

# Al-Qaeda's Keys to Success

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Over the past 20 years, al-Qaeda has been the most recognizable and infamous terrorist organization on the planet. The group has planned and executed thousands of violent attacks, spurred dozens of offshoot affiliate and copycat groups, and even created rival Islamic extremist organizations. Despite all this, and subsequently spending the past 20 years at war with the world's most effective militaries, the group continues to carry out its operations. Moreover, the success of foreign al-Qaeda affiliates illustrate that the group has become a global threat. Analyzing the tools that the organization has used to succeed will give us a better understanding of how to combat al-Qaeda. Perhaps more importantly, it will also help intelligence agencies recognize what strategies the group will likely employ in the future. There are some who argue that al-Qaeda is dying. In this article, I argue that not only is it far from dead, but that the main factors contributing to al-Qaeda's continued global success are decentralization, effective narratives and propaganda, and the specific targeting of locations with a preexisting history of instability and violence.

This article will use three al-Qaeda affiliates and allies—al-Shabaab, Ansar al-Dine (AAD), and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) — to demonstrate each of the above listed success factors. However, before we can discuss how al-Qaeda has achieved their success, we must first define success. If success is to be defined as the completion of each organization's stated goals, none of them have yet succeeded. For example, "For Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) . . . the goal is to overthrow regimes in North Africa, especially Algeria, and replace them with an Islamic regime."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, if one takes the global end-state as described by al-Qaeda's once-spiritual and now operational leader Ayman al-Zawahiri: "It is the hope of the Muslim nation to restore its fallen caliphate and regain its lost glory,"<sup>2</sup> then al-Qaeda has not come even close to accomplishing its goal. AQIM has been unable to topple the Algerian government, and, along with AAD, it failed to topple the government in Mali in 2012 despite its attempt to hijack the Tuareg rebellion. As for the global al-Qaeda movement, it remains a disparate and decentralized entity, rather than a "restored" and unified caliphate as imagined by al-Zawahiri. To examine al-Qaeda's successes, one must recognize that, despite not achieving its stated political goals, it has been able to achieve significant global disruption. Therefore, it is worth investigating how they have been successful in that sense, despite the efforts of much stronger opponents. For the purposes of this article, I will define success using three criteria: relative free-

dom to carry out violent attacks with low probability of state interference, steady sources of recruitment and resupply, and a high probability of continued survival of the group and its leaders. I will show that, due to the success factors listed above, al-Qaeda as a global organization has been and will continue to be successful.

## **Decentralization**

The first key to al-Qaeda's success is its ability to operate in a decentralized fashion. Currently, it has a global network of affiliates, allies, and supporters across the planet, including at least five major regional affiliates and more than 14 allied terrorist groups.<sup>3</sup> However, this was not always the case. Before 2001, al-Qaeda was a more centralized organization with most of the operational control falling under Osama Bin Laden. Then, as pressure from the US and its allies mounted, the organization was forced to adapt and change how they did business. "In the following years (after 2001), al-Qaeda adapted to increased pressure, especially from the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Pakistan, by further decentralizing its decision-making and operational planning. Bin Laden recognized regional groups that became their own centers of operation."<sup>4</sup> As it evolved, its focus naturally shifted to a more decentralized operational model. It began to create affiliates, like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), AQIM, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and allowed them to carry out attacks autonomously, establish interactions among themselves, and set up further alliances in still more regions and countries.

Before continuing, it is important to identify the nature of the connections that largely comprise the global al-Qaeda network. Broadly, the organization can be split into four categories: al-Qaeda Central, affiliates, allied groups, and inspired networks. al-Qaeda Central is the group's leadership nexus commanded by Ayman al-Zawahiri that is mostly located in Pakistan. One can argue which organizations fall into the categories of affiliated groups and which are merely allies but, in general, affiliates are formal yet geographically separated branches of al-Qaeda. AQIM, AQIS, AQAP, and Al Shabab all fall into this category. Third are the allied groups "that have established a direct relationship with Al Qaeda but have not become formal members. This arrangement allows the groups to remain independent and pursue their own goals, but to work with Al Qaeda for specific operations or training purposes when their interests converge."<sup>5</sup> Finally, there are the inspired groups that do not have any formal contact with al-Qaeda, but have been inspired by the message, actions, or branding of al-Qaeda as a whole.

All these entities have ties of varying degrees to al-Qaeda Central. Furthermore, all these entities, particularly the affiliates, contribute to the overall success of greater al-Qaeda by virtue of their links to the organization. AAD falls into the

third category of al-Qaeda allied groups. Although al-Qaeda would classify it as an ally rather than an affiliate, according to the US State Department “AAD is an organization operating in Mali which cooperates closely with AQIM, a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization...AAD has received support from AQIM since its inception in late 2011 and continues to maintain close ties to the group. AAD has received backing from AQIM in its fight against Malian and French forces.”<sup>6</sup> This means that AAD has autonomy to carry out its own main objectives—fighting the French and local Malians—while still receiving training, funding, and legitimacy from their links to al-Qaeda.

How does this translate into a tool for success for the global al-Qaeda enterprise? In addition to making worldwide operations possible, decentralization can be effective in spreading the al-Qaeda brand. As Rohan Gunaratna in his book *Inside Al Qaeda* explains, “What gives al-Qaeda its global reach is its ability to appeal to Muslims irrespective of their nationality, giving it unprecedented reach. It can function in East Asia, in Russia, and the heart of Europe, in sub-Saharan Africa and throughout Canada and the US with equal facility.”<sup>7</sup> Working with allies like AAD means that the al-Qaeda brand is being carried to many countries and peoples. Furthermore, it is heightened by local individuals who coopt the message into their local context and carry the message to their towns and villages. This gives al-Qaeda global reach and influence that translates into recruitment potential and local support. Thus, providing AAD and, by consequence, al-Qaeda with one of the criteria of success: a steady source of recruitment and resupply.

Perhaps the best example of local context resulting in support for the larger al-Qaeda movement comes from the AAD subsidiary, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM). Although still a part of the AQIM organizational structure, the FLM maintains specific cultural and tribal associations, as it is primarily composed of members of the Fulani ethnic group. Though the FLM’s broad objectives remain the same as AAD and AQIM, its narrative and some of its unique objectives are shaped by the group’s affiliation with the Fulani ethnicity and tribal identity.<sup>8</sup> The name “Macina” is a reference to the Macina empire, which was a nineteenth-century Fulani imperial power in the Sahel. The FLM leans heavily on the backdrop of this historical empire for legitimacy, power, and support among disenfranchised Fulani, and AQIM is more than happy to use the same highly localized issues to benefit its overall objectives.<sup>9</sup>

However, arguably the greatest benefit of decentralization, whether through allies like AAD or regional affiliates like AQIM, is simple strength and resilience. This is vital to al-Qaeda networks worldwide. Although local fighters in are unlikely to commit transnational acts of terror, they carry the banner of al-Qaeda. By having a global network, al-Qaeda is stronger, harder to fight, and more tactically

and strategically effective. “Al-Qaeda’s expansion is made much more dangerous by the existence of such relationships...It is now sharing finances, fighters, and tactics across large geographic areas...the entire network is stronger”<sup>10</sup> This means that not only does decentralization aide in recruitment and spreading narrative, but it also gives the group greater freedom to carry out attacks in a myriad of locations while simultaneously protecting al-Qaeda leadership from the consequences of those attacks.

### **Conflict Locations**

The second way that al-Qaeda has found success stems from their desire to continue on the path toward decentralization. In their need to establish geographically distant affiliations and alliances, al-Qaeda has consistently chosen locations where there is a preexisting history of instability and violence. “Al Qaeda has flourished in an environment of weak or quasi-states that are undergoing disruptive political or social change. Vast swaths of political instability in many parts of the world, and particularly in Africa and Asia, have provided a breeding ground for al Qaeda and its analogues.”<sup>11</sup> These locations are rife with poor governance, armed groups, and militias not tied to the state and supplied with unregulated weapons. These conditions make for the perfect foundation of al-Qaeda success as defined above.

If one examines al-Qaeda’s main affiliates — AQAP, AQIS, AQIM, and Al Shabab — as well as most if its allies — like Ansar Dine and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham from Syria — they all came into being amid conditions of conflict and unrest in their respective locations. This is not to say that al-Qaeda has not set up cells and alliances in locations that are more stable. However, it is in conflict zones that the local al-Qaeda affiliates are the most successful. Thus, due to widespread war and civil conflict, Africa has presented a perfect target for al-Qaeda Central, which has been their breeding ground for over 30 years.

Why is it that conflict zones, especially internal civil wars like the ones that gave rise to AQAP, AQIM, AQI, and al-Shabaab, provide such fertile soil for al-Qaeda’s expansion? It may seem evident on the surface, but it nevertheless warrants some investigation. One of the most dangerous consequences of civil war is the weakening and potential dissolution of the power of the state and its institutions to ensure its own security. In his 2003 work *Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators*, author Robert Rotberg said “Nation-states fail because they are convulsed by internal violence and can no longer deliver positive political goods... (No political good) is as critical as the supply of security.”<sup>12</sup> Without no state power to limit extremist operations, freedom of movement is guaranteed. Additionally, as the state can provide little to its people, the extremist

organizations can become a surrogate for the state, making recruitment far easier than it would have been with the existence of strong government apparatus. Civil wars create “certain conditions that assist terrorist groups in recruiting and operating more freely. These conditions are easily sustained in a failed state because of the lack of government control.”<sup>13</sup> The creation of al-Shabaab in Somalia is perhaps the most devastating examples of al-Qaeda using an already tense situation to infiltrate and create an affiliate.

There is significant evidence that, as early as the 1980’s, al-Qaeda had already begun to infiltrate into the Horn of Africa Region. “The countries of East Africa and the Horn offer an enticing environment for al-Qaeda to exploit. Poverty is widespread. Social and economic inequality is common. Political marginalization of minority groups exists in every country...”<sup>14</sup> Although, in the beginning, most of al-Qaeda’s support would have come in the form of providing logistical and material support to ideologically aligned militias and organizations. By the 90’s, its influence could be felt in multiple countries. “Most of the al-Qaeda-related attacks in Ethiopia were carried out by a Somali-based organization known as al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI) or Islamic Unity in the early and mid-1990s. Although probably not controlled by al-Qaeda, growing evidence indicates that AIAI received training and support from al-Qaeda.”<sup>15</sup> al-Qaeda, true to form, was taking full advantage of turmoil wherever possible. However, it was Somalia that would present al-Qaeda with the ideal location for its newest affiliate.

In May of 1988, after over 20 years of rule, tribal forces backed by Ethiopia rebelled against the military Junta of General Siyad Barre. Although resistance against Barre had been building for years in the largely ungovernable tribal areas of Somalia, it would still be three years until the rebels defeated the government forces and force Barre to flee. Unfortunately, the rebel victory did not result in a new government structure, but rather caused the nation to dissolve into chaos, infighting, warlords, and anarchy.<sup>16</sup> The plight was made still worse by a drought that struck in 1992 and subsequent attempted international interventions that ended in the disastrous “Blackhawk down” incident of 1993.<sup>17</sup>

Into this chaos stepped Somalia’s Islamic Courts. More than legal entities, the Islamic Courts were a response to the complete lack of security and stability throughout the country. Although their legitimacy was largely based in religious fundamentalism, “The establishment of the Islamic Courts was not so much an Islamist imperative as a response to the need for some means of upholding law and order. The Islamist agenda in the Courts was not particularly ‘programmatic;’ they were not presided over by expert Islamic judges, nor were they adherents to any specific school of Islamic law.”<sup>18</sup> Their true objective was to reign in some of the anarchy that begun in the 1990s. Using various militias and extremist groups

and their military arm, over the next 15 years the courts consolidated their power. By 2006 the Islamic Courts controlled well over 50% of what used to be the Somali Republic.<sup>19</sup>

In 2006, several of the Courts united to the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). As they had in the past, the ICU chose to use the militia known as *Al Shabaab* as their military wing to enforce their edicts and decrees throughout Somalia. On the surface, the ICU was supposed to be a moderating force that sought to bring people together from all ends of the spectrum of political Islam. However, by this time al-Qaeda had been working ceaselessly to gain a foothold in al-Shabaab and the imprint of its ideology was undeniable. According to Cedric Barnes and Harun Hassan in *The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu's Islamic Courts*, "...key activists within the Islamic Courts certainly subscribed to forms of political Islam ranging from Quttubism to Wahabism that have all espoused radical, violent and anti-'Western' sentiment in some form or other. . . . It was certainly true that militant jihadis, above all al-Shabaab, became an important component of the overall Islamic Courts coalition."<sup>20</sup> With the general acceptance of al-Shabaab as a primary military wing of the ICU, and al-Qaeda's control over al-Shabaab's ideological stance, al-Qaeda was at least nominally in charge of the politics of Somalia.

In December 2006, United Nations and Ethiopian troops, along with troops from Somalia's nascent Transitional Federal Government (TFG), attacked the extremist elements of the ICU and pushed it out of Mogadishu. The ICU splintered and subsequently disbanded on December 27, 2006. However, al-Shabaab continued to remain active throughout 2012. It fought against the TFG, African Union, and UN forces, as well continued to strengthen its ties to al-Qaeda.<sup>21</sup> In 2009, al-Shabaab's leadership made a video pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda and, in 2012, al-Qaeda made al-Shabaab an official affiliate.<sup>22</sup>

al-Qaeda shaped and eventually subsumed al-Shabaab by targeting a region where violence and chaos were and remain rampant. A lack of governmental security and state-provided authority rendered Somalia an ideal location for an affiliate. However, it was by no means unique. Mali, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Pakistan all have similar stories and, as such, all are the home bases for powerful and prolific al-Qaeda Affiliates.

## **Propaganda and Narrative**

The usage of effective narratives and propaganda networks is the third and final method by which al-Qaeda can succeed regularly. We have already seen how al-Qaeda used the preexisting hatred and rivalries during the Algerian Civil War to gather recruits to their name. We also saw how AAD used its affiliation with al-Qaeda to gain prestige and legitimacy, while al-Qaeda Central used AAD to

spread their brand. However, the propaganda networks are not limited within the bounds of war, nor are they static in their growth, evolution, or distribution. In his 2015 piece “Confronting The Changing Face Of Al-Qaeda Propaganda,” Alberto Fernandez illustrated that “Over the years, al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers have transitioned to new platforms and mechanisms as circumstances have changed... in late 2012, the extremists’ migration to social media such as Twitter and beyond accelerated.”<sup>23</sup> al-Qaeda and its allies and offshoots made use of its already decentralized structure to quickly and poignantly spread its narrative globally.

There is not an affiliate that has not participated in the pervasiveness of al-Qaeda propaganda, although some with more success than others. For example, AQAP has been the most prolific affiliate, with products that range from magazines to twitter accounts, targeting anyone who may be vulnerable to radicalization, all with the goal of attracting recruits and support. They use a various mediums and method of communication which allow their narrative to transcend both technology and literacy barriers. For example, in 2010, al-Qaeda launched the online magazine *Inspire* in several languages. Thanks to the ease of internet dissemination, the magazine “become a vital recruitment method for al-Qaeda. The ‘Inspire magazine’ ‘encourages young Muslims [men] in the West to commit terrorist attacks’”<sup>24</sup> Additionally and perhaps even more dangerously, it publishes everything from tactics and training techniques for would-be militants, to step-by-step instructions on bomb-making.

Unfortunately, these tactics not only work, but have been absolutely fundamental in spreading al-Qaeda and building its recruitment base. The creation of AQIS is one of the most recent displays of this very phenomenon. Created in 2014 out of various al-Qaeda allies operating in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, AQIS has shown itself to be highly adept at utilizing media and propaganda. Less than a month after its creation in September of 2014, they launched an online magazine, “Resurgence.” Produced by *As Sahab*, al-Qaeda Central’s propaganda arm, “the magazine covers a variety of jihadist topics... heavily focused on recent events, especially al Qaeda’s activities in the Indian Subcontinent.”<sup>25</sup> Although mostly targeting subcontinental audiences, “Resurgence” is still produced by al-Qaeda Central. However, AQIS maintains its own autonomous propaganda efforts that do not stop with the magazine.

In Bangladesh, AQIS’ media blitz has had, arguably, the most prolific effect of any of their target locations. Partially as a consequence of AQIS’s recent creation and partially due to religious friction in Bangladesh, AQIS can present itself as highly attractive to the local population by using fundamentalist rhetoric mixed with modern means of distribution. Broadly, AQIS’s propaganda focuses on four main narratives: the threat (real or perceived) of Indian hegemonic ambition,

Muslim persecution, the religious credentials of the state leadership, and the overall promotion of Islamic values, particularly as they pertain to contrasting governmental policies.<sup>26</sup> Each narrative is consistently rooted in both Islamic fundamental thought and real-world issues facing Bangladeshis to ensure the widest possible appeal while maintaining Islamic legitimacy for al-Qaeda Central.

The rhetoric is not the only thing that gives Islamist narratives their appeal. AQIS has also proven adroit at using social media and other technological platforms. "AQIS's online propaganda has attracted disenchanted and frustrated youths within Bangladesh. A 2017 survey conducted by the Bangladeshi Police with 250 extremists revealed that 82 percent of them were originally inspired by social media propaganda"<sup>27</sup> Moreover, once radicalized, these same youths continue to use these social media platforms to communicate among each other and make efforts to radicalize their peers.

More worrying than just the appeal of the AQIS narrative is that, thus far, it has proven difficult to combat, while remaining effective in shielding AQIS leadership from implication and arrest. Despite the recent series of operations aimed at disrupting the networks of Islamist militants, AQIS' continued online propaganda efforts have negative implications for peace and security in Bangladesh. Security forces are in the dark about the whereabouts of some of the key figures of AQIS... (yet) they remain active as evident from their online statements."<sup>28</sup>

Kinetic operations can do little to counter the pervasive effects of AQIS online presence and producing counternarratives often fails when those narratives are seen to originate within the government. Thus, AQIS uses its propaganda networks to ensure steady recruitment sources and, in some cases, even protect its leadership from apprehension. As a result, AQIS and all the other affiliates who employ similar strategies are able to use them to maintain their continued success.

This analysis would be incomplete without addressing the counterargument, which, since 2014, has often taken the shape of al-Qaeda's perceived setbacks or failure due to the rise of ISIS. There are some who would argue that with ISIS's achievements over the past five years, al-Qaeda's model is not one of sustained success. However, further investigation shows that ISIS' successes are, in fact, proof of al-Qaeda's continued global success. First, ISIS was an offshoot of al-Qaeda and modeled much of their strategy from that of al-Qaeda. They used effective propaganda networks and undoubtedly focused on locations already in conflict (often caused by al-Qaeda itself). However, unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS chose to maintain a central physical location of its power and authority. Though it began to spread using its propaganda, ISIS's focus was almost always its self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq.



Fortunately, this unwillingness to decentralize gave the US and its allies a distinct target. Coalition partners were able to strike at the Islamic State with relative impunity because they knew where it was. Clear battle lines could be drawn, and territory could be retaken. When ISIS chose not to follow the al-Qaeda strategy of decentralization, they ensured their own short-lived success. While they still exist today, ISIS fighters are weakened and hiding. Those still able to consistently carry out operations are, in fact, ISIS affiliates — the result of ISIS using the al-Qaeda model to ensure survival. Using the criteria for success laid out in the beginning of this article, ISIS is mostly unsuccessful as of this writing. Conversely, and unfortunately, al-Qaeda has weathered the storm and may be emerging to prominence yet again if the actions of its affiliates in Africa, India, and the Yemen are any indication.

Decentralization, effective narratives, and propaganda, as well as a focus on locations with a preexisting history of instability and violence, have been al-Qaeda's keys to continued global success. Although groups like ISIS may have emerged to briefly challenge this model's effectiveness, al-Qaeda has proven to be consistent in its ability to foster success. With this model, al-Qaeda has relative freedom to carry out violent attacks with a low probability of state interference, steady sources of recruitment and resupply, and high probability of its continued survival. Moreover, given the efficacy of these strategies, it would not be difficult to assess that al-Qaeda will continue using them to prolong their achievement. With that foreknowledge, governments and policy makers can improve their decisions regarding the ideal methods by which nations and individuals can counter al-Qaeda, and thereby begin to stymie that success. 🌟

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## Notes

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