Counter Terrorist
Trends and Analysis

INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM RESEARCH
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PONDER THE IMPROBABLE

September 2013: Al Qaeda Then and Now

In the 25 years since Al Qaeda came into being, one thing has become clear – whether as a group, a network, or even a brand, it has been steadfast in its purpose of realizing a borderless Islamic state uniting Muslims across the globe. This fact is unlikely to change in the immediate future and those engaged in combating Al Qaeda must remain as flexible and adaptive as their enemy. One way to do so is to constantly map Al Qaeda's evolution.

Gunaratna and Oreg examine key trends in Al Qaeda's development since 9/11, focusing in particular on how the threat posed by Al Qaeda has dissipated to become more localized. Their article also examines the impact of Al Qaeda's robust online presence and the death of founding leader Osama bin Laden before sketching out a rough trajectory based on the changes underway in Pakistan where the leadership is presently based.

The dispersion and localization of the threat posed by Al Qaeda has meant that its associated groups or franchises have become important targets for study. This issue looks at three Al Qaeda brands – Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) based in Yemen, Islamic State of Iraq based in Iraq as well as Syria, and al-Shabaab, based in Somalia. Wells focuses on the resilience of AQAP and shows that it remains capable of posing a credible threat to the west. In fact, AQAP is a microcosm of the broader trends in Al Qaeda's evolution, which include capitalizing on the instability generated by the Arab Spring, making effective use of the Internet to spread ideology and operational methodology and creating safe havens through a mixture of political participation and embedding into local populations and their struggles.

Mitzcavitch examines Islamic State of Iraq and its involvement in the ongoing Syrian conflict, highlighting the important role played by leadership struggles and revealing some insight into the nature of the relationship that Al Qaeda's leadership has with its branches. This is reiterated in Alkaff's article which looks at how the battle for supremacy within al-Shabaab has affected its struggle to create an Islamic state in Somalia and its position within the broader transnational jihadist movement. Both articles also point to how Al Qaeda is unyielding in its efforts to spread its reach, which is the central theme of this issue.

Al Qaeda: Then and Now

Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg

This article examines key trends in the development of Al Qaeda since 9/11 and looks at its future role within the transnational jihadist movement.

"God willing, the end of America is imminent. Its end is not dependent on my survival. Even if Osama is killed or survives, the awakening has started, praise be to God. This was the point of the September 11, 2001 operation" (Statement by Osama Bin Laden, 27 December 2001).

Osama bin Laden transported the transnational jihadist movement into a new era on 11 September, 2001. With the 9/11 attacks, Al Qaeda peaked as a vanguard seeking to lead the transnational jihadist movement. The primary role of Al Qaeda after 9/11 was in sustaining the transnational jihadist movement with its ideology and operational methodology. Al Qaeda nevertheless continued to carry out major attacks in the wake of 9/11, including the Ghriba Synagogue bombing in April 2002, the October 2002 bombing of the French tanker Limburg and the November 2002 Mombasa bombings.

Global to Local

The main source of the terrorist threat in the present has shifted away from Al Qaeda to groups that are ideologically or operationally linked to it. The core of the transnational jihadist movement has been weakened; its numerical strength has eroded from 2000-3000 members at the time of 9/11 to less than 200 members who are mostly located on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The shift away from Al Qaeda has meant

Osama bin Laden (L) with Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of Al Qaeda.
Photo credit: Reuters
http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2012/06/27/running-al-qaeda/

that the terrorist threat is now localized. Groups that adopted Al Qaeda's ideology of transnational jihad and operated against western targets in their own vicinity – the "far" enemy – are now operating against their governments – the "near" enemy.

The shifting center of gravity in the transnational jihadist movement is related to a change in the way linkages between local groups and Al Qaeda are structured. Traditionally, these linkages were not institutional and relied instead on personal relations cultivated during mujahideen activity in Afghanistan in the 1980s. For instance, 9/11 mastermind and senior Al Qaeda leader Khalid Sheikh Mohamed developed close relations during the Afghanistan jihad in the 1980s with individuals who would eventually head Al Qaeda-linked groups in South and Southeast Asia. They included Riduan Isamuddin (also known as Hambali; Jemaah Islamiyah), Khadaffy Abubakar Janjalani (Abu Sayyaf Group) and Hafiz Saeed (Lashkar-e-Taiba).

Through strong personal relations, Al Qaeda's leadership exercised a degree of influence that could replace leaders, initiate splits and change the broader direction of the groups linked to it. Its leverage over the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), for example, contributed to IMU abandoning its Uzbek orientation and adopting a more pan-Central Asian outlook influenced by Al Qaeda's ideology of transnational jihad. More recently, however, the relationship between Al Qaeda and its associated groups has become more formal. In some cases, local groups adopted a new identity reflective of this relationship, such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which grew out of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria. This kind of regional "rebranding" has even spurred some groups to rename themselves in a similar fashion despite not being

formally merged with Al Qaeda. Examples include Al Qaeda in Indonesia and Al Qaeda in the Malay Archipelago.

Online Threat

While the organizational structure of Al Qaeda may have undergone significant changes, what has remained constant is its presence on the Internet. Al Qaeda's online communications platforms have been instrumental in propagating its ideology and indoctrinating individuals. This forced governments to come to terms with the possibility that any person could become independently radicalized and sufficiently motivated to mount a terrorist attack through the Internet. Online radicalization contributed to attacks and plots such as those carried out by US Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan, the Fort Hood shooter, Faisal Shahzad, who plotted to bomb New York's Times Square in 2010, and the Tsarnaev brothers, who bombed the Boston Marathon in 2013.

The Internet has to a large extent supplanted the *dawah* (proselytizing/preaching) apparatus of Al Qaeda. This vast network consisted of *imams* (worship leaders) and religious clerics deployed in mosques located in non-Muslim majority countries in the west to promote Al Qaeda's ideology and to serve as points of contact. With greater emphasis on the disruption of the *dawah* apparatus after 9/11, the Internet emerged as the main platform for logistical activities of the transnational jihadist movement. Funds are raised through hundreds of internet sites which also serve as information conduits for potential recruits. Some operational activities are also conducted with the help of the Internet as instructions and technical know-how are easily shared online. The Tsarnaev brothers who bombed the Boston Marathon, for instance,

constructed the explosive device used with instructions from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's online magazine Inspire.

Al Qaeda after Bin Laden

The neutralization of Osama Bin Laden has put Al Qaeda and the ideology of the transnational jihadist movement at crossroads. Bin Laden tended to favor a balance between the teachings of his mentor, the Palestinian Islamic scholar Abdullah 'Azzam, and the demands of key constituent members such as the then Egyptian Islamic Jihad leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. 'Azzam pioneered the notion of "global jihad" and promoted the idea that Islam was engaged in a "clash of civilizations" with the west, whereas Zawahiri was more focused on ridding Muslim-majority countries of secular and "un-Islamic" regimes. Bin Laden attempted to cater to both "global" as well as "internal" jihad, but his death in 2011 and the subsequent ascendancy of Zawahiri as Al Qaeda's leader could mean a shift away from this approach. Zawahiri's long-standing support for "internal" jihad and the opportunity presented by the Arab Spring in the Middle East are important factors to consider in this regard.

In addition to the changes within Al Qaeda itself, an external development that will significantly influence its future is the expected withdrawal of US-led NATO combat forces from Afghanistan at the end of 2014. The US-led coalition lacks public support to sustain its mission in Afghanistan. Furthermore, financial crises do not permit either the maintenance or deployment of large forces in future. It therefore appears likely that the US presence in the region will be limited to special operations forces, drone strikes and teams for training and advising. However, the Afghan security forces face a formidable challenge in taking over the responsibility of fighting the Taliban given their nascent capabilities and inexperience. In such circumstances, if a terrorist sanctuary similar to what existed under Taliban

rule in the 1990s is recreated in the vacuum of the withdrawal, it will affect the stability of not only Afghanistan, but of the region and beyond. There is thus an incentive for Afghanistan's neighbors and regional partners to work closely with the US-led coalition to stabilize Afghanistan post-2014. The failure of kinetic responses involving the capture, neutralization and disruption of terrorists and their activities in the Afghanistan context also necessitates a reexamination of strategies that have been employed. A full spectrum response that can make the ground environment more hostile for terrorists will be crucial in avoiding the recreation of a sanctuary that Al Qaeda is likely to benefit from given its proximity to Afghanistan.

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GLOBAL PATHFINDER

Global Pathfinder is a one-stop repository for information on current and emerging terrorist threats focusing on terrorism and political violence in the Asia-Pacific region. It is an integrated database containing comprehensive profiles of terrorist groups, key terrorist personalities, terrorist and counter-terrorist incidents as well as on terrorist training camps. The database also contains specific details and analyses of significant terrorist attacks in the form of terrorist attack profiles.

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Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Resilient and Adaptive

Alexander Wells

Murmurings between Al Qaeda affiliates have thrust Yemen squarely back into the headlines and reignited a targeted drone campaign by the US in the Arabian Peninsula.

The electronic communications intercepted by the United States in August 2013 suggest that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) maintains what Bruce Reidel described as a "remarkable resiliency and adaptability… surviving several leadership changes and major crackdowns in both Saudi Arabia and Yemen." This is in spite of the assassinations of AQAP operatives, including its deputy leader Said al-Shihri.

Analysis of the intercepts led to a global travel alert for US citizens and the closure of two dozen diplomatic missions throughout the MENA region. While this reaction may partly reflect residual furor over the handling of last year's attack on a US diplomatic mission in Libya, senior US officials were quick to point out that the intercepts were more than just innocuous chatter.

Whereas Al Qaeda's core leadership has seen its ranks and operational capacities diminish, AQAP has leveraged the post-Arab Spring geopolitical landscape in Yemen to remain aggressively operational. This has occurred despite renewed cooperation between the United States and the administration of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. The intelligence collected by the US in late July 2013 brought this coordination back into focus. In the subsequent weeks, US Predator and Reaper drones ramped up strikes on AQAP operatives and its political front Ansar al-Sharia, with four attacks in ten days between 27 July and 6 August, bringing the total number for 2013 to

Predator and Reaper drone strikes have resumed in Yemen following the interception of AQAP communications.
Photo credit: AP/Massoud Hossaini
http://www.mintpressnews.com/us-covert-attacks-in-yemen-could-surpass-drone-strikes-in-pakistan-in-2012/23313/

AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi
Photo credit: AFP
http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/130809-qaida-targeted-in-yemen-amid-global-security-alert

21 attacks that have resulted in 88 AQAP casualties. The 6 August attack killed four AQAP operatives including Saleh al-Tays al-Waeli, one of 25 Al Qaeda figures on a list connected to an alleged plot during the end of Ramadan celebrations.

Despite the earlier assassination of al-Shihri and the broader escalation of the drone campaign in recent weeks, AQAP continues to function under the leadership of Nasir al-Wuhayshi, Qassim al-Raymi, and bomb maker Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, all of whom were allegedly present in the Ma'rib Governorate during the time of the strikes. With the exception of al-Shihri, the AQAP leadership cadre remains intact and continues to operate throughout Yemen, which is corroborated by the correspondence between al-Wuhayashi and Al Qaeda Central's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri that precipitated the US reaction. Furthermore, al-Asiri has reportedly trained a number of operatives with the requisite skills to replace him in the event of his elimination.

Since its official inception in 2009, AQAP has coupled its operational competence with shrewd social media promotion that has emboldened Muslims abroad to stage attacks. At home, the political and security vacuum generated by the Arab Spring afforded AQAP a critical opportunity to expand its area of operations, garner popular support and advance its tactics at the expense of the persistently weak central government and the US.

By exploiting the country's porous borders and limited government reach, and by utilizing the expertise of its operatives, AQAP continues to serve as what many consider to be a greater threat to the US than Al Qaeda Central. This perception is underscored by the attempted Christmas bombing in 2009 of Northwest Flight 253, the attempted bombings of cargo planes bound for the US in 2010, the attack executed by US Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan and another thwarted plot planned by Private First Class Naser Abdo. Both servicemen received guidance from AQAP's "Inspire" magazine, which trained and encouraged individuals to execute attacks on their own.

The aforementioned attacks represent the "death by 1,000 cuts strategy" which has become a staple of AQAP. As opposed to the scale and relative cost of the 9/11 attacks, the 1,000 cuts approach has come to typify a more cost-effective operational strategy that, even in failure, forces the US to spend significant sums to review and correct lapses in its national security procedures.

In its own operating environment, AQAP seized upon the galvanizing forces of the Arab Spring and translated the strains of popular discontent into a jihadist language. Bruce Reidel wrote that "AQAP has also led the jihadist movement in adapting the traditional al-Qa`ida narrative and ideology to the new paradigm of the 'Arab Spring.' AQAP embraced the revolutionary "tsunami" both in name and action… In Yemen, the terrorist group has exploited the chaos and confusion around the revolution against President Ali Abdullah Salih to expand its room for maneuver and safe havens."

Bolstering AQAP's reach and efficacy is Ansar al-Sharia, which emerged from obscurity in March 2011 when it established the "Emirate of Waqar," formerly known as Jaar in Abyan province. The initially nebulous link between Ansar al-Sharia and AQAP became clear in the subsequent months as "simply AQAP's effort to rebrand itself." Specifically, Ansar al-Sharia figures as a player in AQAP's efforts to cultivate local support, as opposed to undermining the capacity of the government. In contrast to the new media channels utilized by AQAP, Ansar al-Sharia employs different methods including the embedding of Yemeni and foreign journalists. Furthermore, according to the Small Wars Journal, "There is little mention of global jihad or sweeping historical statements in their rhetoric; rather, the focus is more parochial and on immediate needs in Yemen. When speaking of foreign powers, it is often in an immediate context such as the use of American drones."

Meanwhile, AQAP is focused on establishing a new safe haven in the Hadramaut Governorate, after government forces ousted the group from Abiyan province. Hadramaut, the largest of Yemen's provinces, is the ancestral area from which Osama bin Laden hails and is located along the border with Saudi Arabia. According to Ali al-Sarari, a political adviser to Prime Minister

Mohammed Basindwa, "After the ousting of al-Qaeda from Abyan and the fleeing of the armed militants to different areas, it seems that al-Qaeda has shifted its attention toward Hadramaut… [where they currently] control some areas and are trying to do what they did in Abyan." In order to advance this effort, AQAP coordinated a plot to wrest control of Hadramaut's seaport and capital city Mukalla as well as destroy an oil pipeline and gas facilities.

In an early August 2013 visit to the White House, President Hadi and President Obama reaffirmed both countries' commitment to counterterrorism, security and economic development. As Yemen continues to engage AQAP throughout the country, the US drone program will continue to threaten the cadre of leaders who have skillfully navigated AQAP through its infancy, the tumultuous Arab Spring, and the tactical and strategic challenges of the intervening period.

However, Yemen remains beset by serious security and socioeconomic conditions that will inevitably alter the threat environment. Drones alone will not allay these challenges, even with a post-Saleh military and political climate fully committed to counterterrorism. As Gregory D. Johnsen of Princeton University said recently, "While the United States is scratching names off its most-wanted list, AQAP the organization continues to grow and it continues to prove itself capable of projecting the type of power that sends the United States into panic mode. After this terrorism alert that has sent US diplomatic and intelligence operatives in nearly two dozen countries scrambling, it may be time to rethink that approach in favor of a strategy that's more sustainable — and more sensible too."

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Islamic State of Iraq: Reaching into the Levant

Andrew Mitzcavitch

This article examines the role played by Al Qaeda's Iraqi branch in the ongoing Syrian conflict.

Islamic State of Iraq has been an influential actor in the ongoing conflict in Syria. The Al Qaeda branch based in Iraq was closely involved in the formation and sustenance of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which emerged as one of the most prominent rebel groups fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime. This generated considerable interest in the extent to which JN was influenced by its Iraqi benefactor and the broader extent of Al Qaeda's influence in the conflict. Understanding the web of relations between Islamic State of Iraq, JN and Al Qaeda is therefore important for two reasons. First, it will help shed light on one of the many external influences that are shaping the Syrian conflict. Second, Islamic State of Iraq contributes significantly to the instability plaguing Iraq in the present and its foothold in Syria is raising questions regarding the extent to which it will impact the Syrian conflict and what comes after.

Discerning the Web

Islamic State of Iraq and JN share a relationship that is marked by inconsistencies and complications. The April 2013 announcement by Islamic State of Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that JN was a Syrian extension of his group was not upheld by JN leader Abu Mohammed al-Joulani. Instead, al-Joulani responded with a pledge of loyalty directly to Al Qaeda and said his group viewed Islamic State of Iraq as allies. The JN leader's rejection of al-Baghdadi's unilateral announcement of a merger into an entity called *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL) indicates two important points. First, al-Joulani's rejection of the merger could be interpreted as a rejection of Islamic State of Iraq's objectives overtaking JN's own. Both Islamic State of Iraq and JN are Sunni jihadist groups

that aspire towards setting up an Islamic state governed by *Shariah* (Islamic law), but JN's first objective is to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This is similar to Islamic State of Iraq's initial objective when it sought to remove US-led coalition forces occupying Iraq. However, Islamic State of Iraq's entry into the Syrian conflict has seen the group direct its focus on creating a Sunni-dominated Islamic state that it has been unable to achieve in Iraq which is dominated by a Shia majority. It has nevertheless continued its campaign within Iraq using sectarian violence to create the instability required to topple the Iraqi government so that it can be replaced by an Islamic state.

Second, by pledging JN directly to Al Qaeda instead of acknowledging al-Baghdadi's leadership over both groups in a merged entity, al-Joulani indicated that he perceives his group to have equal standing with its Iraqi benefactor. In fact, al-Baghdadi's attempt to incorporate JN into a merged entity was rejected by Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri who wrote a letter addressed to the leaders of both groups in May 2013 that annulled the move. Al-Zawahiri criticized al-Baghdadi for announcing the merger without consulting or even notifying the Al Qaeda leadership based in the tribal areas of Pakistan. He also took al-Joulani to task for prematurely revealing JN's links to Al Qaeda and sought to demarcate the geographical spheres of influence of the two groups. Al-Zawahiri's letter to the leaders of Islamic State of Iraq not only reveals the limited extent of the Al Qaeda leadership's control over its branch in Iraq, but is also unlikely to be the panacea to the merger dispute. This is because al-Baghdadi travelled from Iraq to Syria after announcing the merger to rally fighters in JN supportive of his aim to unite Islamic State of Iraq

and JN under one banner. As a result, reports emerged of a split in JN, with fighters loyal to al-Baghdadi focused on implementing elements of an Islamic state in areas under their control. This group of JN fighters aligned to al-Baghdadi identifies itself as ISIL and is believed to be composed largely of the foreign and Arab fighters from outside Syria that found their way into JN's ranks through Islamic State of Iraq in the first place.

Reports also indicate that the split is roughly along geographical lines. Al-Baghdadi's ISIL are concentrated in the east and north of the country up to the Iraqi border, while JN appears to be operating independently under its own banner in the west and south of Syria. This is supported by separate statements issued under the individual group's identities in certain cities, as opposed to a single statement under a common identity. The ground reality, however, does not clearly reflect the divisions between the leadership, with the two groups still cooperating to carry out attacks. The extent of the cooperation appears to be largely focused on operations, which mirrors the kind of relationship the Islamist rebel groups in Syria share with the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Implications

In spite of cooperation on the ground, a direct confrontation between ISIL and JN cannot be ruled out completely, with some analysts drawing a comparison to the Iraq Awakening Movement that fought Al Qaeda in Iraq (the precursor to Islamic State of Iraq). They argue that JN could end up aligning with other rebel groups – particularly those oriented towards stopping foreign fighters from "hijacking" the revolution – to take on ISIL. This assertion is supported by the fact that ISIL appears to be pursuing a path that is alienating it from the rest of the opposition and the local population in Syria. In addition to committing the murder of FSA commander Kamal Hamami in July 2013, it is reported that civilians living in areas under ISIL have protested its strict implementation of *Shariah*.

However, JN's reputation has been somewhat tainted by its association with Al Qaeda. It has also weakened due to the split, allowing groups

A Syrian boy marches in front of Jabhat al-Nusra's flag during a demonstration in Aleppo, September 2012.
Photo credit: AP
http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/07/14/world/rebels-fear-side-war-with-jihadists-in-syria/#.Uja91cZmim4

like Ahrar al-Sham to gain prominence at its expense. Furthermore, al-Baghdadi appears to be determined to retain ISIL and remain within Syria in spite of al-Zawahiri's instructions, as evident from an audio message released in June 2013. The implications arising out of defying the Al Qaeda leader's orders, however, have yet to emerge. In the meantime, al-Baghdadi appears to continue to be bringing in foreign fighters into Syria. This has led some analysts to speculate that Syria may become a new terrorist haven should the Syrian opposition lose ground to Islamist groups like ISIL, which is composed of foreign fighters and has aims stretching beyond Syria's borders.

Islamic State of Iraq's foothold in Syria poses an additional complexity in a conflict that is already difficult to make sense of given the lack of verifiable information from the ground and constantly shifting lines. Al-Baghdadi's group comes to Syria with a well-established reputation for ruthlessness and a desire to use whatever means necessary – including the incitement of sectarian violence – to achieve its goal of an Islamic state that blurs borders. Within Iraq, al-Baghdadi has created a constant wave of violence that appears to be overwhelming the government and its security forces. Minorities within Syria already face considerable danger, with Alawites (the sect of Shia Islam that Bashar al-Assad belongs to) particularly under threat. The FSA and Islamist rebel groups may be cooperating in the present because of a pragmatic desire to remove the biggest obstacle – the regime itself – but there is no plan for how the opposition will reconcile its conflicting goals once the fighting stops.

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Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis is open for contributions from researchers and practitioners in the field of terrorism research, security, and other related fields.

Topical areas of interest are terrorism and political violence, organized crime, homeland security, religion and violence, internal conflicts and all other areas of security broadly defined.

Articles can be between 1,000 to 2,000 words. Submissions must be made before the 15th of every month for editing purposes and for inclusion in the next month's issue. Please refer to the guidelines.

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Al-Shabaab: A New Phase?

Syed Huzaifah Alkaff

The apparent end of internal discord within al-Shabaab raises questions regarding its future direction and orientation.

Internal discord motivated by factions adopting differing ideological orientations has been one of the defining features of al-Shabaab. The strife within the group has resulted in a loss of operational cohesiveness in terms of military defeats and a loss of territorial control due to foreign military interventions. Recent developments suggest that the internecine struggle within al-Shabaab may have finally come to an end. This raises two important questions, the first of which is whether the apparent end of factionalism will translate into a more effective operational capability. The second question is what the orientation of al-Shabaab's present leadership will mean for the future direction of the group.

Roots of Discord

The protracted internecine struggle within al-Shabaab was possibly catalyzed by the US airstrike in May 2008 which killed the group's first *emir* (leader) Aden Hashi Farah Ayro and created a vacuum at the top. The death of Ayro came at a time when al-Shabaab was making territorial gains in south and central Somalia. The acquisition of territory led to a sharp divide between those driven by clan loyalties and those motivated by *takfiri* ideology (*takfiris* seek to excommunicate those whom they believe to be apostates of Islam). The *takfiris* within al-Shabaab rejected the clan system and sought to oust clan-oriented factions to prevent them from consolidating their own bases of power. Ahmed Abdi Godane (also known as Sheikh Moktar Ali Zubeyr), one of the key proponents of *takfiri* ideology in al-Shabaab, pushed out clan-based factions such as the Anoole and Ras Kamboni and isolated prominent clan-oriented leaders such as Sheikh Mukhtar Robow (also known as Abu Mansur), who was removed from his position as the group's spokesman.

Sheikh Mukhtar Robow (2nd R) in 2008.
Photo credit: Reuters/Feisal Omar
http://www.freemedia.at/home/singleview/article/kidnapped-somali-journalist-freed-after-five-days.html

Hassan Dahir Aweys, formerly a senior member of al-Shabaab, has been in the custody of the Somali government since June 2013. Photo source: Somali Newsroom http:// somalianews-room.com/2012/06/04/has-al-shabaabs-sheikh-hassan-dahir-aweys-defected/

Godane subsequently took over the reins of al-Shabaab and his ascension to the leadership saw the group open up to greater external influence from the broader transnational jihadist movement. In an audio message shortly after assuming leadership of al-Shabaab, Godane pledged the group's loyalty to Osama bin Laden. He thus sought to reorient al-Shabaab towards the transnational jihadist movement and away from Somali nationalism. This inflamed the existing tensions with Robow, who was determined to maintain al-Shabaab's nationalist agenda. Godane also targeted al-Shabaab's main Islamist competitors among the rebel groups opposing the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG), particularly Hizbul Islam.

Al-Shabaab targeted Hizbul Islam following the failure of their joint offensive conducted in May 2009, which Godane is believed to have blamed on Hizbul Islam. The rout of Hizbul Islam eventually saw it absorbed into al-Shabaab, with a formal merger in late 2010. Hizbul Islam's leader, Hassan Dahir Aweys, a prominent member of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) who had consistently advocated unity with al-Shabaab, was included on the al-Shabaab *shura* (consultative council). This development strengthened the clan-oriented nationalists led by

Robow since Aweys was an advocate for Greater Somalia (which includes all the territory where ethnic Somalis are based beyond Somalia's borders).

Infighting Escalates

The growing influence of the foreign fighters that joined al-Shabaab under Godane's leadership generated considerable tension with clan-oriented nationalists like Robow and Aweys. Although not necessarily opposed to the presence of foreign fighters, they were against the subjugation of al-Shabaab's Somali nationalist agenda to that of the transnational jihadist movement and the ignorance of the clan system. The announcement of a formal merger between al-Shabaab and Al Qaeda in February 2012 deepened this schism. In April 2012, Aweys brought his disagreement with Godane over the direction of al-Shabaab into the open by refuting a statement made by the latter that only al-Shabaab was allowed to wage armed struggle in Somalia.

Aweys' public spat with Godane came on the heels of a controversial video released by a foreign fighter holding a senior leadership position within al-Shabaab. Omar Hammami (also known as Abu Mansur al-Amriki), an

American citizen who joined al-Shabaab in 2006, released a video in March 2012 claiming his life was in danger. As 2012 progressed, Hammami would use his Twitter account to publicly detail the extent of Godane's attempts to target him during a time when al-Shabaab was facing military defeats at the hands of a rejuvenated African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Hammami and other foreign fighters loyal to him were likely to have been targeted due to Godane's fear that his group had been infiltrated by outsiders.

In April 2013, Hammami posted on his Twitter account that he had survived a failed assassination attempt by a group of Godane loyalists. This provoked a reaction from Robow, Aweys and an erstwhile Godane ally, Ibrahim al-Afghani (also known as Ibrahim Haji Jama Mee'aad), who collectively issued a fatwa against Godane criticizing his treatment of foreign fighters and his attempts to neutralize Hammami. The split between al-Afghani and Godane was significant, as it prompted the former to write an open letter to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri that called for his intervention. Al-Afghani, a founding member of al-Shabaab, blamed the loss of the group's territory and its waning support among Somalis on internal divisions. He also described the oppressive nature of Godane's

leadership and the detentions of dissenters carried out by his loyalists.

The leadership struggle came to a head on 19 June 2013, when fighters loyal to Godane clashed with a group allied to al-Afghani. Al-Afghani was reported to have been killed in the clash, which took place in Barawe, a town in southeastern Somalia. Robow and Aweys subsequently fled the area, with Aweys turning himself in to the government on 26 June 2013. The current fate of Aweys is not clear and he remains in custody. Some analysts have argued that he is well placed to provide the government with valuable insight into al-Shabaab's workings. Robow is also believed to have engaged in talks with the government in July 2013, although this has not been confirmed. The departure of the two leaders and the death of al-Afghani nevertheless leaves Godane in a strong position to achieve complete control of al-Shabaab.

Implications

The loss of operational cohesiveness due to the leadership struggle has seen the various factions of al-Shabaab undermine each other despite facing a common threat from external military interventions. This contributed significantly towards the loss of major strongholds for

Omar Hammami, an American citizen who joined al-Shabaab in 2006, was involved in a public spat with al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane since 2012.
Photo credit: AP/Farah Abdi Warsameh
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/18/omar-hammami-al-shabab-death-threats_n_2502519.html

Al-Shabaab recruits
undergoing training.
Photo source: Moon of the South
http://moonofthesouth.com/al-qaeda-

al-Shabaab, including the capital Mogadishu and the southern port city Kismayo over the course of 2012. The effective collapse of al-Shabaab's quasi-state resulted in a shift towards guerrilla tactics as the group withdrew from the territories it held. The loss of Kismayo also meant the denial of a large source of income for the group. It is important to note, however, that despite al-Shabaab's internal discord weakening its operational capability, the military interventions by Somalia's neighbors under the aegis of the African Union had an important role to play in the defeats suffered by the group. The October 2011 invasion by Kenya into southern Somalia was crucial in this regard as it opened another front against al-Shabaab that ultimately overwhelmed the group militarily.

However, analysts have speculated that Godane's elimination of his rivals may reverse this situation since he is better placed to carry out operations more cohesively under a centralized leadership structure controlled by him. They point to attacks on the UN office in Mogadishu in June 2013 and the Turkish mission in July 2013 as evidence of a resurgent al-Shabaab under the centralized leadership of Godane. However, some analysts have pointed out that these attacks could be mere distractions from the significant challenges al-Shabaab faces ahead, which include the loss of fighters loyal to

the rivals Godane has eliminated and sidelined as well as an unclear relationship with Al Qaeda. Godane's treatment of foreign fighters is likely to impact his group's reputation (and by extension Al Qaeda's) negatively in the eyes of the broader jihadist movement.

The infighting within al-Shabaab has also adversely affected the group's standing as a socio-political movement within Somalia. This is because Godane's ideological direction for al-Shabaab places it at odds with both the clan system – which dominates social relations between Somalis – and Somali nationalism. Furthermore, on 11 September 2013, more than a hundred Somali Islamic scholars issued a fatwa denouncing al-Shabaab. This unprecedented development is significant as it contributes to the erosion of the group's religious legitimacy and encourages Somalis to report the presence of its members in their midst and deny them sanctuary. However, al-Shabaab sent a strong response the next day by attacking Ahmed Mohamed Islam Madobe, the head of Jubaland's semi-autonomous administration, in Kismayo. Al-Shabaab thus clearly remains a source of instability for Somalia as it struggles to find a foothold to rebuild.

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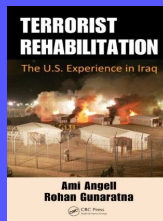
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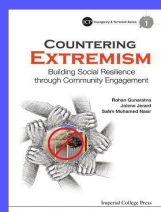
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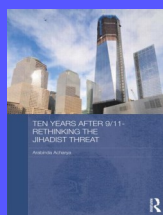
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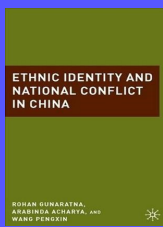Arabinda Acharya (Routledge, 2013)

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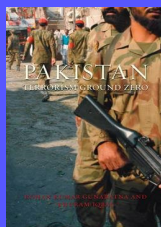
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