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In This Issue

AL-QAEDA: Evolution and Future Implications to Global Security

Summary: Al-Qaeda, Arabic for "the Base," is an international terrorist organization established in 1988 by Usama bin Laden. It initially began during the Afghan War as an operational network of Muslims combating the Soviet Union, but after merging with several other Islamist militant groups in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda adjusted their mission and launched several attacks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and elsewhere. Al-Qaeda's utilization of the internet for communications and recruitment enabled rapid international growth. In particular, al-Qaeda's influence spread to the Middle East, North and East Africa, and South Asia where various affiliate organizations conduct operations in-line with al-Qaeda's ambition of global jihad. This assessment focuses on the six primary branches that have expanded al-Qaeda's global network and still exist today.

Key Questions:
- What is the origin, evolution, and trajectory of large branches of al-Qaeda?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each branch?
- How much of a threat (low, moderate, or severe) does each branch pose to regional and international stability?
- What techniques, ideals, tactics will each branch continue to use in the future?

Key Terms:
- AQIH: al-Qaeda in the Heartland (Afghanistan and Pakistan)
- AQIM: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
- GSPC: Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
- GIA: Armed Islamic Group
- AQ: al-Qaeda
- JNIM: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
- MINUSMA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
- ICU: Islamic Courts Union
- AQI: al-Qaeda in Iraq
- IS: Islamic State
- AQAP: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
- HTS: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
- AQIS: al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

al-Qaeda in the Heartland

Summary: AQIH became the headquarters to a terrorist organization that now spans the globe, influencing groups and individuals alike to act on behalf of its ideals. While IS may have taken international attention away from AQ after it announced the creation of a caliphate in 2014, AQIH continues to stand by for opportunities to rekindle its goal of global jihad. AQIH serves as the hub of AQ's operations and ideals, making it a probable severe threat internationally, while its regional influence and action remains low in the short term.

Development and Analysis: During the Afghan War AQIH became a network of support for Afghan Muslims fighting against the Soviet Union and officially formed in 1988, after originating in Pakistan. Following the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, AQIH partially disbanded, but later re-established headquarters in Afghanistan with the goals of enforcing Sharia law and expelling those that supported Western influence in the region. The widely known founding members, Usama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Jamal Ahmad al-Fadl brought funding, militant expertise, and structure to the organization.

Since it originated in Afghanistan and Pakistan, AQIH spread across the Middle East and into North Africa, creating new branches and affiliates throughout the region. The organization's focus shifted internationally, declaring holy wars on Western countries and their allies, and conducting more elaborate attacks on foreign soil. On 11 September 2001, AQIH carried out its most widely known terror attack, internationally publicizing its capabilities and intentions.

While this branch remains active in promoting the original AQ agenda of global jihad, operations thwarted by Western efforts and the death of Usama bin Laden stalled its momentum. The rise of IS also played a role in AQIH's lessening international acknowledgement. Currently, it seems leader al-Zawahiri is taking advantage of IS' spotlight to maintain a low profile while restructuring and rebuilding forces and resources. With the decline of IS, AQ will likely re-emerge as the primary international terrorist threat due to its extensive membership, assets, and experience.

al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Summary: Through its deadly, localized attacks, AQIM poses a moderate regional threat. Its threat could evolve to severe should its attacks aim for territorial dominance and threaten state stability. AQIM, however, would likely fail in such endeavors as its past attempts at territorial gains and destabilization proved short-lived. Although AQIM has targeted international organizations and Western citizens, its threat level to the international community remains low. Its attacks will most likely remain within Africa and focus on imposing Sharia law locally.

Development and Analysis: The GSPC, predecessor to AQIM, formed in Algeria in 1998 during the Algerian Civil War. Hassan Hattab and several other former officers of the GIA established the GSPC in protest to the GIA's slaughter of civilians. The GSPC, led by Hattab, earned support through its commitment to oppose the Algerian government without targeting civilians. GSPC faction leaders, Nabil Sahraoui and Abdelmalek Droukdel, ousted Hattab in 2003, with Sahraoui leading until 2004 and Droukdel succeeding and remaining the leader of AQIM today. GSPC formally merged with AQ in 2006 and became AQIM in 2007. Primarily funded through its kidnappings, extortion, and other organized crimes, AQIM expanded influence, using deadly attacks to promote its mission of driving out Western influence within the region and imposing Sharia law while still adopting doctrine that resonate within the region.

Early AQIM attacks mainly targeted locals in Algeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Libya, and Tunisia. With AQIM also targeting French nationals, France initiated Operations Barkhane and Serval in 2014. These operations to combat AQIM initially proved successful by decreasing

AQIM attacks. AQIM, however, resurged through its alliances with local rebel and ethnic groups, most namely JNIM. With JNIM, AQIM demonstrated its extension of regional influence and threat through its 2016 attacks in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. In response, African states in the region have expressed fear that AQIM may target them next as it expands. If AQIM continues to coordinate with other groups, it will likely continue to prosper and conduct deadly attacks in new countries.

While AQIM has the strength to conduct attacks in new states, its attacks likely will not threaten state stability or establish territorial gain. AQIM attacks almost exclusively cause civilian casualties without damage to state infrastructure or government entities or pose a threat to stability. Although AQIM made territorial advances and progress in destabilizing eastern Mali in 2013, MINUSMA's deployments subsequently pushed out AQIM from its developing strongholds. AQIM attacks have caused casualties among MINUSMA forces, yet they have not caused enough havoc to prompt AQIM re-establishing dominance in Mali. With its experience against MINUSMA as an example, AQIM may not make any permanent territorial gains or succeed in destabilization when an organized opposition force challenges it.

al-Shabab

Summary: Al-Shabab is an Islamist terrorist organization based in Somalia with well-established ties to al-Qaeda. In 2006, it managed to control Mogadishu and the majority of southern Somalia, but the African Union led a successful military operation to minimize al-Shabab's dominion. Despite various counter-terrorism efforts, al-Shabab continues to routinely execute violent attacks, preserving its status as a high-level security threat to Eastern Africa; however, it does not present a substantial threat internationally due to its regional focus.

Development and Analysis: Members of the al-Ittihad al-Islami, a militant Salafi group prominent in the 1990s, disbanded to form the ICU in 2006, which yielded the youth-led militant group, al-Shabab. In June 2006, the ICU and al-Shabab gained control of Mogadishu until their expulsion by Ethiopia at the request of Somalia's transitional government. Ethiopian intervention catalyzed the radicalization of al-Shabab, which established its ability to effectively carry out guerrilla-style bombings and assassinations. By 2008, al-Shabab rapidly expanded its membership into the thousands and cultivated ties with AQ before officially announcing allegiance in 2012.

Since pledging themselves as AQ affiliates, al-Shabab developed an extensive financial base from racketeering, smuggling, extortion, and taxation, which sustained the African Union's attempts to combat terrorist funding. Despite internal divisions over whether to focus on regional or international jihad, al-Shabab preserves unity through its opposition to the Western-backed Somalia government and support of instituting an Islamic state in Somalia. Instability throughout Somalia enabled al-Shabab to exploit regional power vacuums and escalate operations; however, expansion into northern Somalia provoked battles for supremacy with IS, which will likely continue until the outright eradication of IS. Al-Shabab will almost certainly strengthen its influence, funding, and membership regardless of internal divisions and competing terrorist organizations due to the combination of a sustained international focus on IS and the volatile Somali government.

al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Summary: Since its foundation in 2009, AQAP actively pushed for Islamic and Sharia rule, conducting attacks, mostly bombings, within the Arabian Peninsula. Its influence in the region occasionally faltered, facing difficulties of low membership, competing organizations, and government involvement. However, the group seems to be taking advantage of publicity through propaganda, and lessening competition making them a likely severe threat in the region. Although they encourage lone wolf action, AQAP probably represents low international threat, as most of its funds, attacks, and ideals focus regionally in the Arabian Peninsula.

Development and Analysis: In 2009, AQAP officially formed, merging AQ branches in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. This merge began after the Saudi government forced militants south towards the border with Yemen. The group's original and current objectives of expelling Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and establishing an Islamic Caliphate with Sharia law closely reflect those of AQIH. AQAP's founder, Nasir al-Wuhayshi maintained close ties with other branches and rose to AQ's deputy leader before his death in 2015 by a drone strike. The current leader, Qasim al-Raymi and senior commander, Khalid Batarfi took power following the deaths of many founding members, and now oversee six to seven thousand fighters.

AQAP operations generally focus on bombings as its main medium of attack. Their most recent on occurred 4 August 2018, a suicide bombing in the Abyan governorate of Yemen. While the group continues action in the Arabian Peninsula, many analysts believe it is potentially at its weakest since 2012, likely due to the prevalence of IS in the region forcing AQAP to compete for members, resources, and land. The group now deals with low membership and fear of infiltration. However, it combats these issues with propaganda operations using media outlets and magazines, and a strict screening process demanding a clean passport and history, remaining suspicious of government surveillance.

The proven success of AQAP's propaganda likely means a future increase in its online presence. Propaganda operations will certainly continue and advance with the current technology. Past propaganda encouraged and inspired lone wolf attacks, which the group might further take advantage of to combat low membership. Unfortunately, this likely means a spread of attacks against Western targets. Low membership should rise as IS influence and existence falters in the region, but AQAP will likely still be restrictive in membership as it is considered a larger threat with growth, and international attention shifts away from IS.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

Summary: Jabhat al-Nusra was an Islamist terrorist organization formed by AQI to exploit turmoil in Syria that has evolved through a variety of unions and divisions into HTS. Since its formation in 2011, al-Nusra established itself as adaptable and effective in its attacking and recruiting strategies - an image that has sustained through its evolution. Despite internal divisions and competing insurgent groups, HTS has developed an extensive membership with reliable financing, which legitimizes it as a high-level threat to regional security and a potentially high-level threat to international security.

Development and Analysis: AQI, now known as the IS, initially formed Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011 under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the current leader of the IS, in order to hijack control in Syria through exploiting power vacuums left by the civil war. After al-Baghdadi claimed to absorb Jabhat al-Nusra into AQI in 2013, Abu Muhammad al-Golani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, dissolved its affiliation with AQI and reaffirmed commitment to AQIH. Despite clear historical ties, Al-Nusra separated from AQIH in 2016, with formal authorization, and amended their name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to solidify regional support in Syria. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham consolidated power in 2017 with other Syrian Islamist groups under the name HTS. By the end of 2018, HTS imported the second largest contingent of foreign recruits with up to four-thousand and an overall membership of up to twenty-thousand.

HTS's numerous separations and mergers demonstrate its unique ability to adapt to radical situational changes to survive. Although HTS often conducts joint-operations against the Assad regime in Syria, developing hostilities with Ahrar al-Sham and conflicting internal divisions plague its sustainability and reveal exploitable divisions. Despite the loss of territory and the defection of many of its foreign recruits, HTS will likely retain its stable financial base through private donations, taxes, tariffs, oil sales, and smuggling. HTS will also likely maintain its consistent and rapid stream of regional attacks, which will be partially eclipsed by the international focus on the eradication of the IS, and may begin to split and expand its focus internationally due to a large contingent of AQIH loyalists and foreign recruits among its ranks.

al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

Summary: While the group originally formed to support AQIH, it now relies on funds from other branches to prosper. The original goal of influence over Indian Muslims might be abandoned for more opportunities in Bangladesh, making AQIS a moderate threat in the region. With its attacks stagnating and recruitment limited to word of mouth AQIS poses a low threat internationally, focusing more on regional issues than the overall spread of AQ ideals.

Development and Analysis: In September 2014, AQIS formed in response to the conflict between AQ and IS. It aimed to keep AQ competitive in the global jihad, and fulfill the desire to extend its reach and radicalize Indian Muslims. The group merged with multiple AQ affiliates in the region. It quickly thrived with growing membership and operated training centers throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, AQIS gained international attention and suffered heavy losses of people and equipment after multiple Western-supported raids of training centers.

Most AQIS attacks focus on military or perceived enemy targets in the region, however, attacks dwindled over the years stagnating the group's operations. Support from AQIH and other affiliates continue, keeping AQIS an influential force in the region. The group's exploitation of regional crises and attacks garner it more support and membership, while still allowing it to employ traditional recruitment tactics, which it favors. Therefore, future attacks will probably target activists within the region. AQIS will certainly continue its recruitment strategies of purely word of mouth as it has consistently rejected taking advantage of new technology for communication and propaganda. This trend and AQIS' history of unpopularity among Indian

Muslims means its influence will likely stagnate in India, as it refocuses efforts in Bangladesh, which will likely prove a more inviting environment.

Outlook

Despite the global prominence of IS, the AQ as network remains a threat to stability in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. AQIH and al-Shabab will likely represent the largest international threats, due to their resources, relatively stable leadership historically, and their lack of competition with other terrorist groups in their regions. AQAP, AQIM, HTS, and AQIH do pose threats to their respective regions. Although, given their internal instability, inability to expand territory, and competition for resources, their influence will not likely spread to the global stage.

The AQ network will likely benefit from the attention IS receives to expand their resources and influence without significant attention from the global community. If IS continues to decline, AQ's profile may rise again. Although, following the pattern of AQ's original rise to prominence following the 11 September attacks, and rise of IS following the November 2015 Paris attacks, no single group or AQ will likely receive significant international attention or pushback unless they conduct a large-scale terror attack in a location of international significance.

[Caitlyn Aaron, Cassie Hettmansperger, Riley Coder, Kaylee Coffman, Tom Perkins, Paris Lorts, Janessa Leon Guerrero, Hunter Binkley, Emily Lewis, Michelle Riffer]

EL SALVADOR: President-elect Bukele Might Represent an End to Postwar Politics

Summary: Salvadorans elected Nayib Bukele as President, to take office on 1 June. Bukele will likely begin his presidency with focus on fighting gang violence and promoting regional cooperation to resolve government corruption.

Development: On 3 February, Bukele won El Salvador's presidential election with 54% of votes, breaking a 30-year post-civil war era dominated by a two-party system. Bukele beat out both traditional parties— the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA); and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Bukele served as mayor of the capital city, San Salvador, representing the FMLN until the party expelled him in 2017 for publicly criticizing it. To develop his campaign platform, Bukele joined the small right-wing party Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANA). According to a political scientist, Salvadorans feel frustrated with mainstream politicians and believe Bukele can truly represent the people. Tony Saca, the former president and ARENA politician, now serves a 10-year prison sentence for charges of embezzlement and money laundering in the diversion of approximately $300 million in public funds. Aside from corruption scandals, presidential candidates discussed tackling gang violence and managing emigration from the country.

Analysis: While the public views Bukele as a young political outsider, he will likely use his large social media presence as a platform to delegitimize the political power of street gangs, and to publicize the importance of regional cooperation to fight government corruption. Past administrations have tried and failed to reduce homicide rates through employing a zero-tolerance "mano dura" (hard hand) policy towards gang violence. The president-elect will likely promote the development of more effective youth engagement programs to facilitate the reintegration into society after leaving a gang. This technique might prove more effective than others since Bukele likely holds more capability to influence younger generations through his social media-driven campaign. Also, Bukele will probably push to adopt a version of the International Anticorruption Commission that Guatemala has used for more than ten years. Despite tension over migration issues, he advocates for better relations with the U.S., likely for support in fighting corruption and improving his country's reputation on the world stage. Continually, his proposal to begin great infrastructure projects, such as a new pacific coast train system and a new airport, likely has potential to increase economic opportunities for the public, with an ultimate goal of incentivizing citizens not to emigrate. Bukele will likely take full advantage his country's current state to drive his regional influence and raise younger generations' awareness of the issues that plague the region.

[Ashlee Boyle]

EUROPEAN UNION: Enters Major New Trade Deal with Japan

Summary: The European Union (EU) and Japan entered a new trade deal that creates the largest zone of free trade in the world.

Development: On 1 February, the EU entered into a new trade deal with Japan: The Economic Partnership Agreement. This deal creates the largest zone of free trade in history, drastically reducing barriers to trade that had previously existed. Japan is the EU's second biggest trading partner in Asia after China, and the sixth most important trading partner worldwide. Both the EU and Japan have primarily export-based economies and advocate open trade, paving the way for this deal that will remove 97% of tariffs Japan applies to European goods, as well as 99% of tariffs on Japanese goods imposed by the EU. This includes lifting tariffs previously imposed on car imports over a 7-year transition period. With the removal of tariffs and duties this trade deal is expected to save the EU up to $1.1 billion each year.

Analysis: This new trade deal probably signals a coming shift in the EU economy. From an EU perspective, it almost certainly represents an opportunity to blunt any fallout from the Brexit, while Tokyo probably particularly values the lifting of car tariffs, as well as a boost for Prime Minister Abe's trade-oriented agenda. With the alignment of similar trade policies and other values, the trade deal likely opens the path more collaboration between the EU and Japan. Both economies will likely experience a boost to economic growth and job creation, depending, of course, on trends in world economic growth.

[Alli McIntyre]

IRAN: Fake Facebook Accounts Reveal Years-long Propaganda Effort

Summary: Facebook announced the removal of Iranian controlled fake accounts, revealing current and future threats to the security of countries' political and social processes.

Development: On 31 January, Facebook released a statement revealing the company deleted 783 fake accounts linked to Iran. These fraudulent accounts spread Iranian state interests through topics such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis in Syria. The accounts often advocated for US, Saudi Arabia, and Russian involvement in these conflicts that benefit Iranian interests and targeted users in over 20 countries. Some accounts ran for up to ten years before their removal.

Analysis: Iran most likely used this experiment to test its possible influence through social media and to solidify a course of action for propaganda efforts, perhaps with a goal of influencing foreign elections. Iran will probably relaunch a new network of fake accounts to spread misinformation. However, concerns over valid and secure political and social networking processes influenced companies like Facebook and Twitter to create more preventative measures against fake accounts, which might make Iran's objective more difficult to attain as awareness spreads. Alternately, with the lessons learned from this operation, new accounts or networks may grow more difficult to catch than before. The discovery of Iranian-based fraudulent accounts demonstrates the rampant spread of social media meddling on the global scale.

[Kaylee Coffman]

PAKISTAN: Islamabad Bolsters Naval Forces through a Chinese Arms Agreement

Summary: China and Pakistan have entered an arms agreement that aims to provide the alliance with a strategic advantage in the Arabian Sea, probably spurred by insecurities surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Development: On 1 February, Pakistan agreed to purchase Chinese warships valued at $348 million to improve its air defense and anti-submarine warfare capabilities in the Arabian Sea. For its part, Beijin agreed to construct anti-ship and submarine naval vessels by 2021 and to deploy them to the Gwadar port (located in the southwest corner of Pakistan).

Analysis: Islamabad and Beijing probably intend to secure the CPEC by increasing Pakistani and Chinese naval presence in the Arabian Sea. The purchase of four new sea vessels by an already financially strained Pakistan likely indicates that Islamabad and Beijing believe that anti-CPEC nations, such as India, may threaten Pakistan in the Arabian Sea. Additionally, this transaction between China and Pakistan likely indicates that both powers recognize the strategic significance of protecting CPEC projects, especially given that naval clashes could threaten the Gwadar port and resources in Karachi.

[Carlton Dorrough]

This is a global intelligence briefing prepared by the students of the Global Security and Intelligence Studies program at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona. The views expressed in this briefing are those of the students, not the university.

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