THE ART OF AFFILIATION:
AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB AND THE POLITICS OF TERRORIST ALLIANCES

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THE ART OF AFFILIATION:
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ALLIANCES

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ABSTRACT

Al-Qaeda today is one of the most important contemporary examples of a transnational, networked threat to nations throughout the world. This thesis questions whether the relationships between individual groups in the al-Qaeda network resemble traditional alliances and if so, what are the implications for group behavior? Are terrorist organizations bound by the same constraints as states in formal alliances? Do they face similar risks and receive comparable benefits? Based on classical International Relations theory and traditional terrorism literature, an analytical framework for alliances between terrorist organizations is created. The framework is then tested on a case study of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an al-Qaeda franchise currently active in North Africa. Based on the analysis, the thesis concludes that the relationship between AQIM and al-Qaeda’s senior leadership can be classified as a traditional alliance, but that terrorist organizations are faced with a unique system of constraints, risks and benefits when allied.
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INTRODUCTION

Al-Qaeda today is one of the most important contemporary examples of a transnational, networked threat to nations throughout the world. It is generally accepted that the decentralized nature of the al-Qaeda network is one of its defining characteristics, and one that allows for local, established terrorist groups to join the greater al-Qaeda movement and work towards its agenda of global Salafi jihad while simultaneously maintaining relative autonomy within the network. To date, most analysts have focused on the organizational attributes of the network that make such relationships between local, affiliate groups and the central command of al-Qaeda possible. This thesis is concerned with the relationships themselves.

At its most basic, a network can be defined as “any collection of actors (N greater than 2) that pursue repeated, enduring exchange relations with one another and at the same time lack a legitimate organizational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during the exchange.”\(^1\) The ‘enduring exchange relations’ between AQ central and its affiliates are the domain of this paper. There is a wealth of scholarly information regarding the organizational structure of al-Qaeda. Very little of this research is focused on the decision-making process by which a local, established group with nationalist tendencies becomes enmeshed, if not formally associated, with al-Qaeda and even less of this research is devoted to categorizing and analyzing the relationship between AQ central and the affiliate. This has resulted in a lack of theoretical analysis concerning how groups behave once inside the network.

Current terrorism research is focused on highlighting the differences between state and non-state actors to the point that it may seem counterintuitive to use mechanisms of traditional International Relations theory to analyze the behavior of terrorist organizations. To this end, it is

difficult to make the case that an ideologically driven network like al-Qaeda is comparable to an alliance system between states. However, it is reasonable to ask whether the relationships between individual groups in the al-Qaeda network resemble traditional alliances and if so, what are the implications for group behavior? Are terrorist organizations bound by the same constraints as states in formal alliance? Do they face similar risks and receive comparable benefits?

*Methodology*

The following is composed of three parts. The first chapter focuses on creating an analytical framework for alliances between terrorist organizations. After a brief discussion of why terrorists can be considered rational actors, al-Qaeda’s organizational structure is defined in order to locate the specific relationship between affiliates (the periphery) and the center within the larger al-Qaeda network. The chapter then lays out why and how terrorist organizations would enter into an alliance with another group, drawing on classical terrorism literature, traditional International Relations and alliance politics theory.

The second chapter then tests the framework through an analysis of one of the most powerful al-Qaeda affiliates, Algeria’s al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Who are AQIM and where do they fit into the larger picture of al-Qaeda? Although inherently an Algerian-centric organization, AQIM is one of the most pronounced examples of a local, nationalist group being co-opted, or franchised, under the larger al-Qaeda umbrella. Although seemingly a simple transition, the merger left analysts with many unanswered questions. Is AQIM now a local, regional, trans-national or global organization? Are they independent of al-Qaeda central, subjugated, or franchised? How has the merger affected their influence in the region and, ultimately, can their relationship to AQ central be considered a formal alliance?
The historical background and specific local conditions that led to the group’s formation and the path it took to become a prominent al-Qaeda ally will be discussed. Here, drawing on ideas of rational choice theory and terrorist decision-making, AQIM’s decision to formally cooperate with al-Qaeda in 2006 will be evaluated and an analysis of the alliance will follow. In the final chapter, conclusions will be drawn regarding the potential benefit of applying an alliance framework to al-Qaeda’s relationship with its affiliates. Furthermore, potential areas of conflict resulting from weaknesses within the alliance will be discussed in order to highlight avenues for future counterterrorism efforts.
CHAPTER I
ADOPTING A FRAMEWORK FOR ALLIANCES WITHIN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

1. TERRORISTS AS RATIONAL ACTORS

A core assumption underpinning all Neorealist theory is that states are rational, unitary actors. To assert that individual terrorists and terrorist groups as a whole are also rational actors is a somewhat controversial strand within traditional terrorist literature, but one that is quickly gaining ground.² For the purposes of this paper, it is important to outline rationality in terms of terrorist organizations’ decision-making processes, because the assumption underlying alliance formations is that they are undertaken only after thorough consideration of the costs and benefits.³

Terrorist organizations make rational choices in much the same way individuals do, although the driving factors behind these choices are necessarily different. For the group as a whole, survival is paramount. According to a Rand publication: “Organizations are dedicated to survival. They do not voluntarily go out of business. Right now, the immediate objective of many of the world’s hard-pressed terrorist groups is…. to continue operations.”⁴ Whereas states rarely face scenarios in which their very existence is challenged, terrorist organizations routinely face the threat of disintegration. In fact, there are very few examples of groups that continue to

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operate at any significant level beyond five years. Thus, while the main goal of a state is the accumulation of power and security, the main goal of a terrorist organization is simply to survive another day. Through its very existence the terrorist group gains power.

A terrorist organization ensures its survival in a number of rational ways. Two prominent examples are the secret, underground nature of the organization itself, and the way in which individuals are recruited. The utilization of social networks to recruit and enlist members provides a natural vetting process and serves to strengthen bonds of trust among members.

Furthermore, it is in the group’s best interest to recruit individuals whose decision to pursue terrorism stems from its own rational logic, as opposed to those who are simply mentally unhinged or seeking adventure. Given that survival is the group’s main goal, “not only do serious terrorists scorn the ineptitude of the more excitable, but they find them a serious security risk.”

One strand of rational choice theory inspired by economics is that all individuals, and by extension organizations, are utility maximizers. The particular utility one chooses is based on individual preferences and is not restricted to monetary gain. Consequently, “the dominant paradigm in terrorism studies posits that terrorists are rational actors…According to this view, terrorists are political utility maximizers; people use terrorism when the expected political gains minus the expected costs outweigh the net expected benefits of alternative forms of protest.”

There is a wealth of research, however, that identifies other incentive structures for individuals.

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wishing to become terrorists; the main alternatives to political benefit include social and religious incentives.\(^{10}\)

For example, terrorists operate via propaganda of the deed; that is, the message they wish to send is often embodied in the attack itself.\(^{11}\) If the social cohesion of the group were valued more highly than other factors, the act of planning, preparing for and finally carrying out an attack would serve a purpose beyond the political implications of the attack. The act itself is an external validation of the bonds formed between members. A terrorist attack can also serve the organization in a different way, as a reinforcing mechanism to solidify alliances between two groups, if the target is of particular political or symbolic importance to one or both of the allied groups.

In sum, terrorist organizations make rational decisions based on cost-benefit analyses and strive to maximize a given utility, which may not necessarily be political power. Furthermore, terrorist organizations inherently understand that survival is the central goal and take measures to ensure their self-perpetuation through the use of terrorist acts in order to propagandize, recruit, and build social cohesion within the group. Given this we can make several assertions regarding the behavior of terrorist organizations. First, the group’s survival will be foremost amongst its goals and therefore considerations regarding survival will drive behavior. Secondly, terrorist organizations will act on decisions only after conducting a cost-benefit analysis of the situation. And finally, these same organizations are driven by a desire to maximize a certain utility that can be political, social, or economic in nature. Using these three principles as a baseline, the


following sections develop a framework for understanding why terrorist groups would be interested in forming alliances and how they might be expected to behave, once allied.

2. **AL QAEDA’S NETWORK STRUCTURE**

   There is an abundance of literature in response to the question *what is al-Qaeda?* Much of this literature focuses on identifying the decentralized, cellular nature of the group and emphasizes the fact that al-Qaeda is less a traditional organization than a movement, with disparate strands and various nodes all linked in some way. According to Jason Burke, “together these links, some tenuous, some more direct, allow us to speak of a loose ‘network of networks.’ This is not an ‘al-Qaeda network.’ It is a way of describing those elements within the broad movement of Islamic militancy who have some connections to the ‘al-Qaeda hardcore’ however varied and indistinct.” Scholarly debates over what al-Qaeda is exactly are beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is general agreement among leading terrorist scholars as to the existence of four generally defined parts, or pieces, that comprise the organizational structure of the greater “al-Qaeda” phenomenon. For the purposes of this paper, these components are briefly outlined in order to gain an understanding of who belongs to the al-Qaeda network and where potential allies, like AQIM, fit into the puzzle.

   The *al-Qaeda hardcore* or *al-Qaeda central* (AQ central, herein) refers to the close-knit group of militants that joined bin Laden in Afghanistan during the period 1996-2001 and those who arrived in the post 9/11 period. They are considered to be al-Qaeda’s ‘heavy hitters,’ and

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14 Ibid., 13.
have included Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed and Abu Hamza, to name a few. Generally thought to be operating out of Pakistan’s border region, they fulfill the loosely realized command and control function within the group.\textsuperscript{15} They are its senior leadership, sometimes referred to as AQSL (al-Qaeda senior leadership).

Thinking of al-Qaeda in terms of concentric circles, with AQ central at the core, the next ring is composed of \textit{al-Qaeda affiliates} (also called \textit{franchises}). These are the established, independent, local groups that can be classified under the larger al-Qaeda umbrella. Although there is debate as to how much assistance they receive from AQ central, they are thought to benefit in some way from bin Laden and his core, whether it be guidance, arms, training or finance.\textsuperscript{16} As Jason Burke points out, however, to conceive of the affiliates as evidence that “there is an international network of active groups answering to bin Laden is wrong.”\textsuperscript{17} These groups are not under the direct control of AQ central but instead are motivated by their own, local agenda. They are “homegrown, organized Islamist terror groups with nationalist objectives. Their members are often al-Qaeda operatives from training camps, the Afghanistan War, or other al-Qaeda battlefields, and are known to communicate with al-Qaeda’s command structure.”\textsuperscript{18} Organizations like al-Qaeda in Iraq, Laskar-e-Taiba in Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and AQIM in Algeria are all considered to be AQ affiliates. The constraints and benefits of the relationship between these groups and AQ central, evaluated here in terms of an alliance system, are the main focus of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{17} Burke, Jason. \textit{Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror}. 14.
The third component of the al-Qaeda network are the affiliated units\textsuperscript{19} or cells\textsuperscript{20} that act on behalf of the global al-Qaeda agenda and who typically have some connection with AQ central. Cells are characterized by their size, anonymity and lack of association with an established insurgent group or terrorist organization. These attributes, and the fact that cells are not working towards local government upheaval,\textsuperscript{21} set them apart from the affiliated groups.\textsuperscript{22} Bruce Hoffman identifies a fourth dimension of the al-Qaeda network as the individuals throughout the world with no direct connection to AQ central, its affiliates, or an individual cell, but who are inspired to action by al-Qaeda’s ideological platform.\textsuperscript{23} These four elements, when taken together as a whole, constitute ‘al-Qaeda.’

3. ALIGNMENT VERSUS ALLIANCE

Indian expert M.J. Gohel, has said that “it is important to understand that what is referred to as the ‘Al Qaeda network’ is in reality a conglomerate of a number of terror groups and their cells, of varying autonomy but who share a common ideology and who cooperate with each other.”\textsuperscript{24} Cooperation based on belief in a common ideology forms the basis of Glenn Snyder’s definition of alignment, which he asserts is based on expectations of support or opposition in future interactions, and is a function of opposition as well as cooperation (in his words, alignments can be “against” or “with”).\textsuperscript{25} He writes, “two states that are threatened by the same adversary will each expect defensive help from the other, since they have a common interest in

\textsuperscript{20} According to Schanzer, “cells are small, autonomous clusters of al-Qaeda operatives that may either be dormant or active in a host country.” Schanzer, Jonathan. \textit{Al-Qaeda’s Armies}. 23.
\textsuperscript{22} Examples of cells include: the Hamburg cell responsible for 9/11; Mohammad Sidique Khan’s cell responsible for the 7/11 bombings in London and Ahmed Ressam’s cell responsible for the LAX New Year’s plot.
\textsuperscript{25} Snyder, Glenn. \textit{Alliance Politics}. 6.
preventing the adversary from gaining power.”

However, patterns of alignment are just that: patterns. They are not guarantees of action, nor are they realized sets of agreements based on mutually agreed to conditions. Simply because two states are aligned against an enemy based on a common ideology, military interest or ethnic/religious makeup, does not guarantee that one will come to the other’s defense.

The same is true of non-state actors. The global pattern of alignment created in the aftermath of September 11th has states, particularly western democracies led by the United States, on one side and the militant Islamist movement, to which al-Qaeda belongs, on the other. Within the al-Qaeda organizational structure outlined above, each of the various components are connected to one another based on general principles of alignment: that they are each fighting against a common enemy (the ‘near enemy’ of local, apostate regimes and the ‘far enemy’ consisting of western nations like the US); towards a common goal (resurgence of a pure form of Islam); and in a similar manner (jihad through terrorism, at times insurgency) means that they have generally defined interests in working together. However, based on these alignments alone there are no formal agreements whereby AQ central must come to the aid, either logistically or operationally, of any of the components mentioned above (or vice versa). Thus, as with states, terrorist alignments are non-binding.

In this context, the development of al-Qaeda affiliates and franchises can be viewed as the natural result of alignment. Individual groups within this sub-set are aligned with AQ central to varying degrees. In the most extreme cases, the affiliates actually merge with al-Qaeda, as in the case discussed below; in this instance the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (known by its French acronym GSPC) announced a merger with al-Qaeda in 2006, thus becoming al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Because the group retained its original command and control

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26 Snyder, Glenn. Alliance Politics. 6.
structure, as well as its local agenda for the most part, the merger is less a case of the group being subsumed into al-Qaeda than it is an example of a formal agreement between AQIM and AQ central. The term “merger,” therefore, is a misnomer since it inadequately defines the relationship between the two groups. In a typical merger, one group essentially disappears, having been absorbed into the larger organization. The GSPC did not disappear, nor was it absorbed by al-Qaeda central. Instead, al-Qaeda central and the GSPC, both acting as independent entities, made official, public declarations of cooperation. This is alignment taken to the next level. In traditional international relations theory, this is typically thought of as a formal alliance. According to Snyder, “formal alliances are simply one of the behavioral means to create or strengthen alignments…. Formal alignments introduce a sense of obligation not present in tacit alignments.”

In 2008 The New York Times conducted an interview with AQM emir Abdelmalek Droukdal, whose statements regarding cooperation between the two groups are insightful. When answering the question “why did you join Al Qaeda?” Droukdal responds:

Why shouldn’t we join Al Qaeda? God ordered us to be united, to be allied, to cooperate and fight against the idolaters in straight lines. The same way they fight us in military allies and economic and political mass-groupings…. An ally is faced by another ally, and unity is faced by unity…. The joining was a legitimate necessity…. It was a mindful necessity imposed by the actual reality and the international system.

Later, when asked to identify any assistance provided by al-Qaeda, Droukdal answers: “It’s normal that they [al-Qaeda] get stronger by us and we get stronger by them. They back us up and we back them up. They supply us and we supply them with any kind of support, loyalty, advice and available support.” Based on these statements it is clear that Droukdal himself views his

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29 Ibid.
group’s relationship with al-Qaeda in terms of a formal, traditional alliance. That is, there are expectations of support, as he mentions, and mechanisms for cooperation that transcend those based on principles of alignment. The ways in which this alliance is reinforced through behavior will be discussed in detail below. However, a brief discussion of AQIM’s financing strategy may help define its position as a formal ally of al-Qaeda by contrasting this relationship with that of AQIM and narco-traffickers currently pushing goods through North Africa to Europe.

AQIM continues to finance its operations much the same way it did as the GSPC, through kidnapping for ransom, racketeering, arms trafficking, contraband smuggling (particularly of cigarettes), and its European cells. While AQIM surely benefits in some way financially from its alliance with al-Qaeda central, the extent of this funding is questionable. In light of this, recent reports have indicated that AQIM has teamed up with South American drug cartels in order to provide protection in the form of armed security escorts for the narco-traffickers as they move their goods through the Saharan desert north towards Europe. According to US officials, the “traffickers use the Sahara as a staging post for flying illegal drugs from South America into Europe and that AQIM could also tap into the smugglers’ network of aircraft and secret landing strips.” This clandestine fleet of aircraft has been nicknamed “Air al-Qaeda” and is purported to shuttle shipments of cocaine and arms from Latin America to the Saharan desert.

Cooperation between AQIM and the drug smugglers is based on convenience; the narco-traffickers gain protection from people familiar with the region while AQIM gains much needed

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33 Ibid.
sources of income, potentially weapons, and a potent weapon with which it can tap into a pool of
recruits interested more in financial aggrandizement than ideology.

There have been no formal declarations of cooperation, nor is it likely that one group
could influence the actions of the other. Furthermore, because the cooperation is essentially a
marriage of convenience, there are most likely not expectations of support or action in times of
need. Compare this to a recent example of the influence exerted by al-Qaeda central on AQIM’s
behavior. Ransoming kidnapped hostages, particularly although not exclusively western ones,
has always been a profitable business for terrorists in Algeria. Since hostages are worth more
alive than dead, many analysts were stumped by AQIM’s decision to execute British tourist
Edward Dyer in May 2009 because it did not fit their usual modus operandi. One expert suggests
that it was done only under “direct pressure” from al-Qaeda central who felt it necessary to
“retaliate against the ‘Crusader’s’ crimes.”

Al-Qaeda central has a specific interest in nurturing these relationships: if, beyond the
hardcore center, or senior leadership, the al-Qaeda periphery is indeed a movement rather than an
organization, outside of its alliances AQ central has very little ability to project power. More
specifically, the al-Qaeda affiliates provide the senior leadership with the capability to “go into
areas where it [al-Qaeda] has no natural presence and be successful in forwarding its agenda.”
Furthermore, following the declaration of a formal merger or alliance between al-Qaeda and the
local affiliate, media reports often focus on the presence of al-Qaeda in a country where it was
not thought to operate previously. The alliance thus adds an important propaganda component to
al-Qaeda’s campaign, making it appear more operationally capable and far-reaching than it
would appear otherwise. The extant literature in this vein takes the local groups’ incentive for

allying with al-Qaeda for granted. The following is a discussion of why and how terrorist groups form alliances, and is geared toward analyzing the various environmental and structural components that might drive formal decisions to cooperate.

4. WHY TERRORIST GROUPS FORM ALLIANCES

So why would a terrorist organization, typically clandestine and insular by nature, decide to form an alliance with another organization? If we accept that terrorists are rational actors, then the answer lies somewhere in the three principles outlined above. We can assume, for instance, that the organization’s leadership has conducted a cost-benefit analysis, and therefore the benefits received from allying outweigh the cost of staying independent. Furthermore, because terrorists are utility maximizers, alliances can be discussed in terms of what utility they effect: fame, prestige, operational capability, etc. And finally, because terrorist organizations are necessarily concerned first and foremost with survival, the alliance must in some way positively impact, or be perceived as positively impacting, the group’s chances of survival. International relations theory holds that a state seeks security (and subsequently survival) through a variety of mechanisms, alliance formation being one way to balance power or threats. According to Snyder, “both logical reasoning and empirical observation suggest that alliances are more highly valued, and more likely to form, when their members have substantial

interests in common.” AQ central and its affiliates certainly have shared interests; all are interested in the resurgence of a more pure form of Islam, in a reduction of US world power and influence and in bringing Islamic governments to power around the globe. Where AQ central and its affiliates might diverge, however, is in the ordering of these priorities. Whereas AQ central views the toppling of apostate Muslim regimes as a stepping stone in the global jihad, local groups’ platforms are reversed, in that their nationalist battles are foremost, with concerns of the global jihad coming second. Although this divergence may have long term consequences for the health of the local group, as will be shown in the case of AQIM, it appears to be only a minor hiccup in the initial decision to ally.

Another possible motivation for cooperating is alliance restraint. For non-state actors, as for states, “an alliance can generate leverage over the partner via the implicit or explicit threat to withdraw. Beyond this, the alliance gives one some entrée into the ally’s decision making through a norm of consultation.” As a mechanism of control, alliances can be a potentially potent tool for non-state actors that normally tend to have little direct control over another’s actions and decision. The same decentralized, networked model that lends itself to waging a global jihad is also inherently difficult to control. Through the creation of formal alliances with several of the stronger currents in the network, al-Qaeda’s senior leadership is able to exert a level of influence that it would not otherwise have. AQIM’s murder of hostage Edward Dyer, mentioned above, at the behest of al-Qaeda central is testament to this fact. Accordingly, “the motivation for forming the alliance is not always a two-way street. Often only one party is trying

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to restrain the other. That means the other ally (or soon to be ally) may have an entirely different motivation for forming the alliance.\footnote{Pressman, Jeremy. Warring Friends. 20.}

This “other motivation” can be identified as an attempt to maximize a utility, or more broadly, gain power. Sources of power for terrorists differ from those for states, in that they are not always quantitative. In other words size - of military forces, of controlled land, of economy - is not always fungible. Holding large swathes of land, for example, is not necessarily appealing to the tight-knit terrorist organization that does not have the political mechanisms in place to control or govern it. Furthermore, a large arsenal of weapons, while desirable, does not generally equate to power for a terrorist since great harm can be inflicted using repurposed items (airplanes for example) and rudimentary bombs can be made in a living room. And finally, terrorism is cheap, as bin Laden illustrated by spending just $500,000 to conduct the September 11th attack.\footnote{CNN.com. “9/11 panel: al-Qaeda planned to Hijack 10 Planes.” 17 January 2004.}

For terrorist groups functioning via propaganda of the deed, publicity and fame often serve as primary sources of power in order to generate recruitment and instill fear. Therefore, organizations wishing to reach a larger audience, boost recruitment or increase their worldwide prestige might ally with al-Qaeda in order to acquire more power. For AQ central, power may be defined in different terms. Bruce Hoffman identifies three ways in which support for affiliate groups has aided bin Laden in achieving his own goals:

First, he sought to co-opt these movements’ mostly local agendas and channel their efforts toward the cause of global jihad. Second, he hoped to create a jihadist “critical mass” from these geographically scattered, disparate movements that would one day coalesce into a single, unstoppable force. And third, he wanted to foster a dependency relationship whereby as a quid pro quo for precious al Qaeda support, these movements would either undertake attacks at al-Qaeda’s behest or provide essential local, logistical, and other support to facilitate strikes by the al Qaeda “professional” cadre [AQ central].\footnote{Hoffman, Bruce. Inside Terrorism. 286.}
In this example, and in the al-Qaeda narrative more generally, the personal agenda of an individual (bin Laden) is critical to the development of the group and its policies.

5. HOW TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS FORM ALLIANCES

Terrorist organizations in general tend to be most influenced by the personalities of leaders. In the language of IR theorists, the actions of a terrorist organization can most easily be analyzed in terms of Kenneth Waltz’s first image, or level-of-analysis: that of the individual or decision-maker. In this regard, the personalities of leaders are more important in terrorist organizations than states because there are few checks and balances to a leader’s power and very rarely are there bureaucracies present to challenge a leader’s decision. In this respect, individual relationships between terrorists are often the catalyst for a formal alliance. This was the case regarding the alliance between al-Qaeda and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and is also apparent in the case of AQIM more recently.

There are also organizational, or second image, influences in the formation of alliances. These include the shared interests mentioned above but also interest in acquiring capabilities. For the affiliate this may mean receiving funds or inspiration. For AQ central this most likely has more to do with appearing to be able to fight the ‘near’ and ‘far’ enemy simultaneously, thus projecting greater operational capability than actually, technically exists. This level-of-analysis also raises some interesting questions. For example, how does network structure affect alliances? Are independent affiliates now allied to one another as well as AQ central? If so, is there an expectation of support (or the potential for conflict) between, say, AQIM and al-Qaeda’s East African wing in Somalia? These questions are outside the scope of this paper, but provide a template for further research in the field.

Finally, there are international, or systemic, level influences encouraging alliance between terrorist organizations. Despite their status as non-state actors, terrorist organizations are obviously influenced by trends in the international system. Al-Qaeda itself can be argued as a product of bipolar, Cold War tensions, and globalization has played a central role in the spread of both terrorism and radical Islamist ideology. Furthermore, regional wars encourage cooperation between non-state actors, with Afghanistan and Iraq currently the premiere examples.

Furthermore, a by-product of the war on terrorism has been a renewed interest by the United States and international bodies in places previously thought to be of little strategic value. For example, during the 1990’s a civil war raged in Algeria that pitted government forces against a popular radical Islamist movement that utilized torture and terrorism for nearly a decade. Yet the war garnered very little attention from the rest of the world. Today, following the events of September 11th, Algeria is one of the US’s top allies in the war against terrorism and receives large amounts of financial and military support in its fight against militant Islamists.

Furthermore, there is an increased presence of both US personnel and international security establishments in country. This change may have threatened AQIM’s ability to operate freely within the country and encouraged it to ally with al-Qaeda.

Mechanisms exist through which terrorist groups can solidify and reinforce alliances. Ely Karmon, in his work on coalitions between terrorist organizations, has identified three indices to measure cooperation: ideological, logistical and operational. For Karmon, these expressions of cooperation indicate varying levels of commitment to the alliance, with ideological representing the lowest level and operational being the most extreme form. These variables depend upon “the degree of intimacy between the organizations and the willingness of one organization to

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46 Ibid., 49-50.
take risks on the other’s behalf.” Desouza and Hensgen have identified four categories of behavior that solidify cooperation and reinforce alliances. They are the physical, information, knowledge and action exchanges that occur between groups. Bearing these metrics in mind, the following chapter analyzes the case of al-Qaeda ally AQIM in order to illustrate why and how alliances are formed.

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47 Ibid., 49.
CHAPTER II

CASE STUDY: AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The story of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a prescient one with implications reaching far beyond the confines of the group’s native Algeria. Policymakers and analysts alike are searching for a deeper understanding of the “new terrorism” ushered onto the world stage in the post-9/11 era.\(^{49}\) In this context, questions regarding the nature of al-Qaeda – is it an organization or a movement, a hierarchy or a conglomeration of independent nebulae more akin to transnational corporations? - have been extended to certain groups regarded as al-Qaeda affiliates. As one such affiliate, AQIM finds itself between a local and global imperative.

AQIM is currently the most credible, and most publicized, terrorist organization operating in the Maghreb and Sahel regions of Northwest Africa. In an attempt to understand the threat that militant Islam poses to the individual countries of the Maghreb, to the stability of the region as a whole, to the European Union, and finally the United States, it is necessary to disaggregate the numerous groups currently operating in the region. There is a tendency to lump the jihadist groups of the Maghreb under one banner, with AQIM at the fore due to its heightened visibility, leading to confusion over estimates of strength, man-power and resources. Therefore, disaggregating the threat may result in an entirely different picture. For example, Morocco has had tremendous success in its counter-terrorism programs since the 2003 Casablanca bombings. Although these successes have been considered a blow to AQIM,\(^{50}\) in

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reality there is little evidence that they have significantly impacted AQIM in any way. Moroccan counter-terrorism efforts have been focused on two groups that are Moroccan in origin, both with few reliable ties to AQIM.51 Thus, Morocco’s successes do not significantly impact the operational capability of AQIM. These nuances are often glossed over in favor of a homogenous reading of the various jihadist groups in the Maghreb that tends to conflate the threat posed by radical Islamists in the region.

AQIM was borne out of Algeria’s civil war of the 1990’s, begun when the military wing of the ruling National Front for Liberation (FLN) stepped in to cancel the country’s first multi-party national elections in 1992, which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) were poised to win by a landslide.52 The military, terrified that a FIS win and subsequent Islamist government would signal an end to their back-door government control and unrestricted access to the coffers, stepped in and took control, nullifying the election results and outlawing the FIS. The more radical elements within the FIS, many of them having just returned from fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, took to the mountains and began waging a guerrilla war. In the beginning the Islamist insurgents had not only the support of the majority of the population, but also the moral and political right to govern. This would change by 1994, however, after FIS infighting resulted in a breakaway movement called the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The GIA was frustrated with the other armed groups’ strategy of guerrilla warfare and was convinced that a campaign of terror would sufficiently discredit the regime and cause them to implode. How wrong they were. The resulting levels of chaos and barbarity escalated the conflict to the point of no return. The GIA’s indiscriminate targeting of civilians led the Islamist movement as a whole to lose

legitimacy while, for their part, the government’s policy of infiltrating the armed groups and committing massacres then attributed to “Islamist terrorists” did nothing to win back the hearts and minds of the people.

In 1998 Hassan Hattab broke away from the GIA and formed the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Predilection et le Combat, or GSPC), the organization now known as AQIM. Hattab’s group was intent on regaining popular support and legitimacy by limiting its fight to the security services. However, despite Hattab’s efforts to keep the GSPC on track, more militant members of the group’s core leadership succeeded in sidelining his objectives; in 2001 Hattab resigned as Emir of the group and was replaced in quick succession by Nabil Sahrawi (KIA 19 June 2004) and finally Abu Mus’ab Abd al-Wadoud, aka Abdelmalek Droukdal, the current Emir.\(^53\)

Under Sahrawi, the GSPC claimed allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2003, however it was only after several years of negotiations between Droukdal and Iraq’s Abu Musab al-Zarqawi that the merger was made official, formally announced to the world on September 11, 2006 by one of al-Qaeda’s most prominent commanders, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The new name of the group, al-Qaeda in the lands of the Islamic Maghreb (alternately referred to simply as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM), appears to reference not only al-Qaeda central but also more specifically Zarqawi’s group in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers.

The organizational structure of the group did not change following the announcement. Algeria is split into nine geographic zones, or ‘military regions,’ each with its own Emir.\(^54\) As it stands, AQIM has retained the dispersed cellular structure of the GSPC. Beyond the regional zones, the group is divided along functional lines as well, in order to manage media, recruiting,

\(^{54}\) Hunt, Emily. “Counter-terrorism successes force Algerian militants to evolve.”
and communication between cells, for example. There is evidence that Droukdal has established a sub-group, called the Organization of al Qaeda in the Land of the Berbers, in order to facilitate the flow of fighters and new recruits to Iraq. AQIM does not appear to have any branches in other parts of the world. However when the GSPC formed in the late 1990’s it took control of the GIA’s well-established European cells and networks, which provided financial and material support to the group in Algeria while maintaining operational autonomy. There is every reason to believe that these European cells continue to operate in support of AQIM following the merger and remain a significant source of funding.

There are several obvious difficulties inherent in estimating the number of current AQIM members, but there does seem to be consensus regarding trends in membership growth. At its inception in 1998, the GSPC had between 500 and 1,000 members. By 2002 that number had swelled to roughly 4,000. More recent estimates put the numbers today anywhere from 300 to 500, with the majority of fighters located in the Kabilya region east of Algiers. Several factors contribute to the flux of membership. The most important is public support. When Hattab started the GSPC his insistence on targeting “legitimate” opponents, like corrupt government officials and the security services, increased public support and, by extension, recruitment. However, since Hattab’s exit from the group and its subsequent leadership’s hard-line approach, civilian deaths particularly among “innocent” Algerians have increased. With memories still fresh of the massacres of whole towns at the hands of the GIA, domestic support has receded. Sheikh Yahya,

55. Johnson, Thomas H. “An Introduction to a Special Issue of Strategic Insights: Analyses of the Groupe Salafiste our la Predication et le Combat (GSPC).”
58. Evans, Martin. Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed. 260
59. Johnson, Thomas H. “An Introduction to a Special Issue of Strategic Insights: Analyses of the Groupe Salafiste our la Predication et le Combat (GSPC).”
60. Mekhennet, Souad. “Ragtag insurgency gains a lifeline from Al Qaeda.” See also: Hunt, Emily. “Counter-terrorism successes force Algerian militants to evolve.”
a regional commander who surrendered in 2001, told Reuters that “the loss of popular support
has been the key factor behind AQIM’s defeat.”61 According to another former lieutenant,
Mourad Khettab, “We didn’t have enough weapons. The people didn’t want to join. And money,
we didn’t have enough money.”62 Other factors like increased employment opportunities63 and a
country wide government sponsored amnesty for fighters from the civil war willing to put down
their arms appear to be negatively affecting AQIM’s membership numbers.64

Algerian counter-terrorism efforts coupled with operational attrition from the use of
suicide bombers is also shrinking the rank and file, not to mention the leadership cadres.65
Furthermore, there have been several high-level defections from the group. Most notably, Hassan
Hattab and two of the original founding members of the FIS, Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj,
who have come out as vocal critics of the group and their attacks.66 In addition to these well-
respected former leaders of the Islamic struggle, religious leaders within Algeria have issued
fatwas urging members of AQIM to lay down their arms.67 Without new recruits, the group’s
ability to survive is threatened. Therefore, a key component of Droukdal’s decision to formally
ally with al-Qaeda central was most likely to tap into a new pool of recruits: those attracted by
the al-Qaeda brand. The formal merger of the GSPC with al-Qaeda in 2006 has led to a
perceived shift in operations and communications and the formal alignment could be used to
bolster recruitment among youth interested in taking part in the global jihad.

61 Chikhi, Lamine. “Analysis: Algeria violence drops, Qaeda threat shifts south.”
62 Mekhennet, Souad. “Ragtag insurgency gains a lifeline from Al Qaeda.”
63 Johnson, Thomas H. “An Introduction to a Special Issue of Strategic Insights: Analyses of the Groupe Salafiste
sur la Predication et le Combat (GSPC).”
65 On 7 October 2009 Mourad Louzai, responsible for communications between cells, was assassinated only weeks
after Bilal Abou Adnane, second in command of the western zone was killed by government forces.65 Himeur,
Mohamed Arezki. “Algeria confirms assassination of senior Al-Qaeda operative.”
66 Marret, Jean-Luc, PhD. “The GSPC/Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: a mix of low and high-tech capabilities.”
67 Chikhi, Lamine. “Analysis: Algeria violence drops, Qaeda threat shifts south.”
2. THE AL-QAEDA ALLIANCE: A NEW LEASE ON LIFE?

Al-Qaeda’s connection to Algeria can be dated to the first war in Afghanistan when a
number of Algerian men travelled there to fight the Soviet Union with the mujahideen under the
tutelage of Osama bin Laden. The foreign fighters under his command came to be known as the
Arab Afghans, with the Algerian contingent nicknamed les Afghans Algériens. Many of these
veterans returned home to an Algeria on the brink of civil war. Overtures by bin Laden (at this
time looking for a new home and seeing potential in the Atlas Mountains) were firmly denied by
Algerian groups in deference to, and as evidence of, their strong nationalist bent. According to
a former lieutenant quoted in the New York Times, Mourad Khettab claims that bin Laden
approached the insurgents around 1994 about moving his operational base to Algeria, but “We
refused, and said we don’t have anything to do with anything outside. We are interested in just
Algeria.” Bin Laden moved instead to the Sudan, but kept in contact with members of the
various Islamist groups within Algeria. By 1996, however, the GIA had declared all Algerians
kuffar (disbelievers) for their tacit support of the government; in the eyes of the jihadists, this
label meant that although Muslim, ordinary citizens were legitimate targets. The massacres that
followed caused the majority of al-Qaeda’s senior leadership to break ties with the group and
even bin Laden condemned the attacks, publicly stating that the GIA “had become deviant and
lost its reputation.”

By 2001, however, it appears that channels of communication had opened again between
the two groups. In an interview with the pan-Arab newspaper al-Hayat, GSPC founder Hassan

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Al-Qaeda’s Armies.
70 Mekhennet, Souad. “Ragtag insurgency gains a lifeline from Al Qaeda.”
Hattab credits bin Laden’s “increasing influence…over the movement at that time [2001] as causing rifts in the membership, and one of the factors behind his [Hattab’s] own decision to leave (these rifts were likely behind the confusion surrounding the GSPC’s support, or criticism, of bin Laden at the time of the 9/11 attacks).”

Hattab then continues by crediting bin Laden with urging the group to strike outside of Algeria in the greater Sahel region, a move that Hattab was firmly against. In a GSPC communiqué released by Hattab shortly after 9/11, the official GSPC objective was re-affirmed as, solely, “jihad against the Algerian regime.”

Hattab’s successors, Nabil Sahrawi and Abdelmalek Droukdal, were of a new school of militants: younger, more pan-jihad in their thinking, and thoroughly fascinated with the al-Qaeda narrative. In 2003 Sahrawi declared the GSPC’s allegiance to al-Qaeda and following his death Droukdal began courting Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Around this time the GSPC, at its height of power, used its considerable channels within Algerian society and the region as a whole to recruit fighters for Iraq, soon becoming the “regional hub.”

According to one report, US authorities believe that nearly a quarter of the suicide bombers in Iraq in 2005 were North African coming to Iraq via the GSPC. Shortly after Droukdal’s succession as emir, Abu Omar Abdul Bir, commander of the group’s media wing, gave an interview to al-Faath Magazine in which he discussed the greater global jihad:

Our mujahideen brothers in Iraq, al-Hijaz, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Palestine, Kashmir and elsewhere are the students of our allies and the crowns of our heads….Moreover they are a part of us. We are hurt if they are hurt; what makes them happy will also make us happy. Allah knows that we will sacrifice our blood

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73 Ibid.
75 Filiu, Jean-Pierre. “How Al-Qaeda Turned Algerian.”
76 Ibid.
and our lives for theirs….The GSPC is not limited by a narrow regional vision…

So what has been the effect of the merger on group dynamics? Several concrete changes to AQIM tactics and operations have occurred since. For one, targets have become more international in scope. According to Jonathan Schanzer, writing in 2004:

The *modus operandi* for the average al-Qaeda affiliate generally involves attacking Western targets on ‘home turf.’….Algeria’s GSPC, however, has not attacked Western targets inside Algeria. This is strange in that more than 40 countries maintain embassies in Algeria….Further, while the U.S. is not popular among the GSPC’s ranks, the historical lack of American involvement in Algeria has likely led the group to leave Washington out of its struggle for now.\(^78\)

Since his writing, however, the GSPC has formally allied with AQ central and its targets have included Chinese workers associated with a natural gas company; a bus filled with civilian contractors from Kellogg, Root and Brown, a subsidiary of Halliburton; and a devastating attack on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees headquarters in Algiers. The UN bombing, which killed 17 UN officials, was meant to evoke memories of the August 2003 attack on the UN mission in Iraq and symbolically connect the two struggles.\(^79\) The State Department noted the change in AQIM’s behavior in its 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism, indicating that previously, the…GSPC, now…AQIM, focused on targeting Algerian government interests and had been more averse to suicide attacks and civilian casualties. Although Algerian government interests remained the primary focus of AQIM [in 2008], the attack on the bus and an attack against French railroad workers confirmed AQIM’s intention to act on its public threats against foreigners. AQIM continued to diversify its tactics by importing tactics used in Iraq and Afghanistan.\(^80\)

\(^77\) Interview with Abu Omar Abdul Bir from the Media Wing of the Jamaah Salafiyah lid-Dawah wal Qital Combat (GSPC). Al-Faath Magazine. 31 January 2005.

\(^78\) Schanzer, Jonathan. *Al-Qaeda’s Armies*. 116-117.

\(^79\) Jebnoun, Noureddine PhD. “What is behind the December 11\(^{th}\) Bomb Attacks in Algiers?” Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University. http://ccas.georgetown.edu/88443.html

The UN attack is emblematic of two other trends associated with Al-Qaeda: suicide bombers and coordinated bombings. Simultaneous attacks are not new to Algeria: the FLN used them with a great degree of success during the liberation war, and the GSPC has used them numerous times in the past, often targeting multiple police stations at a time to wreak havoc.\textsuperscript{81} The use of suicide bombers, on the other hand, is a very new phenomenon and one that may not be sustainable in practice for AQIM.\textsuperscript{82} Several economists have indicated that the successful use of suicide bombers over time by an organization is contingent upon that organization providing for the well-being of the families left behind in addition to providing social services within society; the theory is known as the “club goods” model.\textsuperscript{83} AQIM does not provide any public goods or services that might be used as incentive to recruit suicide bombers, nor is there evidence that they provide for the families of martyrs.\textsuperscript{84} Furthermore, there is evidence indicating a certain level of deception that may be occurring during the recruitment process. Recruits are enlisted to go to Iraq, where they believe they will be trained in order to return to fight the jihad in Algeria, only to find upon arrival in Iraq that they are intended for suicide attacks there, instead. Alternatively, recruits are enlisted with the promise of being sent to Iraq, only to be absorbed into the local, Algerian network.\textsuperscript{85}

The use of suicide bombers has gone hand in hand with the increasing use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). VBIEDs first came onto the scene in Algeria around the time of the al-Qaeda merger which, coupled with the already detailed ties between

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\textsuperscript{83} Berman, Eli and David D. Laitin. 2005. “Hard Targets: Theory and Evidence on Suicide Attacks.”
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Iraqi jihadists and Algerian ones, makes a strong case for the transfer of knowledge and potentially experts from Iraq to Algeria. Droukdal has downplayed the presence of Iraq war veterans among AQIM cadres by saying that “what the media is promoting about the existence of a large proportion of fighters in Iraq that came back and joined us is wrong. But there is a limited and very small number of the mujahedeen brothers who fought in Iraq then came back and joined us.” Whether this is a more accurate portrayal of the situation or a case of nationalist pride is difficult to tell. There is a chance, however, that the numbers of foreign fighters from Iraq in Algeria could swell over time, as the United States continues to be successful in defeating the insurgency there. Stratfor analysts have noted that attacks in Algeria are increasingly carrying larger death tolls, arguing that this could indicate more competent IED design, thus enforcing the theory that bomb makers with experience in Iraq or Pakistan could be migrating to Algeria.

The influence of al-Qaeda on AQIM operations can also be seen in the increasing frequency of “spectacular” events, and their dissemination on web forums and jihadist websites. To date, the majority of AQIM operations have been small and frequent – a bomb here, an assassination there – often multiple attacks a week targeting security services in rural communities, very rarely videotaped or blogged about and conducted anonymously. Since allying themselves with AQ central, however, the group has increasingly conducted large-scale, urban attacks against government installations and high-profile international targets that have been heavily publicized and documented. The December 11, 2007 twin bombing of the UN headquarters and Algerian Constitutional Court in Algiers are an example of this trend. A home video of the attackers making the bombs was disseminated after the fact. Previously that same year, on March 11th, coordinated suicide attacks in Algiers hit the Prime Ministers office and a

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87 Stewart, Scott and Fred Burton “Algeria: Taking the Pulse of AQIM.”
88 For a comprehensive timeline of terrorist attacks in Algeria see: Alexander, Yonah. “Maghreb & Sahel Terrorism”
police station on the road to the airport; photographs of the “three martyrdom seekers of the lions of Islam” that conducted the attacks were published on AQIM’s website.\textsuperscript{89} The same goes for the December 10, 2006 attack on a bus filled with employees of Halliburton subsidiary BRC, marking the first time American interests were targeted in Algeria. A video of the attack was then aired on the internet.

There are downsides, however, to becoming a formal al-Qaeda ally. On the one hand, the re-branding may allow AQIM to tap into a network of “new school” recruits that are attracted to the image of al-Qaeda. On the other hand, the move may serve to divide the group strategically between the old school members who want to focus on Algeria, and the new school who consider Algeria a part of the broader global jihad. Furthermore, as described above, the intentional targeting of civilians is a contentious debate within militant Islamist circles in Algeria, particularly among the leadership who set strategy. According to Stewart, “a schism arose between members who favored the traditional GSPC target set and opposed killing civilians, and those members who were more heavily influenced by al-Qaeda and wanted to hit foreign and symbolic targets with little regard for civilian casualties.”\textsuperscript{90} AQIM will have to be very careful in its targeting and when conducting attacks in order to avoid appearing careless with civilian life; as evidenced by the demise of the GIA, a loss of public support could mean the end of AQIM in Algeria.

Finally, while the attention that affiliation with AQ central brings the group could be considered a boon for recruitment, the added attention has also brought about a great deal more pressure from an aggressive counterterrorism campaign launched by the Algerian government. Furthermore, since any mention of al-Qaeda is sure to bring about an increased US interest and


\textsuperscript{90} Stewart, Scott and Fred Burton “Algeria: Taking the Pulse of AQIM.” 3.
presence in the region, AQIM has suddenly found itself under enormous international scrutiny and increased pressure from Algerian security services, thus noticeably decreasing their ability to operate in Algeria with impunity. The result of Algerian counterterrorism successes can be viewed as having a “balloon effect” on the group: “pushing the group to move to new areas in response to local eradication campaigns.”\(^{91}\) Evidence of this effect is seen in AQIM’s increasing activity in the Sahel. Although AQIM represents the latest iteration of the militant Islamist faction within Algerian politics, they have expanded their reach in recent years to include operations in Mali, Niger, Chad, Tunisia and Mauritania. AQIM’s regional expansion would appear to be less a sign of rising popularity and more an indication that Algeria’s counterterrorism strategy has successfully forced the group to operate outside of its home country with increasing frequency.

3. AN APPRAISAL OF THE ALLIANCE

From the above analysis we can conclude that the alliance between the former GSPC/AQIM and al-Qaeda central was the result of the individual relationship between AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdal and al-Qaeda in Iraq’s leader Zarqawi, as well as a natural result of the organizational interests that AQIM shares with the larger al-Qaeda network. The alliance rests on the premise that it is beneficial to both parties. AQIM is able to maximize its fame and prestige by reaching a larger audience, as well as tap into a pool of new recruits attracted by the al-Qaeda name. Furthermore, aggressive counterterrorism measures have underscored the group’s “apparent inability to operate outside a relatively small rural region of Algeria.”\(^{92}\) In response, AQIM began conducting operations in the countries of the Sahel. In a propaganda

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\(^{91}\) Marret, Jean-Luc PhD. “Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A “Glocal” Organization.”

coup, the alliance with al-Qaeda provided AQIM with a timely excuse to legitimize this expansion: namely by claiming that it was part of AQIM’s new strategic objectives inspired by its adoption of al-Qaeda’s global jihadist platform.

Despite its appealing parsimony, an analysis of AQIM that focuses solely on the effect of its cooperation with al-Qaeda fails to recognize even stronger shifts occurring within the group, shifts that have their roots pre-9/11 and that are often influenced by local, not global, events. Despite a steady growth in operational capability since 2001, today AQIM remains a fringe terrorist organization with marginal popular support, susceptible to defection and vulnerable to aggressive counterterrorism measures.

The international community generally tends to interpret an affiliate’s alliance with al-Qaeda as a sign of strength. Strength both in terms of the affiliate’s influence in local affairs and strength in terms of al-Qaeda’s ability to have infiltrated countries around the globe. However, the case study above and the earlier discussion of alliance politics both seem to contradict this assumption. When cooperation between groups is discussed in terms of the functions and objectives of the alliance, it appears that the decision to cooperate was made more form a position of weakness than one of strength. AQIM appears to be attempting to draw strength and power from various external sources; in addition to the formal alliance with AQ central these outside sources include an increased reliance on the European network, the introduction of narco-trafficking and the group’s spread into the Sahel.

What sort of behavior reinforces formal alliances between terrorist organizations? Desouza and Hensgen have identified four types of exchanges that are used to solidify cooperation: physical, information, knowledge and action.93

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Physical exchanges between groups can be characterized by “the movement of a tangible resource, or terrorist movements toward a given resource like a safe haven.” Typically for al-Qaeda, these physical exchanges have taken the form of providing access to training camps in Afghanistan for members of allied groups. As documented above, the flow of Algerian fighters to Iraq also qualifies as a physical exchange reinforcing the boundaries of the alliance. Hypothetically, this flow of fighters could become a two-way street as the insurgency in Iraq winds down and as al-Qaeda/Taliban fighters in Afghanistan are continually pursued by US and NATO forces. AQIM operates several large training camps along the Mali-Mauritanian-Algerian border area that one would expect them to open up to foreign fighters exiting those wars.

Information exchanges are important to the livelihood of the terrorist organization as they target such areas as operational expertise, local knowledge, physical geography and intelligence. While it is difficult to know what information and intelligence is being shared between AQ central and AQIM, it is safe to assume that the formal alliance agreements between the two organizations include some form of shared communications channels.

Knowledge exchanges are more readily identifiable than information exchanges and several instances in the case of AQIM can be isolated. For example, shared knowledge about bomb making and IED construction between terrorists operating in Iraq and Algeria has resulted in increased competency on the Algerian side, resulting in more deaths per attack. Also important, and perhaps untenable, is the “development of a culture of domestic ‘martyrdom operations’, possibly a more significant challenge than the technical aspects of suicide attacks, [and] probably facilitated by the association with al-Qaeda.”

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*Action exchanges* include cooperation in preparing and executing attacks. There is evidence of AQIM sending a number of fighters to Iraq to engage in suicide bombers there, however there have been no cases of al-Qaeda’s senior leadership captured while working in Algeria, thus questioning whether this exchange works both ways. Another example of a reinforcing action exchange might be Zarqawi’s targeting of two Algerian diplomats and several French nationals in Iraq during 2005 in a show of support for AQIM. There is evidence that the former GSPC issued a communiqué requesting Zarqawi target the French in Iraq prior to these attacks. These exchanges can be symbolic, as well, and still function as a reinforcing mechanism. On 11 December 2007 AQIM bombed the UN headquarters in Algiers in an attack that bore a striking resemblance to Zarqawi’s 19 August 2003 attack on the UN compound in Baghdad. Thus the groups remain linked through deed as through word.

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CHAPTER III
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. THE POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT

Within even the most amicable of alliances there lies the potential for conflict. Positively identifying the sources of these conflicts should be a top priority for counterterrorism officials, as they can be exploited to the disadvantage of the terrorist organization. It follows from the preceding analysis that one ally might become disillusioned with the cooperation agreement when the benefits no longer outweigh the costs of being allied. This could mean several things for a group like AQIM.

*Internally,* the formal alliance has caused a divide within the group, detailed above, that could result in the formation of splinter groups or in an extreme case, the disintegration of the group as a whole. The first scenario is far more likely in the short term, given the historical context: the GIA and the GSPC both originated as splinter groups following major riffs within the militant Islamist movement in Algeria. The schisms in AQIM stem directly from its formal alliance with al-Qaeda. The decision to target foreign interests in Algeria and to expand into the Sahel are both examples of AQIM adopting a strategy more in line with al-Qaeda’s vision of global jihad than with the traditional, Algerian-centric, nationalist strategy that has long been at the core of the Algerian Islamist movement. As illustrated above, this has split the group between those favoring strategic incorporation of the ‘far enemy’ and those that believe the fight should be limited, as it has been traditionally, to the ‘near enemy.’

At a tactical level, the formal alliance between the groups has resulted in AQIM adopting the operational techniques of al-Qaeda, particularly al-Qaeda in Iraq, most likely in an effort to...
show solidarity and solidify channels of cooperation. Domestically, however, these tactics may induce a popular backlash against the group that could effect recruitment. The use of ‘spectaculars,’ long an AQ central signature, often cause indiscriminate civilian deaths, which Algerians are particularly sensitive to given the levels of terrorism and brutality that were present in the country not more than a decade before. Also contributing to increased numbers of civilian casualties is the use of VBIED’s, a trademark of al-Qaeda in Iraq, and only employed by AQIM following the alliance. Perhaps the most domestically untenable tool that AQIM has ‘borrowed’ since the alliance, however, is the use of suicide bombers. Employing young men in acts of martyrdom without the necessary methods in place to care for the families has created a culture of distrust within Algeria, as explained above.

In the long run, therefore, the domestic objectives of the alliance for AQIM (increasing recruitment and operational ability) may be co-opted by the functional requirements of cooperating with al-Qaeda central. This could lead the group to conclude that the resulting internal benefits of allying are eclipsed by the net cost of association. Whether this conclusion ends in AQIM breaking with al-Qaeda central is difficult to say, and perhaps only time can tell. However, the benefits that AQIM has received outside of the domestic environment, may give us a clue as to its future behavior.

Externally, it would appear that the benefit of allying with al-Qaeda is working in AQIM’s favor. By associating itself with the group it has exponentially increased its media attention, fame and prestige, all three identified in the earlier section as sources of power for terrorist organizations. Conflict could arise, however, if the alliance no longer provides these benefits. The most natural way for this to occur would be the discrediting of al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda central, or al-Qaeda’s senior leadership in the eyes of the affiliates that would lead to a devaluing
of the fame and prestige currently stemming from association. This process may already be in
motion and is dependent upon the success of US and allied forces in Afghanistan. Already there
is evidence that the US presence in Afghanistan and its war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda has
pushed the senior leadership into a compromised position in Pakistan, from which it has limited
ability to project influence over the affiliated groups, units and cells around the world. Having
shifted in recent years from a potent force, organizationally capable of masterminding and
carrying out the September 11th attacks, the al-Qaeda senior leadership now appears to be serving
more of an inspirational, figurehead role. If they are subsequently caught, captured or killed by
the US (or desperate Taliban or Pakistan’s intelligence services), the effect may be a diminished
level of prestige associated with belonging to the al-Qaeda movement.

The power vacuum created by these events already in motion may be producing another
effect: that of competition between al-Qaeda central’s allies, each potentially positioning itself as
the natural successor to the throne. Competition between allies is common among states and in a
terrorist network where publicity and fame equate to power, being perceived as the strongest al-
Qaeda affiliate is naturally important. AQIM has several reasons to believe it is in the running
for succession. For starters, Algerians are one of the largest nationalities represented in al-Qaeda,
outnumbered only by Saudis and Yemenis.98 The group has legitimacy by claiming roots in
Algeria’s jihad of the 1990’s and has proved itself operationally capable of hitting both large and
small targets within the country. Physically, the group operates large swathes of unpatrolled land
in the south of the country that are being used as training camps. There is evidence that AQIM
has been reaching out to other regional groups in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya, perhaps in an
effort to co-opt the groups and become the undisputed leader of militant Islam in the region. The

Watch #1034. 28 September 2005.

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channels of communication and flow of fighters between Algeria and Iraq could become extremely important following a potential US victory over al-Qaeda in Iraq. Could Algeria, under the careful direction and planning of AQIM, become the next Afghanistan? Maybe. Maybe not. Emily Hunt writes that “The connections these Algerians made in Afghanistan span the globe, while the weakening of the original al-Qaeda leadership has created an opportunity for local “franchise” groups to take the initiative in global jihad.”

Long-term goals like these could be derailed by an increased US interest in cooperating with Algerian officials in counterterrorism efforts. As mentioned earlier, Algeria is one of the United States’ most important regional allies, and interest in the country from a US perspective escalated from indirect support in the general war on terror to direct support in combating a threat to US national security following the formal alliance between AQ central and AQIM. Increased attention from the United States and international security establishments has resulted in difficult operating environments for terrorists in the past. Added attention like this could directly increase the costs associated with an al-Qaeda alliance.

Recent threats made by AQIM, however, indicate that it may be thinking seriously about the lack of action from al-Qaeda’s senior leadership, their relative weakness thanks to US military efforts, and the potential for advancement within jihadist circles. If AQIM is a rising power, then, it has to compete with other AQ allies in order to prove its worth. Taken in this light, the recent threats AQIM made about targeting British and US games at the South African World Cup in 2010 could be less about anger towards the US and Britain and more about proving that it can fill a leadership position within the global Salafi jihad. This is a plausible explanation given that the threats diverge completely from AQIM’s standard operating

100 Hughes, Simon. “Al-Qaeda: We’ll Blitz World Cup.” The Sun, 10 April 2010.
procedures and traditional *modus operandi*. Whether or not the group has the capability to carry
off a truly ‘spectacular’ attack like that is questionable. But the announcement appears to have
gotten a rise out of al-Qaeda’s other African ally, al-Shabaab, who shortly after the threat was
announced proceeded to issue its own threat.\(^\text{101}\) Is it possible we are witnessing the start of a
competition to fill the vacuum created by a neutered al-Qaeda senior leadership? The potential
exists.

2. CONCLUSION

Further research is needed to fully explore and refine this model. Case studies of
other groups associated with al-Qaeda should be conducted in order to provide quantitative data
regarding the decision-making process behind alliance formation. On that note, further research
into terrorist organization’s decision-making processes in general would be useful in order to
identify mechanisms used outside of traditionally conceived cost/benefit analyses and economic
conceptions of utility maximization. Studies conducted on the interactions between terrorist
groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, like AQIM and al-Shaabab, and the potential for conflict
stemming from competition, would be insightful as well.

This thesis has laid out an alternative method for analyzing the issue of al-Qaeda
affiliates by classifying them not as franchises but as traditional alliance partners, with their own
agendas, preferences and sources of power. Through the examination of a case study, al-Qaeda
in the Islamic Maghreb, it becomes clear that the relationship previously conceived of as a
merger is in fact more in line with an alliance agreement. It is possible to conclude, therefore,
that when disaggregated from the network as a whole, the individual relationships between al-

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Qaeda central and its affiliates resemble traditional alliances that carry their own system of risks, constraints and benefits unique to terrorist organizations.