned with the organisation) and inspires other networks to act in a similar manner.⁷ Unfortunately for AQ, its growth also exposes the organisation and the global jihadist brand to a new set of dangers connected to the growing internal contradictions within its ranks. The enlargement of any structure and inclusion of more people in the decision-making processes and recruitment of additional staff can lead to damaging personality clashes or ideological disputes, as witnessed by three of the four AQ affiliates in recent months, which influence the parent organisation's fate. Events preceding AQ's 25th birthday contained a lot of potential clues on the current or future dividing lines in the most famous terrorist network in history. Their careful assessment could help decision-makers formulate potent responses to the threat emanating from jihadists worldwide and provide them with an answer as to the extent to which AQ and its affiliates, allies and inspired networks are intent on "fighting each other out."⁸

Al Qaeda Central (AQ Central)

AQ's main node is the core of the organisation, the so called AQ Central, i.e., the remnants of the entity founded on 18 August 1988, which until this day survive most probably somewhere on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. At least from 2010 onwards, arguments over its real standing have been raging in public discussions, with various officials and commentators attempting to quantify its strength.⁹ Notwithstanding any debate on AQ Central, President Barack Obama's 2012 remarks on "defeat[ing] Al Qaeda, and deny[ing] it a chance to rebuild," which is allegedly "within our reach,"¹⁰ concerned the rump entity led by Ayman al-Zawahiri and not the totality of the organisation with its affiliates, allies or inspired networks.

AQ Central is probably the most elusive of the organisation's elements, as one can hardly expect open sources to reliably portray the internal situation in the world's most famous terrorist entity. It most probably maintains a limited structure akin to that developed throughout the 1990s,¹¹ which allows it to maintain the pretence of a robustly functioning organisation. Its operational capabilities, however, are hard to discern, but it is said to maintain a string of operators and de facto liaison officers within the ranks of various Pakistani terrorist groups and amongst the Afghan Taliban.¹² AQ Central may not be planning its own terrorist attacks but will attempt to execute

⁵ See: L. Farrall, "How al Qaeda Works," *Foreign Affairs*, April/March 2011.

⁶ See, e.g.: "New Defense Secretary Panetta: We have al Qaeda 'on the run,'" <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/07/09/afghanistan.panetta/index.html>.

⁷ S. Jones, "Re-Examining the Al Qaeda Threat to the United States," Congressional Testimony, 18 July 2013, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT300/CT396-1/RAND_CT396-1.pdf.

⁸ See Ref. 1.

⁹ E. Harris, "CIA: At most, 50-100 Al Qaeda in Afghanistan," *abcNews*, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2010/06/cia-at-most-50100-al-qaeda-in-afghanistan/>.

¹⁰ B. Obama, "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the Nation from Afghanistan," 1 May, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/remarks-president-address-nation-afghanistan>.

¹¹ See: R. Gunaratna, A. Oreg, Al Qaeda's Organizational Structure and its Evolution, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33, Iss. 12, 2010, pp. 1043-1078.

¹² B. Roggio, "Pakistani al Qaeda commander threatens government over execution of jihadists,"

them through its affiliates, allies or inspired networks via such things as internet communications or at least to try to influence their choice of targets. Moreover, the other elements of AQ seek Central's counsel and advice. These may not be of an operational nature but underscore their dedication to the seemingly defeated organisation.

Conflicts within AQ Affiliates

The assessment of AQ "subsidiaries" begins with the organisation's branches and franchises in Iraq, the Maghreb, Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula that act locally but share the organisation's global, anti-U.S. (the "far" enemy) goals, and at times make attempts to broaden the battlefield, i.e., expand their armed incursions and terrorist activities to neighbouring countries. Their struggles are meant to create safe-havens in reality—Islamic emirates in idea—that would be utilised as springboards for further jihadist activities elsewhere.

Throughout 2013, most of them have witnessed a fair dose of internecine feuding that often became public and could have profound implications for individual "subsidiaries" and AQ Central, which is seemingly intent on imposing more control over its regional affiliates.¹³ Internal conflicts, an everyday occurrence for most older terrorist groups,¹⁴ if prolonged and well-harnessed to fit into a number of states' counter-terrorism strategies, could aid the process of destroying AQ from within and undermine the argument about its seeming uniqueness amongst terrorist organisations.

Iraq

Al Qaeda in Iraq, operating under the name Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), was seemingly checked by the U.S. troop surge into the country in 2007 but able to re-establish itself as a potent guerrilla-terrorist force. It not only capitalized on the post-2011 chaos of the civil war in neighbouring Syria and the American withdrawal from Iraq (completed in December 2011) but also on the political conflict in the country in which mostly-Shiite (re)centralisers clash with mostly-Sunni decentralisers.¹⁵ Its growth, associated with the "destroy the walls" campaign aimed at freeing captives in Iraqi jails and re-dominating areas it formerly controlled,¹⁶ allowed the group to threaten Iraq with reignited sectarian conflict.¹⁷

Apart from re-conquering territory in Iraq, the group also attempted to broaden its reach and the jihadist battlefield into neighbouring Syria. This led to an embarrassing and public feud with the Syrian jihadist rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which rejected ISI's attempt to merge the groups. JN's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, chose to remain directly under the command of Ayman al-Zawahiri, underscoring his independence but also dedication to the wider AQ network. He also wished to shield his group from local criticism of an alleged Iraqi (ISI) takeover of a Syrian rebel

The Long War Journal, 14 August, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/08/pakistani_al_qaeda_c_1.php.

¹³ See: SOCOM-2012-0000019 in: Combating Terrorism Center, "Letters from Abbottabad," <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined>.

¹⁴ See, e.g.: K. Reĳawek, *Irish Republican Terrorism and Politics*, Routledge, London, 2011; or M. Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.

¹⁵ M. Knights, "Yes, Iraq Is Unraveling," *Foreign Policy*, 15 May, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policyanalysis/view/yes-iraq-is-unraveling>.

¹⁶ See: S. Wyer, "The Islamic State of Iraq and the 'Destroying the Walls' Campaign," *Institute for the Study of War*, 21 September 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWSecurityUpdate_Islamic-State-Iraq.pdf.

¹⁷ See: UNAMI, "UN Casualty Figures for July, 1 August, 2013," <http://unami.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=2790&ctl=Details&mid=5079&ItemID=1739589&language=en-US>.

group (JN) and was mindful of ISI's much-contested record of brutal imposition of Sharia law in Iraq. In Julani's view, copying ISI's *modus operandi* in this regard would reduce JN's popularity in Syria. Finally, AQ's leader weighed in on the dispute between the two groups and ordered them to function as separate organisations.¹⁸ Surprisingly, ISI's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, seemed to have defied al-Zawahiri's orders while insisting on the validity of the ISI-JN merger and the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.¹⁹ Currently, the two groups function separately in different areas of Syria with scores of former JN operatives joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (Syria), effectively Al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria.

Northern Africa

Although named after AQ, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, previously the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or GSPC) shares only very few features with AQ Central. Historically, the relations between the two were particularly troublesome because since the eruption of the Algeria civil war in the early 1990s AQ's global jihadist leaders perceived Algerian jihadism as too domestically and nationally focused. Allegedly for this reason, AQ Central rejected GSPC leader Abdelmalek Droukdel's requests a few times to become associated with bin Laden's organisation. However, in late 2006, the union was accomplished, owing to the great interest of AQ in increasing its influence on Algeria and eventually using GSPC cells in Europe.²⁰ AQIM moved towards a more hybrid, theoretically Al Qaeda-esque structure after the collapse of its 2007/2008 terrorist campaign in Algeria. In a practical admission of strategic defeat in Algeria, AQIM internationalized its activities, and its units operating outside the home country and in the Sahel were given a lot of operational leeway with the group's central leadership, what was based in north-eastern Algeria, significantly weakened in its command-and-control abilities. Moreover, while less successful on the terrorist-guerrilla front, AQIM attached seemingly greater focus to extracurricular, non-terrorist activities related to crime, from smuggling to kidnapping Westerners for ransom.²¹ At the same time, purely jihadist activities were sidelined. This transformed AQIM into the wealthiest AQ Central affiliate but seriously distracted it from attempting to achieve AQ Central's global jihadist goals.²²

This distraction further compounded major internal frictions within AQIM. The rise of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Droukdel's arch rival, as a semi-independent commander in the Sahel,²³ led to a split within the organisation and the formation of The Masked Brigade (or the Those who Sign with Blood Brigade). Paradoxically, this seemed to have served AQ Central's goals, as Belmokhtar's group immediately pledged allegiance to al-Zawahiri and conducted spectacular terrorist attacks in In Amenas (Algeria) and Agadez and Arlit (Niger) in January and May 2013, respectively. Thus, once again a regional AQ Central affiliate was conducting headline-grabbing operations in the name of global jihad. Belmokhtar, however, openly challenged AQIM in its area of operations, so the

¹⁸ "Translation of al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri's letter to the leaders of the two Jihadi Groups," <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/710588/translation-of-ayman-al-zawahiris-letter.pdf>.

¹⁹ T. Joscelyn, "Islamic State of Iraq leader defies Zawahiri in alleged audio message," *The Long War Journal*, 15 June, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/islamic_state_of_ira_3.php.

²⁰ J. D. Le Sueur, *Between Terror and Democracy. Algeria since 1989*, Zed Books, London, 2010, pp. 143-168.

²¹ M. Mokeddem, *Al-Qaida au Maghreb islamique, contrebande au nom de l'islam (Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, contraband in the name of Islam)*, Éditions Harmattan, Paris, 2011.

²² "Al Qaeda's richest faction dominant in north Mali: U.S.," *Reuters*, 26 July 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/26/us-mali-usa-africom-idUSBRE86P11C20120726>.

²³ R. Callimachi, "Rise of Al-Qaida Sahara Terrorist," *AP Big Story*, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-exclusive-rise-al-qaida-saharan-terrorist>.

organisation is said to be determined to regain control over him, or at least contain his independence.²⁴

Somalia

The Somali jihadist group Al-Shabaab (AS) has been trying to merge with AQ Central at least from 2009 onwards.²⁵ The merger, however, was vetoed by bin Laden, who was of the opinion that Al-Shabaab stands to gain relatively little from attaching itself to an increasingly unpopular global organisation, and the pairing only materialised in the aftermath of his death, in February 2012.²⁶

Just as AS was merging with AQ, it was consumed by prolonged internecine feuding fuelled by its leaders' personality clashes and disputes over the future direction of the organisation.²⁷ Thus, bin Laden's reluctance to merge AQ Central and AS proved justified as the latter's proponents of a more localised jihad clashed with its global jihadists. Matters worsened in April 2013 when one of the original founders appealed directly to al-Zawahiri to intervene in the matters of the group and put an end to Moktar Ali Zubeyr's allegedly dictatorial reign in the AS.²⁸ Most probably, before AQ's leader had time to react, Zubeyr staged an internal coup and further consolidated his control of the group by killing two of the key co-founders of AS.²⁹ Thus, the faction appears to be adhering to AQ Central's global goals in its ascendancy but has simultaneously displayed an attachment to more nationalist, Somali jihadist features as it developed a negative outlook on the internationalisation of the Islamist struggle in Somalia.

Interestingly enough, these divisions and the apparent battle losses by AS, which no longer controls parts of Mogadishu or of Southern Somalia, failed to foment the group's disintegration.³⁰ Moreover, Amniyat, the AS's secret service, which is also responsible for conducting terrorist attacks, seems to be fairly intact and serves as a mechanism through which Zubeyr consolidates his stranglehold over the group.³¹

²⁴ D. Cristiani, "Directions in North African Jihadism in the Post-Mali Conflict," *Jamestown Foundation – Terrorism Monitor*, Vol.11, No.11, 30 May 2013, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40959&tx_ttnews%5BackPid%5D=26&cHash=641e71f13ca38a73f9adc36cb182a978.

²⁵ N. Lahoud, "The Merger of Al-Shabab and Qa'idat al-Jihad," *CTC Sentinel*, February 2012, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-merger-of-al-shabab-and-qaidat-al-jihad>.

²⁶ See: Letter SOCOM-2012-0000005 found in bin-Laden's compound in Abbottabad. Available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-laden-sidelined>.

²⁷ See: N. Horadam, "Profile: Ahmed Abdi Godane (Mukhtar Abu Zubair)," *AEI CRITICAL THREATS*, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/somalia/al-shabaab-leadership/ahmed-abdi-godane-mukhtar-abu-zubair-november-14-2011>.

²⁸ M. Ahmed, "Open letter to al-Zawahiri rocks foundations of al-Shabaab," *SABAHI*, http://sabahionline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2013/04/12/feature-01.

²⁹ H. M. Abukar, "Somalia: The Godane Coup And The Unraveling Of Al-Shabaab," *AFRICAN ARGUMENTS*, <http://africanarguments.org/2013/07/02/somalia-the-godane-coup-and-the-unraveling-of-al-shabaab-%E2%80%93-by-hassan-m-abukar/>.

³⁰ U. N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2060 (2012): Somalia," July 2013, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/413.

³¹ C. Lynch, "Is the U.S. Ramping Up a Secret War in Somalia?" *Foreign Policy*, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/22/is_the_us_ramping_up_a_secret_war_in_somalia_al_shabab.

The Arabian Peninsula—The Odd One Out?

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), an AQ branch originally set up on the orders of Osama bin Laden,³² looks like an oddity in the jihadist organisation's universe as it successfully avoids internecine feuding. However, it has suffered significant personnel losses.³³ At the same time, its commander, Nasir al-Wuyashi, is effectively becoming AQ Central's number two, and the threat emanating from the organisation lead the U.S. to order widespread diplomatic post closures in Africa and the Middle East in early August 2013. AQAP, unlike other AQ affiliates, has a track record of terrorist attempts on U.S. targets and the elevation of its leader seems to vindicate the opinion that the overall organisation is turning its attention towards the Arab World, the Middle East and Northern Africa, and Wuyashi's outfit will play a central role in the process.³⁴

AQ Allies?

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, some of the countries that witnessed revolutions and regime change experienced a significant rise in Islamist-oriented political players.³⁵ The Islamist camp in these countries is rather heterogeneous. Several groups, different in orientations, features and aims now populate the polities of these countries. Among them, one of the most notable is Ansar al Sharia (namely, the Partisans of Sharia). Groups falling under this brand operate in Tunisia and Libya (and are the subject of this paper), but are allegedly also active in Mauritania, Egypt and Morocco and outside the region, in Yemen. However, Ansar al Sharia is anything but a cohesive and unitary group. It is more a label, with groups maintaining distinct national and specific characterizations, as they differ in the history of their major leaders, organizational features, political aims and strategies. However, these groups are generally characterized by a more diversified and complex agenda than the one identifying AQ. Although they share the general AQ view on jihad against the "far" (U.S.) and "near" (non-Islamist regimes of the Muslim states) enemy in defence of Islam, they simultaneously aim to have a wider and deeper outreach. Thus, at best they could be described as AQ allies.

The final aim of the Partisans is to make the societies in which they operate Islamic, mainly through a bottom-up approach, not only utilizing jihad but also Da'wa, i.e., preaching and proselytizing Islam.³⁶ This is to be achieved through a comprehensive approach focused on planning, organizing and educating people, delivering social services and trying to provide Islamic-consistent responses to local, specific socio-economic, political and moral issues. This links the groups to the conceptual, neo-traditional heritage of the Muslim Brotherhood, which differs from AQ Central's violent and armed approach. The Partisans also differ from AQIM, the regional AQ Central affiliate, which, just like its counterparts in Iraq/Syria and the Maghreb, is less prone to deliver social services or work to achieve the bottom-up Islamisation of societies. Moreover, these groups are largely national-based, while AQIM is more plural and transnational in its composition,

³² See: T. Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia : violence and pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010.

³³ P. Bergen, "Al Qaeda in Yemen: On the Ropes," <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/18/opinion/bergen-al-qaeda-yemen/index.html>. However, see a recent assessment: G. Johnsen, "How We Lost Yemen," *Foreign Policy*, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/06/how_we_lost_yemen_al_qaeda for a more positive take on AQAP's fortunes.

³⁴ Authors' electronic communication with Paul Cruickshank, CNN's expert on terrorism, July 2013.

³⁵ K. Bokhari, *Salafism and Arab Democratization*, Stratfor, 2 October 2012, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/salafism-and-arab-democratization>.

³⁶ A. Zelin, "Maqdisi's disciples in Libya and Tunisia," *Foreign Policy*, 4 November 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/11/14/maqdisi_s_disciples_in_libya_and_tunisia.

with the leadership chain dominated by Algerians and its lower ranks full of Mauritians, Malians, and Nigerians, as well as Saharawis and Tuaregs.³⁷

Nonetheless, tactical convergences and operational links between AQ Central or AQIM and the Partisans remain extremely possible—and have been actually observed on several occasions over the past few months, especially in Tunisia—since the strategic aim of defending Islam is similar. The Tunisian group could trace its links to both pre-Arab Spring opposition to President Ben Ali's regime and the general amnesty for radical Islamist prisoners announced by the Islamist-led government. Abou lyadh, leader of the Tunisian Ansar, previously led the Tunisian Fighter Group (GCT, or *Groupe combattant tunisien*), one of the AQ informal affiliates, famous for its killing of Ahmad Shah Massoud on the eve of the 9/11 attacks.³⁸

In Libya, Ansar al-Sharia was allegedly established in February 2012. Its members are active in delivering social services to the population, especially in Benghazi and its surroundings, including security. Its seemingly localized or Libyan character did not stop the group from launching an attack on the informal American consulate in the city on 11 September 2012, which resulted in the deaths of four Americans, including the U.S. ambassador, Christopher Stevens. The Libyan Partisans were largely formed by members belonging to different Islamist militias, mostly from the Eastern part of the country, active during the civil war. However, the group, despite individual linkages and unlike its counterpart in Tunisia, has no structural links to AQ central but shares its general goals of defending Islam and its popularization.³⁹

AQ-Inspired Networks

The extent to which post-2013 Al Qaeda will continue as inspiration for other terrorist networks remains debatable and is difficult to quantify. In theory, one could claim that if a wannabe terrorist, unconnected to either AQ Central, its affiliates or even its allies, undergoes a radicalization process abetted by AQ recruitment videos and other online material, then such an individual should be included in an attempt at mapping out the threat emanating from Ayman al-Zawahiri's organization. Simultaneously, as appears to be the case with Boston bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev,⁴⁰ seemingly an ideal example of an AQ-inspired terrorist, these personas are also motivated by localized grievances and incidents of oppression. Thus, they might be more responsive to the arguments furthered by supporters and practitioners of "local jihad" and not necessarily by AQ's anti-American and anti-Western "global jihad."⁴¹ Nonetheless, in times of jihadist crises these often amateurish terrorists or self-radicalised networks could theoretically keep AQ's flag flying until the organisation's "subsidiaries" or its centre reconstitute or rebuild themselves. Due to their ill-defined and sparse connection to AQ Central, however, the inspired individuals and networks cannot constitute the organisation's main source of strength on its 25th anniversary.

³⁷ J.P. Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel," *Carnegie Papers*, Middle East Program, No. 112, June 2010.

³⁸ "Tunisie - Pourquoi Abou lyadh fait-il aussi peur?" ("Tunisia – Why Is Abou lyadh So Afraid?") *Business News (Tunisia)*, 18 September 2012, <http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Tunisie---Pourquoi-Abou-lyadh-fait-il-aussi-peur-,519,33500,1>.

³⁹ M. Eljarh, "Ansar al-Sharia returns to Benghazi," *Foreign Policy*, 8 March 2013, http://transitions.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/08/ansar_al_sharia_returns_to_benghazi.

⁴⁰ See: J. Reitman, "Jahar's World," *Rolling Stone*, 17 July, 2013, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/jahars-world-20130717?print=true>.

⁴¹ See: J. Brachmann, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009 for a detailed discussion on "local" versus "global jihad."

Conclusions

Recently most of the AQ Central affiliates have been involved in damaging internal disputes. These might have, as was the case with AQIM and to an extent with ISI but not with AS, reduced their operational capabilities and tarnished their links with AQ Central. It remains doubtful, however, whether this internecine feuding has further weakened the totality of the organisation, as even the splinters have still pledged their loyalty to al-Zawahiri, who leads AQ Central. Thus, splintering of the affiliates does not necessarily mean that the new groups leave the global jihadist universe and sever links with the mother organisation. Simultaneously, however, the seeming AQ Central expansion on the back of its allegedly allied organisations operating in Northern Africa is open to question. That is not to suggest that the threat from different Ansar al Sharia groups should be taken lightly but their assignment into the broader ranks of AQ is not automatic as these nationally based outfits may not respond to calls for global jihad from any AQ Central leader. The same could be said of the so called inspired networks, which are too disorganised, amateurish or disinterested in striking the “far” enemy.

Nonetheless, the broader AQ seems resilient enough to withstand a certain degree of “fighting each other.” It will most likely function in its rump state on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border or attempt to relocate some of its personnel to Yemen, the base of operations of its now second-in-command. From whatever locale, it will maintain a certain degree of relevance as an arbiter, advisor and dispenser of inspiration. In times like the post-Arab Spring reality of the Muslim world, AQ Central will see its importance strengthened and its affiliates and, to a lesser extent, allies, respond to its message. That does not mean that there are no dangers for AQ in the future, but for now it looks able to celebrate its 25th birthday in a relatively good state.

Al Qaeda’s resilience raises interesting implications for counter-terrorism strategies of the organisation’s enemies. On one hand, focusing on exposing AQ’s multiple internal conflicts theoretically damages the weakened organisation but fails to engineer its downfall as the splinter groups remain loyal to AQ Central. However, in these conditions, discarding the idea of a centralised strategy focused on toppling AQ Central through fomenting contradictions within the ranks of its affiliates or allies could prove beneficial. Just as al-Zawahiri’s organisation grows and relies more on its “subsidiaries” and turns its attention back to the Middle Eastern “near” enemy, while relying on AQIM, ISI and to an extent on Ansar al Sharia groups, the global counter-terrorism efforts should be de-centralized and aimed at paralysing the AQ Central affiliates via means of assisting the ongoing internecine feuding in these groups. This will not topple AQ Central but might disarm the most prominent elements of its network, and in the longer term destabilise the organisation’s core led by al-Zawahiri. In such conditions, AQ might be celebrating its next birthday in a much gloomier mood.