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Who was Leading Whom?

Assessing the Organizational and Strategic Dynamics Between Al Qaeda Central and its Affiliates, 2004 - 2014

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**Who was Leading Whom?: Assessing the Organizational and
Strategic Dynamics Between
Al Qaeda Central and its Affiliates, 2004 - 2014**

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**Thesis Submitted to Fulfill Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (War Studies)**

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Abstract

This thesis joins the debate over how to understand the Al Qaeda network's organizational function and strategic coherence, with a focus on assessing the ways in which Al Qaeda's franchising process influenced not only the regional affiliates, but also, and especially, Al Qaeda Central (AQC) itself. Analysis of affiliate actions will determine the extent to which the affiliates' propaganda and operations were in alignment with AQC's stated objectives, and whether the affiliates were responsive to guidance from AQC leadership. Examination of Al Qaeda's internal documents and secret correspondence will provide insight into AQC leaders' vision for the organization, their attempts to direct and influence the franchise groups, and their reactions to the affiliates' behavior. Study of AQC's internal communications and of shifts in its public messaging practices will enable assessment of how the central organization may have adapted its own organizational and propaganda strategies in response to the actions of affiliate groups. These approaches, by bringing to bear evidence that has been unavailable or overlooked in previous research, enables this thesis' comparatively high-confidence new interpretation of Al Qaeda's overall organizational and strategic characteristics during its prime franchising era, from the establishment of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004, until Zawahiri's public disavowal of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sam (ISIS) in 2014.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Setting the Scene

In late 2001, Al Qaeda's successful attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon resulted in a major strategic setback for the Salafi-jihadist group when it was driven underground from its Afghan sanctuary, its members and support networks hounded by retaliatory international counterterrorism operations. Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Al Qaeda's senior cadres found themselves essentially sidelined, with few resources and little freedom of movement. In order to maintain relevance and operational reach, Al Qaeda's leaders relaxed their centralized organizational model and over time cultivated a network of regional affiliates, mostly through mergers with existing Islamist militant groups. Bin Laden's original organization, which became known commonly as Al Qaeda Central (AQC), was able to revitalize its public profile by receiving credit for operations conducted in its name by franchise groups, but its reputation and standing within the jihadist community suffered by association when affiliate organizations committed mistakes or unpopular acts. Each regional group also had its own agenda rooted in the concerns of its local constituency, and these priorities often distracted them from AQC's strategic focus on the "far enemy" of Western governments. Preference divergences risked diluting the potency and coherence of the global Al Qaeda "brand," and they presented AQC with command and control challenges. Some analysts have seen these difficulties as evidence of AQC's fragility and organizational decline, but many observers—particularly among the popular media and Western government officials, but also a sizeable contingent from within academia—have not wavered in their view of Al Qaeda as a strategically and operationally unified organization, with a resilient AQC at its helm.

Much has been written about Al Qaeda,¹ but the continued prevalence of widely differing interpretations of the organizational dynamics at work within Al Qaeda, and of strategic agreement and unified action across the organization, demands additional research to explore the command relationships and reciprocal influences between AQC

¹ "Bibliography: Al-Qaeda and its Affiliated Organizations (Part 1.)" *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, No. 6 (December 2017): 200-244, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26295968>.

and its affiliates, and to investigate whether the notion of a dispersed, yet unified Al Qaeda, asserting itself around the world, has been a reality or merely a carefully nurtured image. The Al Qaeda organization has suffered additional setbacks in recent years, resulting both from continuing international counterterrorism pressure and from loss of prestige and capacity following schism with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the successor to AQC's original, and arguably most prominent, franchise. AQC still claims the loyalty of numerous regional affiliates, however, and its central leadership, under Zawahiri, continue to profess their intent to attack the "far enemy" to remove Western influence from the Muslim world. Continued research to understand the organizational and strategic dynamics that have characterized the Al Qaeda network—even in past time periods, as is the case for this thesis—is important to inform both scholars of terrorism studies and policymakers. Not only does Al Qaeda continue to exist as a determined Islamist militant organization with ambitious designs and active franchises, but greater understanding of how it has functioned (or failed to function) as an organization may provide useful insight into other current or future violent extremist organizations.

This thesis joins the debate over how to understand the Al Qaeda network's organizational function and strategic coherence, with a focus on assessing the ways in which Al Qaeda's franchising process influenced not only the regional affiliates, but also, and especially, AQC itself. This study is distinct from previous works both methodologically and conceptually. Methodologically, this thesis relies upon recently available, and heretofore underexamined, primary sources to assess the Al Qaeda organization's internal workings. This project also incorporates analysis of comprehensive operational data from the Global Terrorism Database to enable objective assessment of the Al Qaeda franchises' actions, and therefore of their levels of compliance with AQC's strategic framework, in a departure from the typical practice in existing literature of employing limited data selections or anecdotal examples to draw conclusions about the affiliates' operational practices and areas of strategic focus. Conceptually, this thesis traces the interplay between AQC and its constellation of affiliates, with a particular focus on identifying the ways in which the central organization adjusted its own strategic approaches, stances, and methods in reaction to its

franchises' interests and actions. This concentration on assessing the reciprocal influences that led to changes by the parent organization is unique within the literature, which has been preoccupied by how the Al Qaeda affiliation process has affected regional militant groups, and it enables a more complete and nuanced understanding of decisive influences and drivers of action across the Al Qaeda organization. These approaches (explained in greater detail in the Methodology and Contribution to the Literature sections of this chapter), by bringing to bear evidence that has been unavailable or overlooked by previous authors, enables this thesis' comparatively high-confidence new interpretation of Al Qaeda's overall organizational and strategic characteristics during its prime franchising era, from the establishment of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004, until Zawahiri's public disavowal of ISIS in 2014.

Lawrence Freedman has noted that “[s]trategy is required when others might frustrate one’s plans because they have different and possibly opposing interests and concerns.”² In the case of Al Qaeda, these frustrating parties obviously have included security forces prosecuting counterterrorism campaigns; however, AQC’s embrace of affiliate groups introduced another set of actors who ultimately complicated AQC’s pursuit of its original objectives. This thesis will examine how franchise groups advanced or frustrated AQC’s plans, and will assess how bin Laden and Zawahiri sought to guide their organization “through a series of states, each one not quite what was anticipated or hoped for, requiring a reappraisal and modification of the original strategy[.]”³

This introductory chapter first defines the scope of the study, along with key terms. Next, it reviews the research questions underpinning this investigation, summarizes the key findings, and describes this study’s mixed-methods approach. Then, the literature review introduces key themes and interpretations from scholarship on Al Qaeda and describes this research project’s place within the literature, explaining how it will complement and move beyond other recent works to provide new understanding of the strategy, organizational dynamics, and reciprocal influences between AQC and its affiliates. The final section of this chapter previews the thesis’ chapter structure.

² Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xi.

³ Ibid.

1.2 Scope of the Study

This study is focused on AQC and its affiliates, as described in the multi-tier categorization of elements of the Al Qaeda network most commonly employed in the literature.⁴ AQC refers to the original core cadre based along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and directly led by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al Qaeda affiliates are the regional groups that have pledged fealty to AQC leadership and, in turn, have been acknowledged publicly by the parent organization as official components of Al Qaeda. These affiliates, or “franchises,” are: Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its successor organizations, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS); Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), based in Algeria and other parts of north Africa; Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), based in Yemen; Al-Shabaab, based primarily in Somalia; Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), based in Syria; and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), based primarily in Pakistan. The literature often includes two additional tiers of the Al Qaeda movement that are not included in this study: Al Qaeda associates (groups with direct connections, but no official ties or command relationship with AQC), and Al Qaeda-inspired elements (groups or radicalized individuals who have no direct connections with Al Qaeda, but who conduct attacks out of solidarity with Al Qaeda’s *jihadi* message). These additional tiers are excluded from this study because their relationships with the central leadership lacked the explicit mutual acknowledgment of senior-subordinate relationships that existed between AQC and its affiliates. As examined in Chapter 2, Al Qaeda’s internal correspondence shows that AQC leaders felt a special responsibility towards, and expected obedience from, the affiliate groups. Although the central leadership took seriously their responsibility to encourage and sometimes advise non-affiliates, the more informal, non-binding

⁴ Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, "Al Qaeda's Post-9/11 Evolution: An Assessment," in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment*, ed. Russell D Howard and Bruce Hoffman (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 337-8; James JF Forest and Sammy Salama, "Jihadist Tactics and Targeting," in *Jihadists and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, ed. Gary Ackerman and Jeremy Tamsett (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2009). Some scholars use basically the same organizational framework, but assign slightly different names to the individual levels of the movement. Other scholars combine the “associate” and “inspired” categories into one when describing the structure of the Al Qaeda movement.

relationships that existed between the center and “associated” and “inspired” elements would distort focus and introduce more unverifiable assumptions into this particular investigation, making them inappropriate for inclusion. AQC’s interaction with these subsets of the greater Salafi-jihadist movement is a worthy topic for a separate line of research inquiry, however. This thesis concentrates primarily on the four oldest affiliates, AQI/ISI/ISIS, AQIM, AQAP, and Al-Shabaab. Treatment of JN will be included in the AQI/ISI/ISIS case study chapter,⁵ and AQIS, founded in September 2014, was not an acknowledged Al Qaeda affiliate during the time period covered by this study, which ends in February 2014 (see below).

The time period for this investigation is what could be termed the “golden age” of Al Qaeda’s franchising activities, from the negotiations that culminated in bin Laden’s acknowledgement of AQI as the first regional militant group officially to join Al Qaeda in October 2004,⁶ until Zawahiri’s disavowal of AQI’s successor organization, ISIS, nearly a decade later, on 02 February 2014. During this period, the Al Qaeda network’s notoriety largely was due to widespread belief that the original, centralized organization had evolved into a far-flung militant movement of shared purpose. Government officials, the press, and casual observers all tended to conflate the actions of Al Qaeda regional affiliates with AQC’s global agenda, a perception of organizational unity and strategic coherence that AQC’s leaders sought to nurture. AQC’s break with ISIS, however,

⁵ Al Qaeda’s fifth affiliate, the Syrian group Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), will be discussed primarily in the chapter dealing with AQI/ISI/ISIS. JN is included in this chapter because it originated as an offshoot of ISIS, founded in January 2012; it existed for less than two years during the time period of this study, which ends in February 2014; and because JN played a critical role in the conflict between ISIS and AQC that ultimately led to the undermining of Al Qaeda’s franchising project when al-Zawahiri took the dramatic step of excommunicating ISIS from Al Qaeda.

⁶ Some authors note that the short-lived branch of Al Qaeda established in Saudi Arabia at the direction of AQC leadership in 2002 (and which first employed the name Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)) technically may be considered as the first regional Al Qaeda affiliate, but this group was a wing of the original AQC, and as such did not require AQC leadership to extend their “franchise” in the same way that they did to other regional groups that became formal affiliates through a process of vetting and fealty-swearing. In fact, many of the Saudi group’s most notable (and mostly failed) operations took place before it had adopted its regionally-differentiating moniker. Some members of this group, which Saudi security services dismantled shortly after it began operating, eventually made their way to Yemen and joined other militants in forming the more commonly known AQAP in that country. For additional discussion, see Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 51-56; Byman, “Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations,” 454; Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, 109-16.

demonstrated in a very public way the limits of the central organization's ability to control its affiliates. Zawahiri's excommunication of Al Qaeda's franchise in Iraq was a watershed event that provides a logical ending point to scope this study. AQC's open admission of disharmony and insubordination within its ranks, that it was unable to check, along with its subsequent rivalry with its former franchise, initiated a new phase for Al Qaeda, requiring potentially different organizational management approaches in a multi-polar *jihadi* landscape. This study is focused on the period when AQC endeavored to lead a still-intact network of affiliates and to avoid yielding the image of organizational cohesion and strategic unity of effort that had been key to Al Qaeda's prestige and relevance since the core initiated its franchising strategy.

1.3 Research Questions and Findings

1.3.1 Research Questions

Within the parameters noted above, this thesis undertakes to assess organizational function and strategic coherence across the Al Qaeda organization, with a particular focus on the reciprocal influences at work between the central organization and its franchises. This overarching purpose is enabled by the following subordinate research questions:

- 1) What was AQC leadership's intended command and control relationship with the regional affiliates? How did AQC leaders seek to control and influence the actions of the affiliates, and what were the command dynamics between AQC and its franchises, in practice?
- 2) What strategic guidance did AQC leaders issue to the affiliates? To what extent did the affiliates comply with AQC's guidance, and what are the explanations for cases of compliance or non-compliance?
- 3) What have been the effects of Al Qaeda affiliation on the strategy, operations, and rhetoric of regional militant groups?
- 4) How has the addition of regional affiliates affected AQC's strategy, operations, and rhetoric?

1.3.2 Summary of Findings

Employing unique analytical approaches and previously unexploited evidence, this thesis offers a new interpretation of organizational function and strategic coherence across the Al Qaeda organization during its primary franchising period, from 2004 until 2014. It describes the nature of the Al Qaeda network's command relationships and organizational processes, as well as the substance of AQC's strategic guidance to its affiliates. It assesses the reciprocal influences between the central organization and the regional groups by evaluating the affiliates' compliance with AQC's guidance and conformity with the parent organization's strategic framework, and by examining the ways in which AQC adapted its own strategic approaches and activities in response to the actions of its affiliates.

AQC's franchising strategy was born of a period of weakness, as the central leadership sought to co-opt the access and capabilities of regional Islamist militant groups to restore Al Qaeda's relevance and prestige as a *jihadi* vanguard after the core organization was driven from its Afghan sanctuary in 2001 and hunted globally by the United States and its allies. Despite the challenges to AQC's freedom of movement and ability to communicate, however, bin Laden and his lieutenants insisted that the expanding Al Qaeda network remain a hierarchical organization, with the parent organization responsible for directing the affiliates, and entitled to their obedience. AQC leaders issued comprehensive strategic guidance to the affiliates and employed a variety of management methods to assert control over the network. Internal correspondence shows that, on the whole, the commanders of the regional groups acknowledged their subordination to the central leadership, not only accepting their directives, but often seeking guidance and approval from AQC leaders. AQI/ISI/ISIS is a notable exception to this organizational consensus. The Iraqi franchise's leaders consistently disregarded—and sometimes openly defied—AQC's orders, eventually driving Zawahiri to excommunicate the group from Al Qaeda.

The regional groups that became Al Qaeda affiliates generally adapted their public messaging to reflect AQC's strategic prioritization of attacking the “far enemy”—the U.S., Israel, and their Western allies—although AQC leaders often found fault with the execution, tone, and content of the franchises' media operations. With few

exceptions, however, the affiliates failed to match their threats against the “far enemy” with action; their military operations remained overwhelmingly focused on localized agendas that ran counter to AQC’s guidance, such as attacking “near enemy” regional regimes, attempting to control territory and establish short-lived “emirates,” or prosecuting sectarian rivalries. These operations often resulted in significant casualties among Muslim civilians and fomented conflict between the affiliates and tribes or other local populations, thus earning widespread criticism of the affiliates—and of AQC, by association—from across the Muslim community. It is possible, and in some cases likely, that the franchises’ departures from AQC’s strategic framework stemmed from differing strategic visions or broad insubordination by affiliate leadership, and that the regional *emirs* (leaders) were disingenuous in their expressions of deference to the central leadership’s orders. It may be that communication difficulties across the clandestine network prevented some of AQC’s instructions from reaching the affiliates, or that capabilities limitations at the regional group level prevented them from successfully executing AQC’s directives. There also is strong evidence to suggest, however, that dysfunction and preference divergence within the franchise groups, themselves, contributed significantly to the affiliates’ failure to adhere to AQC’s strategic guidance.

On balance, AQC’s actions and strategic approach were more greatly impacted by the franchising process than were those of the regional groups that merged with Al Qaeda. AQC’s extension of the Al Qaeda franchise to regional militant groups enabled it to regain its aura of power and global reach, but it also placed the parent organization’s reputation and credibility with the *ummah* (Muslim community) at the mercy of the affiliates’ unruly actions. The central leadership found itself forced into a reactive mode, constantly adjusting its own policies, actions, and rhetoric to accommodate and defend the affiliates, while also seeking to protect AQC’s own standing and legitimacy in the eyes of its Muslim constituency. Some of these adjustments accommodated specific affiliate concerns or practices, or opportunistically leveraged them to benefit the parent organization. The central leadership shifted strategic focus areas to support affiliate priorities and to capitalize on strategic openings presented by the franchises’ regional access, and they compromised AQC’s ethical stances to embrace certain of the affiliates’ criminal activities that helped to bolster the organization’s finances.

Most significantly, AQC's strategic agenda was hijacked by the need to mitigate the effects of unpopular actions by its franchises. The central leadership continuously refined their guidance to the affiliates to redirect them from counterproductive activities that provoked denunciation from across the *ummah*, and they attempted to intervene—circumventing affiliate leadership, in some cases—to resolve conflicts that distracted from the regional groups' focus on AQC's strategic priorities. AQC's efforts to control its franchises were largely ineffective, however, so the central leadership developed a carefully balanced propaganda scheme to compensate for strategic disconnect across the Al Qaeda organization. On one hand, AQC leaders resolutely defended their affiliates' actions in order to project the image of a cohesive global network, operating in alignment with the central command. On the other hand, they sought to deflect criticism and to protect the legitimacy of the Al Qaeda brand by condemning, in principle, the types of indiscriminate violence of which their affiliates were guilty, while avoiding direct censure of their franchises. AQC leaders walked this tightrope, endeavoring rhetorically to separate the sinners from the sin, so to speak, until ISIS' excessive brutality and overt insubordination created such reputational risk for the parent organization that Zawahiri was compelled to disavow Al Qaeda's first regional franchise, thus implicitly acknowledging the limits of the central leadership's control over their affiliates.

1.4 Methodology

This thesis project pursues the research agenda laid out above by studying captured or found Al Qaeda internal documents and correspondence, by analyzing descriptive data on operations by regional groups that became AQ affiliates, and by surveying public statements by AQC and affiliate groups. Analysis of captured or found Al Qaeda internal documents and letters contributes to understanding AQC leadership's goals for and frustrations with their affiliates; their attempts to control, influence, and assist the franchises; the ways in which the central organization relied upon, adapted to, and was influenced by its affiliate groups; and the organizational relationships and processes at work across the Al Qaeda network. Comparison of rhetoric and operations by regional militant groups before and after they formally affiliated with Al Qaeda illuminates what, if any, changes in their stated objectives and operational practices

occurred after affiliation. This comparison also enables assessment of whether the groups' propaganda matched their deeds, and to what extent the Al Qaeda franchises were responsive to key strategic guidance released publicly by AQC leadership. Examination of AQC public statements reveals ways in which the central organization adjusted its messaging themes to accommodate the concerns and activities of its affiliates, to guide their franchises, or to mitigate reputational damage caused by their actions.

1.4.1 Al Qaeda Internal Documents

The greatest challenge to studying clandestine, illicit organizations is penetrating the opacity of their inherent secrecy to obtain access to information about their internal functioning. Organizations such as Al Qaeda clearly have vested interests in concealing details about their command relationships and organizational processes, so, barring the availability of internal documents and communications or the personal testimony of group members, researchers are left to accept an organization's public statements, or to deduce a group's intended agenda and internal characteristics by observing its actions.

This thesis breaks new ground by drawing upon a sizable body of newly available and previously underexamined Al Qaeda secret internal correspondence, either captured during counterterrorism operations or discovered by journalists and researchers, to provide insight into the group's internal workings, illuminating both how AQC leaders intended for the network to function, and how it functioned in practice. These documents reveal the guidance and advice that AQC leaders directed to the affiliates; the requests for or responses to AQC communications by affiliate leaders; strategic and operational priorities and objectives; organizational goals and values; AQC leaders' attempts to assert control over their franchises; interactions with non-Al Qaeda militant groups; and complaints about the actions or responsiveness of other parts of the organization. Reading these letters and memoranda allow us to see the Al Qaeda organization through the eyes of some of its members. Viewed over time, they illuminate ways in which AQC and its franchises adjusted to circumstances and evolved as a result of their reciprocal influences on each other.

The largest publicly available collections of Al Qaeda-related correspondence and internal documents are comprised of items captured during counterterrorism operations by the United States military. Many of these records have been translated (if necessary) into English, undergone a security review for declassification, and released for public and scholarly access through three main programs: the U.S. Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Program⁷, the U.S. National Defense University's Conflict Records Research Center⁸, and the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence's "Bin Laden's Bookshelf" series, which consists entirely of documents obtained during the 02 May 2011 raid during which U.S. special operations forces killed the Al Qaeda founder.⁹ Additional documents obtained during police investigations or submitted as evidence during legal prosecution of Al Qaeda-linked individuals have been released by various law enforcement agencies from around the world.¹⁰ Finally, some materials that shed light on the clandestine inner workings of the Al Qaeda organization have been discovered and published by journalists, such as the trove of records discovered in Timbuktu, Mali, after members of AQIM abandoned their short-lived occupation of the city in order to escape advancing African and French forces in early 2013.¹¹

The most extensive, and arguably most important, collections of primary sources relevant to the period of franchising activity explored by this thesis are the documents captured from bin Laden's home in Abbottabad. A limited selection of seventeen

⁷ U.S. Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, <https://ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program>.

⁸ "Al-Qaeda and Associated Movements Collection," Conflict Records Research Center, U.S. National Defense University, accessed August 16, 2017. <http://crrc.dodlive.mil/collections/aqam/>.

⁹ "Bin Laden's Bookshelf," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, accessed August 16, 2017. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf>. In addition to the 265 letters and other Al Qaeda internal documents, the ODNI also listed on its website more than 300 other pieces of print and electronic media recovered from bin Laden's home. These items are valuable resources, as well, as they illustrate the types of information that bin Laden was consuming and where some of his interests lay.

¹⁰ For example, "United States v. Abid Naseer Trial Documents," U.S. Department of Justice, accessed August 16, 2017. http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf; "Al Qaeda Manual Found in Manchester," accessed August 16, 2017. <https://www.investigativeproject.org/document/10-al-qaeda-manual-found-in-manchester-translation>; "Office of Military Commissions Cases," U.S. Department of Defense, accessed August 28, 2017. <http://www.mc.mil/CASES.aspx>.

¹¹ "The Al-Qaida Papers," Associated Press, accessed August 16, 2017. <http://interactives.ap.org/2014/al-qaida/>.

documents were released through the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Program in 2012,¹² and have been used by a number of scholars.¹³ However, a set of 265 additional pieces of personal and professional correspondence and organizational documents, comprised of several thousand pages of English translations, was released by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) between 2015 and 2017.¹⁴ Exploitation of these latest releases, which have been largely ignored in the academic literature until now, is a cornerstone of this thesis project (see additional discussion in the Contributions to the Literature section, below).¹⁵

These new, underexplored documents serve as vital resources, but it is important to acknowledge the limitations of conclusions drawn from them. There undoubtedly are many internal documents generated by elements of the Al Qaeda organization that have not been captured or discovered, and there is no way to know the quantity or content of these materials. Additionally, there may be documents that have not been released by military or law enforcement sources for security reasons due to their intelligence value or sensitivity. For these reasons, researchers must recognize that the full context of a particular document may not be evident, and that there could be unseen material that might alter interpretations or conclusions, if it were available. These concerns about incompleteness of the documentary record do not negate the value to researchers (and to

¹² The original documents and English translations are available on the Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program website, <https://ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program>. Summary and preliminary analysis of the seventeen letters is provided in Nelly Lahoud, Stuart Caudill, Liam Collins, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Don Ressler, and Muhammad al-Ubaydi, *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012).

¹³ See the Contributions to the Literature section of this chapter for discussion.

¹⁴ "Bin Laden's Bookshelf," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, accessed August 16, 2017. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf>.

¹⁵ In November 2017, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency released nearly 470,000 additional files found on hard drives taken from bin Laden's Abbottabad compound. These files, which include written or typed documents, photographs, videos, articles, and even computer operating system files, are untranslated and uncatalogued, and were not used for this thesis. Review of these additional documents to identify and assess relevant materials could be an important future project for researchers with the right capabilities and resources. "November 2017 Release of Abbottabad Compound Material," U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/index.html>; "Osama bin Laden's hard drive files: Computer held home movies, propaganda and video games," *ABC News*, 01 November 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-02/osama-bin-laden-hard-drive-documents-released/9110704>.

this study) of being able to read Al Qaeda's internal communications, however. As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the available documents contain considerable evidence of coherent dialogue over time among AQC senior leaders, as well as between the central leadership and the affiliate *emirs*. This internal correspondence includes themes and narratives with sufficient repetition and consistency to enable cautious confidence that they accurately represent the substance of significant portions of the guidance, opinions, requests, and other content communicated across the Al Qaeda network.

1.4.2 Operations Analysis

This thesis employs analysis of comprehensive data on attacks conducted by Al Qaeda affiliates, derived from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD),¹⁶ to gain a complete, objective view of the franchises' military operations, and therefore to enable assessment of the affiliates' compliance with AQC's operational guidance and conformity with the central leadership's strategic priorities. This methodological approach is novel within the literature on Al Qaeda (as explained in the Contributions to the Literature section, below), but it is necessary to correct a tendency in both scholarly and popular treatments of Al Qaeda to inflate the significance of highly-publicized or spectacular-seeming attacks, interpreting what may be isolated or misattributed incidents as evidence of an operational pattern or new direction by the perpetrating affiliate, or even by "Al Qaeda," as a whole.¹⁷

Operational analysis is critical to enable objective assessment of the extent to which formal Al Qaeda affiliation influenced regional militant groups. When a regional group officially joined the Al Qaeda organization, it theoretically embraced the central organization's global agenda, including its prioritization of targeting the "far enemy." An Al Qaeda franchise might use rhetoric to show superficial commitment to AQC leadership's stated objectives, but, if its merger with the central organization were to be

¹⁶ "Global Terrorism Database," National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) (2015), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

¹⁷ Fawaz Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 195-200; John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

more than nominal, then its military activities should demonstrate operational alignment with AQC priorities, with increased emphasis on attacks against Western personnel and interests.

This paper examines data on regional militant groups' military activities to assess whether their formal affiliations with Al Qaeda were accompanied by changes in operational practices. Analysis of operational statistics alone does not enable the establishment of causal relationships, but it suggests how joining the Al Qaeda organization may have influenced (or not influenced) the regional franchises' operational objectives and tactics, as well as the extent to which the affiliates were responsive to AQC leaders' guidance.

This study uses historical data on Al Qaeda affiliates' operations found in the GTD, which is managed by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). The GTD is the largest and most comprehensive open source, non-subscription database of "terrorist" attacks, with the 2015 edition (the version used for this study) containing information on more than 140,000 terrorist incidents occurring between 1970 and 2014.¹⁸ The GTD is selected for this project because it reports the greatest number of events over the full time period examined (1990s until 02 February 2014), and because it codes for substantially more variables for each event than do other databases. The GTD investigators also assess for each event whether or not the identity of the perpetrating group is reasonably certain. In this study, only events coded as "group certain" are considered, in order to avoid data distortions resulting from possible over-attribution of militant violence to Al Qaeda affiliates in government or media reports.

¹⁸ Other highly-regarded databases used by researchers in the field of terrorism studies include the International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE) database (Edward F. Mickolus et al., "International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE), 1968-2015," (2015), accessed August 16, 2017, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=hdl:1902.1/21952>.) and the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents ("RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents," (2009), accessed August 16, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/terrorism-incidents.html>.) For further comparative discussion of available databases, see Ivan Sascha Sheehan, "Assessing and comparing data sources for terrorism research," in *Evidence-based counterterrorism policy* (Springer, 2012); Todd Sandler, "The Analytical Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014).

The primary limitation of this dataset is that it does not include tallies of thwarted attacks that never progressed to execution (a limitation shared by similar databases). Attacks that were attempted but were disrupted or otherwise unsuccessful during actual tactical execution are included in the data. This prevents systematic evaluation of cases in which affiliate groups may have been planning or preparing for attacks, but were stymied prior to the execution phase; these cases arguably would have been more likely with intended “far enemy” targets, due to the increased security capacity employed to protect Western personnel and interests. It is possible, therefore, that certain operational efforts by affiliates would not be reflected in this broad review of attack data, potentially skewing assessment of the franchises’ strategic priorities as evidenced by their military actions. This limitation does not negate the value of using GTD operational data to support this study, however. First, this is the most complete and standardized data available, and it enables the comprehensive, objective appraisal of affiliate operational activity that is sorely lacking in the literature. Second, a dataset of thwarted attacks inevitably would be incomplete and prone to inconsistency. Attacks that have been disrupted or otherwise have not advanced to execution cannot be reliably categorized because not all foiled attacks necessarily would be announced to the public by government authorities due to operational security requirements. Additionally, such categorization would be vulnerable to mistaken conflation of intent and capability; just because a militant organization aspires or plans to conduct a certain attack, it does not mean that the group could or would follow through to the end. Finally, there is great usefulness in evaluating the actions that franchise groups actually executed—particularly in the absence of compelling evidence that a dataset fails to capture significant trends in certain affiliate operational activity—as this represents the most concrete way to assess how (or if) these groups sought to advance AQC’s strategic agenda or to implement the central leadership’s guidance.

Using information contained in the GTD, this study compares the regional affiliates’ operations before and after their formal mergers with Al Qaeda, as well as comparing their operations before and after selected instances of operational guidance contained in public statements by AQC senior leaders (see below). The timeframe for the analysis of operational data begins with the first recorded attack conducted by a regional

group that eventually became an Al Qaeda affiliate, and ends on 02 February 2014, the day that Zawahiri disavowed ISIS. Statistical categories used to support the comparative operations analysis include:

- Number and frequency of attacks
- Target nationality (nationality of apparent primary target)
- Target type (military, business, private citizen, etc.)
- Country in which attacks took place
- Attack type (suicide attack, bombing, armed assault, hostage taking, etc.)
- Casualties associated with each of the above categories

Instances of AQC Public Guidance to Affiliates

In addition to comparing the nature of militant groups' operations before and after formal Al Qaeda affiliation, this study will employ GTD data to examine whether affiliate groups (or groups that eventually would become affiliates) demonstrably modified their operational practices after selected instances of publicly issued guidance from AQC senior leadership. These comparisons aid in assessing the regional groups' responsiveness to direction from the central organization, thus suggesting the strength of the command relationships between AQC and its affiliates. The use of guidance contained in publicly released statements for these comparison points accounts for the unreliability of clandestine communications in an underground network; it is not always possible to know whether orders contained in secret correspondence ever reached their intended recipients. The instances of public guidance selected for this project were issued by bin Laden on 22 October 2007 and by Zawahiri on 15 September 2010. These statements, both originally issued by *As-Sahab*, AQC's official media wing, also were widely publicized and commented upon in the international media. Their chronological spacing roughly divides the era of Al Qaeda franchising activity examined here into thirds, allowing for reasonably large numbers of operational data points before and after each message to aid in identifying possible trends.

Bin Laden's Message of 22 October 2007

First released on 22 October 2007, bin Laden's "A Message to Our People in Iraq" received substantial attention in the international press.¹⁹ It came at a time when AQI's successor organization, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was in open conflict with Sunni tribes and other Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq, many of whom had turned on the Al Qaeda affiliate due to its cruel and overbearing treatment of fellow Muslims.²⁰ The ISI's excesses, combined with unpopular attacks by other Al Qaeda affiliated or associated groups that resulted in substantial Muslim casualties, had led to increased criticism of bin Laden and his organization in Salafi-jihadist circles, including from several high-profile clerics and former militants.²¹

In the message, bin Laden seemed to take the unprecedented step of publicly acknowledging errors by his followers, saying, "I have a subject on which I would like to share some advice with my brothers: i.e. the mistakes that take place between the brothers...the nature of man is to err...It is impossible for the people not to make mistakes, and when they happen, differences break out between them. Major sins were committed in the best of eras."²² Bin Laden urged unity among the *mujahidin*, and, in a possible allusion to the influence of leaders such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, under whom AQI had earned its reputation for brutality against fellow Muslims, bin Laden criticized any militant who "shows fanatical partiality to the order of his group and its leaders, and he doesn't comply with a verse of Allah's Book or a Hadith of Allah's Messenger...this is clear misguidance."²³ Bin Laden seems to have been calling for a higher standard of conduct from his subordinates: "Statements and actions are to be weighed by [Prophet

¹⁹ Osama bin Laden, "A Message to Our People in Iraq," As-Sahab Media Foundation (October 23, 2007), accessed June 16, 2017, <https://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/4656/OBL20071023.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>. The Qatari media company Al Jazeera aired portions of the audio-only Arabic recording of bin Laden's statement on 22 October 2007. On 23 October 2007, As-Sahab, Al Qaeda's media wing, released the full recording online in the form of a video that showed a still picture of bin Laden and featured English subtitles to accompany the Arabic audio message.

²⁰ Reuters, "Bin Laden Urges Iraq Rebel Unity, Admits Wrongs," (October 22, 2007), accessed October 25, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-binladen-idUSL2251391920071022>.

²¹ Fawaz A. Gerges, "Osama bin Laden's Growing Anxiety," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 26, 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1026/p09s02-coop.html>.

²² bin Laden, "A Message to Our People in Iraq," 3-4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

Muhammad's] statements and deeds, and what agrees with them is accepted, and what differs with them is rejected, whoever it might be who said or did it... That is, those who contradict the *Shariah* of the Messenger openly or secretly should fear and beware 'lest a trial afflict them'... 'or a grievous punishment overtake them.'"²⁴

While bin Laden did not reference specific instances of the brothers' "mistakes," his message was clear: the *mujahidin* should stop fighting one another and unite, and they should be more disciplined in their operations, protecting themselves from charges of un-Islamic behavior. If an affiliate group were heedful of and responsive to bin Laden's guidance, one would expect for its operational patterns to show decreases in attacks against other Muslim groups, against Muslim civilian targets, or use of tactics likely to result in collateral civilian casualties.

Zawahiri's Statement of 15 September 2010

Marking the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, *As-Sahab* released a recording of Zawahiri delivering his message "A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign."²⁵ The still video recording contained English subtitles, and the Al Qaeda media arm also released transcripts of the message in English, Arabic, Pashto, and Urdu.²⁶ Unlike many previous 9/11 anniversary messages released by AQC senior leaders, which included taunts and threats toward the West, this message did not explicitly mention the 9/11 attacks, and instead focused on encouraging the Muslim community and exhorting them to strengthen their pursuit of *jihad*,²⁷ based on "the lessons and examples found in the experience of nine years of confronting the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign," *As-Sahab Media Organization* (September 15, 2010), accessed October 25, 2015, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/a-victorious-ummah-a-broken-crusade-english.pdf>.

²⁶ Aaron Y. Zelin, "New statement from Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri on the Ninth Anniversary of 9/11: 'A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade'," *Jihadology* (September 15, 2010), accessed June 13, 2017, <http://jihadology.net/2010/09/15/new-statement-from-dr-ayman-al-zawahiri-on-the-ninth-anniversary-of-911-a-victorious-ummah-a-broken-crusade/>.

²⁷ Brian Fishman, "What the New Zawahiri Tape Means," *Foreign Policy* (September 15, 2010), accessed June 15, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/09/15/what-the-new-zawahiri-tape-means/>; Scott Stewart, "The 9/11 Anniversary and What Didn't Happen," *Stratfor Security Weekly* (September 16, 2010), accessed June 17, 2017, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/911-anniversary-and-what-didnt-happen>.

Crusaders and their agents...”²⁸ Included in his advice was a particularly clear articulation of a code of conduct for the *mujahidin* that echoed the spirit of bin Laden’s message from 22 October 2007 (this theme is one that Zawahiri would repeat and expand upon in future communications):

...I emphasize to my brothers the Mujahidin everywhere that true victory is in adherence to Allah’s *Shariah* and not being negligent in applying it. That’s why the Mujahidin must be diligent in abiding by the sacredness of Muslim blood, and that’s why their operations must be regulated by the noble *Shariah*, and that’s why they must study every operation from all sides. And the Mujahidin must disown every operation which is falsely attributed to them despite their innocence of it and which is aimed at the Muslims in their markets, mosques and gathering places. Moreover, we disown any operation which a Jihadi group carries out in which it doesn’t show concern for the safety of the Muslims; for we have only left our houses, abandoned our homelands and made our sacrifices in order to seek Allah’s pleasure and aid His *Shariah* and the rules of His religion.²⁹

If Al Qaeda-linked groups had not grasped bin Laden’s earlier guidance, Zawahiri’s statement left little room for misinterpreting the standards of conduct that AQC leaders expected of them. The operational patterns of militant organizations acting in submission to AQC’s directives should have shown a clear avoidance of Muslim (or at least Muslim civilian) targets, and of tactics that would endanger innocent Muslim bystanders.

1.4.3 Rhetorical Analysis

This study surveys publicly released statements by both the central organization and its regional franchises to note changes in content and areas of emphasis associated with the regional groups’ mergers with Al Qaeda, complementing the project’s analysis of internal documents and operational patterns to show how AQC and its franchises chose to portray their agendas and actions to the world. In keeping with Ayman al-Zawahiri’s well-known remark that “we are in a battle, and...more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media,” public messaging has been an important

²⁸ al-Zawahiri, "A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign," 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

element of Al Qaeda strategy.³⁰ AQC leadership placed great emphasis on media activity, and rhetoric was an easy way for regional militant groups to demonstrate solidarity with AQC during and after the process of becoming formal affiliates.³¹ Similarly, AQC used public messaging to create the image of a unified and coordinated global movement. As its number of franchises grew, AQC often modified the content of its propaganda to include the region- or issue-specific concerns of its affiliates, and it regularly justified its affiliates' unpopular operations. In so doing, AQC leaders attempted to conceal the organizational turmoil and frustration with franchise groups that appeared throughout their secret correspondence. Instead, they portrayed a cohesive movement, in which the central organization and its subordinate groups shared strategic priorities and coordinated operations.

AQC's media wing, *As-Sahab*, released English-language versions of many of its messages, as did several affiliate groups. Additionally, various research and media monitoring organizations published translations of Al Qaeda-related media productions. In addition to examining translated primary source materials, this thesis draws on studies by scholars who have conducted original-language research.

1.5 Literature Review

1.5.1 Al Qaeda Pre-9/11

Osama bin Laden founded Al Qaeda in 1988 in Peshawar, Pakistan, with the purpose of organizing and supporting Arab fighters who joined the Afghan *mujahidin* in *jihad* against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal, bin Laden maintained Al Qaeda to preserve the momentum of jihadist commitment formed in Afghanistan, eventually becoming alienated from Arab rulers and shifting the organization's focus towards overthrowing so-called "apostate" regimes throughout the

³⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Letter to Zarqawi," (July 9 2005): 10, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>.

³¹ Hanna Rogan, *Al-Qaeda's Online Media Strategies: From Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007* (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), 2007), 1, accessed July 15, 2016, https://archive.org/stream/AQOMS/AlQaedaMediaStrategy_djvu.txt; Byman, *Breaking the Bonds Between Al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliate Organizations*, 1-6.

Muslim world. As most governments throughout the region began to view bin Laden as a pariah, he was compelled to move his Al Qaeda headquarters several times in the years after the Afghan *jihad* against the Soviets. After initially returning to Saudi Arabia, he was forced to flee back to Pakistan, and then to Sudan, before eventually settling in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in 1996.³²

The authors of histories on early Al Qaeda differ somewhat in their accounts of the characteristics and activities of the organization between the end of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1989 and Osama bin Laden's relocation from Sudan to Afghanistan in 1996;³³ however, there is general consensus that, between 1996 and late 2001, Al Qaeda existed as a fairly centralized and conventionally-organized group. During this period, Al Qaeda most closely resembled the monolithic, active, and dangerous organization that, even today, often is portrayed in simplistic descriptions by government spokespersons and the popular press.³⁴ By this point in time, having been persuaded of the futility of reforming or deposing Western-backed Middle Eastern regimes through either persuasion or violent resistance, Al Qaeda's leadership had settled firmly on its "far enemy" strategy, by which it sought to undermine Western support (especially that of the United States) for "apostate" Muslim regimes, thereby making these "near enemy" regimes more vulnerable to overthrow. Unmolested in its Afghan safe haven, Al Qaeda was free to pursue its self-appointed role as the elite vanguard of the global jihadist movement, operating training camps for militants from around the world, vetting these trainees and selecting the best among them for Al Qaeda membership, and planning for "spectacular" attacks against

³² Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 1 (2012): 3-27.

³³ Authors such as Peter Bergen (*The Osama bin Laden I know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006); "Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years.") and Rohan Gunaratna (*Inside Al Qaeda: global network of terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).) stressed the high level of centralization and organization within Al Qaeda from shortly after its creation, while Jason Burke challenges that notion, arguing that the group didn't truly coalesce until it entered its Taliban-sponsored safe haven in Afghanistan in 1996 (*Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 2007).).

³⁴ Carlos Setas Vilchez, "What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Al-Qaeda," *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies* 4 (2014): 2-6, accessed August 14, 2017, Dialnet-DeQueHablamosCuandoHablamosDeAlQaeda-4900465_2.pdf.

Western interests.³⁵ Operating within its highly centralized construct, Al Qaeda's major operations during this period included the attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the attack on the *USS Cole* in 2000, and culminated with the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington in 2001.

In directly attacking United States territory on 9/11, however, Al Qaeda fell into what Peter Neumann and M.L.R. Smith describe as the "escalation trap:" the group escalated the level of violence in its campaign against the "far enemy" until it provoked an overwhelming response (the "trap") by the US and its allies.³⁶ Osama bin Laden miscalculated both the resolve and the capabilities of the US and its international partners; rather than intimidating the US into withdrawing support for Middle Eastern regimes—or possibly provoking it into a half-hearted war in Afghanistan in which it could be defeated by *mujahidin*, much like the Soviet Union had during the 1980s—the 9/11 attacks instead prompted what became the "Global War on Terror," resulting in reduction of Al Qaeda's Afghan sanctuary, degradation of its financial structures, and severe restriction of its members' ability to travel and communicate with one another.³⁷

1.5.2 Al Qaeda Since 9/11

Having lost its safe haven in Afghanistan and enduring constant pressure from international counterterrorism operations since shortly after 9/11, Al Qaeda has been compelled to undertake strategic adjustments. As C.J.M. Drake has observed, ultimate political objectives are not necessarily the same thing as the strategies pursued to attain them.³⁸ While Al Qaeda's ultimate goal of a reestablished Islamic caliphate, free of Western interference, has appeared to remain constant (though unrealized) since Osama

³⁵ Bergen and Cruickshank, "Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years."; Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: global network of terror*; Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*; Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

³⁶ Peter R Neumann and Michael Lawrence Rowan Smith, *The strategy of terrorism: How it works, and why it fails* (London: Routledge, 2007), 81-83.

³⁷ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 51-6.

³⁸ C.J.M. Drake, *Terrorists' Target Selection* (London: MacMillan, 1998).

bin Laden's first *fatwa* in 1996,³⁹ the strategies it has adopted to advance that goal have evolved. The group's reduced operational capacity after being driven underground in late 2001 forced it to recalibrate its strategy in an attempt to maintain relevance as a vanguard of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. Under these conditions, Al Qaeda leadership sought to make up for the core organization's operational limitations by increasing reliance on media operations to promote their ideology and inspire adherents,⁴⁰ while also decentralizing command and control by "franchising" the Al Qaeda brand through regional militant groups.⁴¹ While this flexibility has kept Al Qaeda alive, the resulting organizational changes have not been without their disadvantages. Al Qaeda's strategic innovations often have proved to be a double-edged sword, requiring further adjustment to address new complications arising from them.

1.5.3 Organizational Decentralization

Prior to late 2001, when the United States launched its retaliatory campaign in response to the 9/11 attacks, Al Qaeda operated with relative impunity from its Afghan sanctuary, and thus largely was free from what Jacob Shapiro has termed the "terrorist's dilemma."⁴² This concept addresses the tension between secrecy and control for violent covert organizations. On the one hand, a centralized, hierarchical organization is more vulnerable to discovery, penetration, and disruption by security forces than is a decentralized network. On the other hand, command decentralization cedes the control necessary to plan and execute sophisticated, large-scale operations. Additionally, a decentralized organization is more likely to suffer from counterproductive activities (such as excessive or indiscriminate violence) by lower-level operatives that can have a negative effect on the reputation of the overall organization and on its ability to achieve its overarching objectives.⁴³ Once it lost its safe haven in Afghanistan and its members

³⁹ Michael WS Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ James JF Forest, "Influence Warfare and Modern Terrorism," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2009): 18.

⁴¹ Barak Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy," *Survival* 53, no. 3 (2011): 29.

⁴² Jacob N Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 13-15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4-10.

became the subjects of worldwide manhunts by the US and its allies, Al Qaeda was forced to sacrifice some of the efficiency and efficacy of its centralized command structure in the interests of security. This was the period when Al Qaeda more closely began to resemble a network or movement.⁴⁴ The actual extent to which Al Qaeda's senior leadership gave up or lost control over the organization is a central area of inquiry for this thesis.

A number of analysts and commentators have extolled the Al Qaeda leadership's flexibility and innovation in conceiving of the transition to a decentralized network or movement, and some believe that the elusiveness and unpredictability of such a movement make it at least as dangerous as the original, centralized Al Qaeda.⁴⁵ It also could be said that the image of a transcontinental, many-headed terrorist movement adds to the Al Qaeda name's popular mystique. While some organizational theorists note that Al Qaeda's post-9/11 structural evolution resulted in the creation of a new, uniquely adaptive organizational typology,⁴⁶ others have argued that the commonly perceived operational benefits of a diffuse network are largely illusory. Scholars in the latter group contend that, in fact, Al Qaeda's decentralization harmed its strategic coherence and capacity for collective action, while simultaneously linking the organization's reputation to the actions of affiliated or associated groups over which its senior leaders had little control.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg, "Al Qaeda's Organizational Structure and Its Evolution," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 12 (2010): 1043-78; Bruce Hoffman, "The Global Terrorist Threat: Is Al-Qaeda on the Run or on the March?," *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2 (2007): 44-58; Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (2013): 635-53.

⁴⁵ For example, Bruce Riedel, "Al Qaeda Strikes Back," *Foreign Affairs* (2007): 24-40; Hoffman, "The Global Terrorist Threat: Is Al-Qaeda on the Run or on the March?"; Leah Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works-What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say about Its Strength," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011): 128-38; Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, "Towards Global Jihadism: Al-Qaeda's Strategic, Ideological and Structural Adaptations since 9/11," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5, no. 2 (2011): 36-49.

⁴⁶ Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal, "Al Qaeda as a Dune Organization: Toward a Typology of Islamic Terrorist Organizations," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 4 (2005): 275-93.

⁴⁷ Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Calvert Jones, "Assessing the Dangers of Illicit Networks: Why al-Qaida May Be Less Threatening Than Many Think," *International Security* 33, no. 2 (2008): 7-44; Brad McAllister, "Al Qaeda and the Innovative Firm: Demythologizing the Network," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 4 (2004): 297-319; Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, 26-62.

1.5.4 Al Qaeda's Franchise Strategy

Throughout its history, Al Qaeda has maintained loose or periodic collaborative relationships with other Islamist militant organizations. At the same time, it has sought to inspire the broader Muslim population to take up the responsibility of defensive *jihād* against perceived aggression by infidels and apostate regimes. After the operational freedom of Al Qaeda's core leadership was severely constrained by counterterrorism efforts in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, its reactive process of organizational decentralization led to the establishment of formally affiliated regional "franchises." Over a little more than a decade following 9/11, Al Qaeda's senior leadership negotiated for, received, and publicly acknowledged pledges of fealty from the leaders of regional jihadist organizations in Iraq, North Africa, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, and the Indian Subcontinent. With the addition of these affiliate groups, Al Qaeda had transformed into the multi-tiered movement consisting of the four levels that are most often described in the literature: 1) Al Qaeda Central (the original core cadre based along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and directly led by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri), 2) Al Qaeda Affiliates (the formally-linked Al Qaeda "franchises" mentioned above), 3) Al Qaeda Associates (groups with direct connections, but no official ties or command relationship, to Al Qaeda Central or its affiliates), and 4) Al Qaeda-Inspired elements (groups or radicalized individuals who have no direct connections with Al Qaeda, but who conduct terrorist attacks out of solidarity with Al Qaeda's jihadist message).⁴⁸

This practice of cultivating franchises was a significant departure from Al Qaeda's pre-9/11 organizational strategy. While Al Qaeda had long worked to encourage unity of purpose among disparate militant organizations and considered one of its primary missions to be inspiring the Muslim masses to embrace an ethos of transnational

⁴⁸ Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, "Al Qaeda's Post-9/11 Evolution: An Assessment," in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment*, ed. Russell D Howard and Bruce Hoffman (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 337-8; James JF Forest and Sammy Salama, "Jihadist Tactics and Targeting," in *Jihadists and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, ed. Gary Ackerman and Jeremy Tamsett (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2009). Some scholars use basically the same organizational framework, but assign slightly different names to the individual levels of the movement. Other scholars combine the "associate" and "inspired" categories into one when describing the structure of the Al Qaeda movement.

jihad, pre-9/11 Al Qaeda avoided establishing formal regional affiliates. Formalized linkages with such groups ran the risk of causing Al Qaeda to become bogged down in nationalistic agendas, thereby diluting its message that Muslims should unify in *jihad* based on their common religion, transcending political divisions.⁴⁹

There is general agreement within the literature that the AQC leadership's decision to embark on a program of acquiring regional affiliates was driven largely by a desire to preserve the core organization's relevance and influence while its own capabilities had been significantly degraded by international counterterrorism activities.⁵⁰ Al Qaeda's diversification into regional affiliates has been likened to a business's attempts to maintain the dominance of its brand in a highly competitive market.⁵¹ In return for mutual material, operational, and propaganda benefits,⁵² both Al Qaeda Central and the regional organizations with which it merged adapted their objectives in order to accommodate one another. This "ideological hybridization" led regional groups to adopt the rhetoric of global jihad and to dedicate some of their efforts towards attacking the "far enemy," while AQC accepted that its new affiliates also would continue pursuing their local concerns.⁵³

As John Mackinlay and Jacob Shapiro have noted, a feature of decentralized militant organizations is that the tactical actions taken by dispersed elements often are disconnected from the overarching strategy that these groups are meant to be pursuing. Consequently, in the absence of strong central coordination, actors within less

⁴⁹ Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy," 29-30.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works-What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say about Its Strength," 128-38; Rick Nelson and Thomas M Sanderson, *A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2011).

⁵¹ Alex Gallo, "Understanding Al Qa'ida's Business Model," *CTC Sentinel* 4 (2011); Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy," 41-42.

⁵² Daniel L Byman, *Breaking the Bonds Between Al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliate Organizations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2012), <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2012/7/alqaida%20terrorism%20byman/alqaida%20terrorism%20byman.pdf>.

⁵³ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9 (2009): 26-45; Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works-What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say about Its Strength," 132.

hierarchical networks or movements may engage in counterproductive violence that is poorly calibrated to the prevailing political circumstances.⁵⁴

Al Qaeda has not escaped these drawbacks of decentralization. With AQC's leadership under duress, exerting control over its affiliates' activities has presented a challenge, particularly in light of the demonstrated tendency by some affiliate leaders to flout the counsel and instructions of AQC's senior leaders. The methods and outcomes of AQC's efforts to guide and manage its affiliates is a central area of investigation for this thesis.

Research into the content of jihadist web sites and Internet chat forums reveals the ferocity of debate over the extreme and indiscriminate attacks often perpetrated by Al Qaeda affiliates or other groups claiming to operate in Al Qaeda's name. Illustrating the problematic nature of a decentralized organizational strategy, AQC leaders have been reproached by Islamic clerics or potential supporters for the actions of affiliate groups over which they have little-to-no control and apparently waning influence.⁵⁵ These criticisms have caused AQC to expend substantial energy justifying the actions of groups operating in its name, and, occasionally, to express regrets on allied groups' behalf. Captured correspondence and published writings by AQC's senior leaders show that these men worried that such public disparagement could undermine jihadist unity and tarnish Al Qaeda's reputation.⁵⁶ As Barak Mendelsohn has pointed out, "Franchising means that Al Qaeda does not only get the credit for success; it also owns the blunders."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ John Mackinlay, *The Insurgent Archipelago: From Mao to bin Laden* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 224; Jacob N Shapiro, "Terrorist Decision-Making: Insights from Economics and Political Science," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 4-5 (2012): 12; Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, 4-11.

⁵⁵ Gabriel Weimann, "When Fatwas Clash Online: Terrorist Debates on the Internet," in *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas*, ed. James Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 49-74; Forest, "Influence Warfare and Modern Terrorism," 18-26.

⁵⁶ Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined*; Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America*, 66-72; Barak Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Palestinian Problem," *Survival* 51, no. 4 (2009); Michael Doran, "The pragmatic fanaticism of al Qaeda: an anatomy of extremism in Middle Eastern politics," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2002): 187.

⁵⁷ Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy," 43.

1.5.5 Debating the Organizational Nature of Al Qaeda

The questions of how to describe the nature of the Al Qaeda organization, and of what that means for the threat it poses to its declared enemies, has generated significant disagreement among terrorism analysts. The two dominant schools of thought were represented in a well-known and somewhat rancorous debate between Bruce Hoffman and Marc Sageman that played out in the pages of these two leading experts' writings in 2007 and 2008. Hoffman took the position that, despite ongoing counterterrorism pressure and a number of material setbacks, Al Qaeda continued to be resilient and relevant, and it remained the most serious threat to the West. Hoffman included the regional affiliates in his tally of Al Qaeda's overall capabilities, accepting that a meaningful level of coordination, or at least unity of purpose, still held across the organization.⁵⁸ Sageman maintained that, although AQC had not been destroyed and still could make a comeback in the right circumstances, it largely had been neutralized from an operational standpoint, and was limited to serving as a symbolic figurehead. He believed that the real threat stemmed from the dispersed, loosely connected network of local groups and inspired radicals undertaking what he termed to be the "leaderless jihad." According to Sageman, even the officially acknowledged affiliates were more appropriately characterized as part of the "al Qaeda social movement," rather than as true subordinate elements reporting to AQC.⁵⁹ These two leading scholars have continued to make similar arguments in their more recent works,⁶⁰ and most assessments of the state of Al Qaeda during its franchising era, at least until its public conflict and schism with ISIS, line up generally behind one of the two positions described above.⁶¹ Analysts'

⁵⁸ Hoffman, "The Global Terrorist Threat: Is Al-Qaeda on the Run or on the March?," 44-58; Bruce Hoffman, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism-Why Osama bin Laden Still Matters," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2008): 133-38.

⁵⁹ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 125-33; Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman, "Does Osama Still Call the Shots? Debating the Containment of al Qaeda's Leadership," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2008).

⁶⁰ Bruce Hoffman, "The Coming ISIS-Al Qaeda Merger: It's Time to Take the Threat Seriously," *Foreign Affairs* (March 29, 2016), accessed August 26, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-29/coming-isis-al-qaeda-merger>; Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future."; Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

⁶¹ Other examples of works asserting AQC's continuing strength and influence include Peter Bergen, Bruce Hoffman, and Katherine Tiedemann, "Assessing the Jihadist terrorist threat to

appraisals of Al Qaeda's current strength and the nature of the threat it presents generally align with how they have described the organization's characteristics going back to its origins: those who have tended to view the early organization of Al Qaeda (i.e. pre-1996 return to Afghanistan) as being highly structured and centralized tend to perceive AQC as continuing to have a strong hand in directing its affiliates and other allied groups,⁶² while those who were inclined to view early Al Qaeda as one of several players in a more decentralized extremist network tend to see its influence diminishing as the global jihadist movement expands.⁶³

Given that adherents to both of these schools of thought have been looking at basically the same evidence, the main issue informing their differing positions is how much "credit" they give AQC for the actions of its affiliate organizations and for more loosely associated or Al Qaeda-inspired groups and individuals. This discrepancy illustrates an area in which more research is needed, and is a key point of inquiry for this thesis. It is undeniable that AQC is less active in a traditionally operational sense than it was up until 9/11, and even the most strenuous proponents of a resurgent AQC acknowledge that its most potent capability today is to provide ideological inspiration and strategic direction to the rest of the global jihadist movement. It also is widely accepted (again, even by those who still see a strong AQC), that Al Qaeda's affiliate organizations do not entirely forsake their local/regional agendas in favor of constant confrontation with the "far enemy," and that decentralized elements have been guilty of

America and American interests," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 2 (2011): 65-101; Riedel, "Al Qaeda Strikes Back," 24-40; Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works-What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say about Its Strength."; Martin Rudner, "Al Qaeda's Twenty-Year Strategic Plan: The Current Phase of Global Terror," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 12 (2013): 953-80. Examples of works that challenge the operational and strategic coherence of the Al Qaeda organization, as well as AQC's ability to direct it, and instead place greater emphasis on the dispersed threat of leaderless or "homegrown" terrorists and locally-focused groups, are George Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012); Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*; Christina Hellmich, *Al-Qaeda: From Global Network to Local Franchise* (London: Zed Books, 2011); Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶² For example, Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 282-83; Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader*; Bergen and Cruickshank, "Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years."

⁶³ For example, Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*; Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*.

counterproductive violence that required AQC leadership to conduct “damage control” through their media operations. Still, many analysts persist in treating the activities of elements from different tiers of Al Qaeda as if they reflect unified action across the movement, often using the singular, monolithic noun “Al Qaeda” rather than parsing the organizational dynamics at work to arrive at a more nuanced view of the network responsible for Al Qaeda-linked militant activity around the world.

A valid question about the Al Qaeda organization during its franchising period is: who has been leading whom? Have affiliate groups faithfully followed the strategic and operational guidance laid out by AQC, or has AQC constantly adjusted its message and finessed its relations with affiliate leaders in a continuous bid to preserve its relevance within the jihadist community and a semblance of power and influence in the eyes of its enemies? Have the strategic innovations outlined above actually enabled AQC to continue propagating its vision of *jihad* through a coherent network, or have they only resulted in the appearance of a unified movement, when in actuality the underlying operational and organizational dynamics have changed substantially?⁶⁴ Answering these questions requires looking past jihadist public statements. As Christina Hellmich has observed, “what can be said with certainty is that the jihadis will attempt to appear as unified, competent and powerful as possible. The extent to which this amounts to wishful thinking and mere pretence is another question entirely.”⁶⁵

1.5.6 Assessing Relationships and Reciprocal Influences Between AQC and Affiliates

Considering the prominence of the regional franchises in discussions about post-9/11 Al Qaeda in official, media, and academic circles, surprisingly little empirical research has focused on the organizational and strategic effects of the affiliation process on the Al Qaeda organization as a whole, particularly as it relates to the reciprocal influences that the franchises have had on AQC. Much has been written about individual Al Qaeda affiliates, often describing the initial affiliation process and acknowledging the

⁶⁴ For discussion of the challenges and ramifications of defining command relationships and network boundaries within terrorist organizations, see Brian A Jackson, “Groups, Networks, or Movements: A Command-and-Control-Driven Approach to Classifying Terrorist Organizations and Its Application to Al Qaeda,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 241-62.

⁶⁵ Hellmich, *Al-Qaeda: From Global Network to Local Franchise*, 17.

competition between the regional groups' local agendas and the global focus they nominally adopt upon merger with Al Qaeda.⁶⁶ These studies primarily concentrate on the activities of the regional groups, however, rather than on the interplay over time between the affiliate and AQC.⁶⁷ Many authors who set out to survey or analyze the broad post-9/11 Al Qaeda organization acknowledge the significance of the affiliate network, but often lump affiliate activities together as "Al Qaeda" operations, overlooking or oversimplifying the distinctions between the activities and agendas of AQC, its formal affiliates, and even other informal members of the Al Qaeda movement.⁶⁸ A number of articles have been written to assess the network formed by AQC and its affiliates from an organizational theory standpoint;⁶⁹ however, these works generally are dedicated to drawing (sometimes tortured) comparisons to organizational science and business literature, concerning themselves with Al Qaeda as a structural archetype, rather than testing their theories using available evidence that describes the details of interactions among the Al Qaeda organization's constituent groups.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ For example, Bryce Loidolt, "Managing the Global and Local: The Dual Agendas of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 2 (2011); Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib " *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 2 (2009).

⁶⁷ Writings about AQI/ISI/ISIS provide exceptions to this point; due to the well-publicized tensions between AQC leadership and AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi over AQI's use of brutal methods that alienated many Muslims, followed years later by ISIS' defiance of Ayman al-Zawahiri and the group's eventual excommunication from Al Qaeda, most studies of the Iraq affiliate naturally address the evolving dynamics between franchise and core. See, for example, Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁶⁸ For example, Abdel Bari Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda, the Next Generation* (The New Press, 2013); Brian Michael Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade: Irreversible Decline Or Imminent Victory?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 1-5; Martin C Libicki, Peter Chalk, and Melanie Sisson, *Exploring terrorist targeting preferences*, vol. 483 (Rand Corporation, 2007); Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works-What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say about Its Strength."

⁶⁹ See, for example, Xavier Raufer, "Al Qaeda: A Different Diagnosis," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26, no. 6 (2010); McAllister, "Al Qaeda and the Innovative Firm: Demythologizing the Network."; Jackson, "Groups, Networks, or Movements: A Command-and-Control-Driven Approach to Classifying Terrorist Organizations and Its Application to Al Qaeda."; Mishal and Rosenthal, "Al Qaeda as a Dune Organization: Toward a Typology of Islamic Terrorist Organizations."

⁷⁰ Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, "Assessing the Dangers of Illicit Networks: Why al-Qaida May Be Less Threatening Than Many Think," 9.

Daniel Byman and Barak Mendelsohn have written the most thorough works looking at the causes and consequences of Al Qaeda's post-9/11 franchising strategy, with Mendelsohn producing the only book-length writing dedicated to the topic.⁷¹ Both scholars draw upon organizational theory to establish a framework within which to view AQC's program to expand through formal affiliates, and then—with greater thoroughness than the organizationally-focused articles mentioned above—they illustrate their frameworks using case studies. The two authors reach similar conclusions when assessing the reasons for and outcomes of Al Qaeda franchising. Byman points out the gains in expertise, shared learning, and resources that can accrue through the addition of affiliates, while emphasizing the criticality to AQC of the increased operational reach and legitimacy that came from co-opting the missions of and receiving loyalty pledges from regional militant groups.⁷² Mendelsohn emphasizes the impetus for AQC to pursue franchises, arguing that “the organization was pushed to adopt a branching-out strategy as a response to its decline...as a way to create the impression of expansion” in order to offset the operational impotence of the central organization after it came under intense counterterrorism pressure following the 9/11 attacks in 2001.⁷³ Byman and Mendelsohn share the conclusion that AQC's affiliation strategy may have been more damaging than beneficial to the organization. Divergent priorities between AQC and its affiliates, increased reputational risk to AQC when its franchises conducted unpopular attacks, command and control problems, and “brand” dilution are among the drawbacks they identify as inherent in AQC's franchising program.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Daniel Byman, "Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations," *Security Studies* 23 (2014): 431-470; Byman, *Breaking the Bonds Between Al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliate Organizations*; Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy."

⁷² Byman, "Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations," 447-53.

⁷³ Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, 16-17.

⁷⁴ Byman, "Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations," 433; Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, 18.

1.6 Contributions to the Literature

This thesis contributes to the body of scholarship on Al Qaeda by employing unique methodological and conceptual approaches to provide a new interpretation of organizational function and strategic coherence across the Al Qaeda organization during its main franchising period, from 2004 to 2014, with particular focus on the ways in which the regional franchising process shaped both the affiliate groups and AQC. From a historical standpoint, this investigation resolves to a higher degree of confidence than previous works—thanks to its use of new methods and new primary source evidence—some of the fundamental questions discussed in the literature regarding the command relationships and organizational processes that existed between AQC and its franchises during this period, as well as the extent to which the affiliates complied with AQC leaders' guidance and conformed with the central organization's strategic framework. Focused examination of the ways in which the actions and influences of the franchises caused AQC to modify its own approaches and methods adds an important layer to a holistic understanding of the organizational and strategic dynamics of the network. In laying out a new historical interpretation of Al Qaeda's organizational and strategic characteristics during the timeframe of this study, this thesis also establishes a new baseline of understanding that will inform analysis of the Al Qaeda network's function and strategy during later periods, up to the present, and that will support lines of inquiry into other aspects of the Al Qaeda organization. The findings, methodology, and conceptual approach of this study also could inform research on other current or future violent extremist organizations or other non-state actors, particularly ones with a "franchise" structure, such as ISIS and its regional *wilayats* (provinces).

Three particular approaches of this thesis, two methodological and one conceptual, are distinct from approaches employed in current literature and underpin this study's contributions to the field: 1) use of a body of newly available and underutilized primary sources; 2) comprehensive, objective analysis of all affiliate operations during the time period of this study; and 3) focus on reciprocal influences, particularly the ways in which AQC has adapted in reaction to the affiliates.

1.6.1 Use of New Primary Source Al Qaeda Internal Documents

An important methodological element of this project is thorough examination of the new body of primary source material, consisting largely of internal correspondence among AQC senior leaders and between the central leadership and the affiliate *emirs*, that recently has become available. In lamenting the “stagnation in terrorism research” in 2014, Marc Sageman identified the lack of available evidence, especially declassified information originally gathered during government counterterrorism operations, as a major hindrance to progress in the field.⁷⁵ Since that time, as outlined in the methodology section above, researchers have gained access to substantial new material, most notably several thousand pages of the documents captured by U.S. forces in 2011 from bin Laden’s home in Abbottabad, translated and publicly released by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence in three tranches between 2015 and 2017.⁷⁶ These documents provide a significantly more detailed and nuanced view of the internal functioning of the Al Qaeda network than previously was available, thus warranting a reevaluation of analyses published before these documents’ release.

As Chapter 2 of this thesis describes, Al Qaeda’s internal documents illuminate the ways in which both AQC leaders and the affiliate commanders understood the command relationships between the center and the regions, the depth of involvement that AQC leadership sought to have in the franchises’ affairs, the management methods that AQC applied in attempts to control the regional groups, and the interactions and adjustments that occurred between the parent organization and its affiliates. Additionally, Chapter 3 details the corpus of strategic guidance that AQC leaders issued to the franchises. The strategic guidance expressed in AQC’s internal correspondence was much more detailed and wide-ranging than the general strategic prioritization and targeting guidance included in the central organization’s media releases. Interpretations

⁷⁵ Marc Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014): 570.

⁷⁶ “Bin Laden’s Bookshelf,” U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, accessed August 16, 2017. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf>. In addition to the 265 letters and other Al Qaeda internal documents, the ODNI also listed on its website more than 300 other pieces of print and electronic media recovered from bin Laden’s home. These items are valuable resources, as well, as they illustrate the types of information that bin Laden was consuming and where some of his interests lay.

of Al Qaeda that have not considered the full body of currently available primary sources are inherently disadvantaged, as they have had to rely on assumption or deduction to draw conclusions about the command relationships, organizational processes, and full strategic framework that characterized the Al Qaeda network. This thesis will show that there was a great gulf between propaganda and the realities of action across all components of Al Qaeda, as well as energetic efforts, particularly by AQC, to conceal these strategic discrepancies. Therefore, analyses that do not benefit from insight into Al Qaeda's secret communications, which reveal information and circumstances meant to be hidden from the world, are on shaky ground. This project endeavors to address this weakness of the existing literature through thorough consideration of recently available, and thus far underexamined, primary sources.

Clearly, many of the flagship interpretations of the nature of Al Qaeda described in the literature review above, which still dominate the field of study, were completed before these primary sources were available, and new research should test their conclusions against current evidence. Strangely, the wealth of new primary sources has been largely ignored in the current academic literature, receiving mostly cursory or introductory attention in newspapers and blogs.⁷⁷ This dearth of academic treatment is mystifying, considering the abundance of information these documents provide into previously obscured aspects of Al Qaeda's internal function. It is possible that mistrust of the validity, completeness, or editorial curation of the documents has discouraged scholars from relying upon them extensively, although such doubts are not expressed in the literature with any degree of prominence. More likely, few scholars have bothered to delve fully into these primary sources because, by the time they became available to the public, Al Qaeda had become less a topic of current interest, as ISIS' rapid territorial

⁷⁷ For example, Greg Miller and Julie Tate, "Months Before U.S. Raid, bin Laden Considered Leaving Pakistan Compound," *Washington Post* (May 20, 2015), accessed August 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-opens-files-on-osama-bin-ladens-private-library/2015/05/20/7f7949b8-fef7-11e4-833c-a2de05b6b2a4_story.html?utm_term=.18c1cc85006d; Cody M. Poplin, "ODNI Releases Second Tranche of Abbottabad Documents," *LawFare* (March 2, 2016), accessed August 28, 2017, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/odni-releases-second-tranche-abbottabad-documents>; Bill Roggio, "Don't Close the Book on the Osama bin Laden's Documents," *Long War Journal* (January 20, 2017), accessed August 28, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/dont-close-the-book-on-the-osama-bin-ladens-documents.php>.

gains and declaration of a Caliphate following its break with Al Qaeda in 2014 catapulted the former franchise past the parent organization in prominence and perceived threat.

Some works relevant to this thesis' focus area, such as Byman's and Mendelsohn's studies of Al Qaeda's franchising strategy,⁷⁸ incorporated the smaller body of Al Qaeda internal documents available prior to 2015, most notably a preliminary tranche of seventeen Abbottabad documents released through the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Program in 2012.⁷⁹ These documents represented a fraction of the primary sources now available, however, and their limited scope deprived the authors of the ability to assess the full substance and nuance of interactions between AQC and its affiliates. A small number of additional papers do rely on some or all of the currently available internal documents to assess the command structure of the Al Qaeda network, but they do not pair their investigations with comprehensive analyses of the affiliates' actions, resulting in assessments that overlook evidence of affiliate non-compliance and AQC leaders' frustrations and reactions.⁸⁰ Finally, some prominent recent works, such as Peter Bergen's biography of bin Laden⁸¹ and Brian Fishman's history of ISIS,⁸² draw upon captured documents, but do not use them for this thesis' focus on in-depth assessments of the entire Al Qaeda organization.⁸³ This thesis' examination of the full

⁷⁸ Daniel Byman, "Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations;" Byman, *Breaking the Bonds Between Al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliate Organizations*; Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy."

⁷⁹ The original documents and English translations are available on the Harmony Program website, <https://ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program>. Summary and preliminary analysis of the seventeen letters is provided in Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?*

⁸⁰ Katherine Zimmerman, "The Al Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy," *American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project*, September 2013, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/aei/0030271/f_0030271_24481.pdf. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, June 2018, <https://www.hudson.org/research/14365-how-al-qaeda-works-the-jihadist-group-s-evolving-organizational-design#>.

⁸¹ Peter Bergen, *The Rise and Fall of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

⁸² Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*.

⁸³ Bergen's work employs the available primary sources to gain insight into bin Laden's life and thoughts, but he provides only a cursory treatment of the Al Qaeda affiliate network. Fishman's work is focused on examining AQC's relationships with its affiliates in Iraq and Syria.

body of available, translated internal Al Qaeda documents will address these gaps in the literature to enable complete assessment of the organizational and strategic dynamics across the entire Al Qaeda network, fully informed by the unique insight provided by access to the confidential words that AQC leaders and affiliate members wrote to each other.

1.6.2 Comprehensive Operational Analysis

A second key methodological aspect of this project is the use of data from the Global Terrorism Database to enable descriptive statistics and trend analysis of the affiliates' complete operational records, an approach without precedent in current literature. Most studies of Al Qaeda affiliate activity, even detailed works that focus on single franchises, employ cherry-picked or limited data samples to draw conclusions about the extent to which a regional group's operations have complied with AQC's strategic guidance. In particular, there is a tendency within the literature to focus on attacks that received substantial attention in the Western press, or about which AQC or its affiliate leaders chose to make victorious claims in their public statements.⁸⁴ Such selective use of data results in distorted case studies, and risks mistaking the claims of Al Qaeda propaganda or breathless media outlets for concrete operational trends. Unfortunately, even significant studies of the Al Qaeda franchise network, such as Byman's and Mendelsohn's, employ mostly anecdotal, rather than methodical, evidence of affiliate group operations.⁸⁵ This thesis undertakes to correct these methodological

⁸⁴ For example, see Eric Ouellet, Jerome Lacroix-Leclair, and Pierre Pahlavi, "The Institutionalization of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014); Stephen Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group Into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," *Concerned Africa Scholars* 85 (2010); Ricardo Rene Laremont, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel," *African Security* 4, no. 4 (2011); Anneli Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," *ISS Monograph Series* (June 2008), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.issafrica.org/uploads/MONO144FULL.PDF>; Bryce Loidolt, "Managing the Global and Local: The Dual Agendas of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 2 (2011); Matthew J. Thomas, "Exposing and Exploiting Weaknesses in the Merger of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 3 (2013), 413-435.

⁸⁵ Byman, "Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations;" Byman, *Breaking the Bonds Between Al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliate Organizations*;

limitations of previous studies by examining comprehensive data on attacks by Al Qaeda affiliates in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 to evaluate the regional groups' full bodies of work, looking beyond the headlines to assess objectively the trends and outcomes of the franchises' militant activities, thus enabling a clearer appraisal of the affiliates' compliance with AQC's guidance and strategic priorities.

1.6.3 Focus on Reciprocal Influences

A conceptual element that distinguishes this thesis from other studies of the Al Qaeda organization is a deliberate focus on tracing the reciprocal influences between AQC and its franchises, with a particular emphasis on assessing how the central organization has adjusted its strategic approach, management methods, and rhetoric in reaction to the affiliates' actions, and based on the center's experiences attempting to lead the regional groups. Analyses that do not account for the ways that AQC evolved throughout its implementation of a franchising strategy ignore one side of the equation, resulting in incomplete or inaccurate understanding of how the Al Qaeda network truly functioned, and of how the central leadership's strategic paradigm was or was not being advanced across the organization.

As discussed in the literature review above, the preponderance of writing on the overarching Al Qaeda network, while acknowledging the significance of regional affiliates, treats the organization more or less monolithically, as a singular "Al Qaeda."⁸⁶ This approach fails to appreciate the divergences and frictions that existed between the center and the regions. Glossing over the distinctions between AQC and its affiliates naturally creates the tendency to perceive a one-way influence vector leading from the parent organization to the franchises, and it leaves little room for assessment of how AQC has been forced to react and adjust its own approaches and practices as a result of

Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences.*; Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy."

⁸⁶ For example, Abdel Bari Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda, the Next Generation* (The New Press, 2013); Brian Michael Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade: Irreversible Decline Or Imminent Victory?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 1-5; Martin C Libicki, Peter Chalk, and Melanie Sisson, *Exploring terrorist targeting preferences*, vol. 483 (Rand Corporation, 2007); Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works-What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say about Its Strength."

the affiliates activities. In some cases, this approach can lead to mistakenly interpreting instances of affiliate divergence from AQC's strategic framework as evidence of a new centralized strategy.⁸⁷

Studies of individual franchise groups also have been preoccupied with describing how the regional militant groups did or did not change as a result of their affiliations with Al Qaeda.⁸⁸ While scholars analyzing single affiliates do sometimes note instances of divergence between the regional groups and the central organization, they generally do not carry the analysis through to assess whether or how AQC adjusted in response.⁸⁹ Due both to the limited scope and the single-direction focus of these studies, they certainly do not investigate how instances of strategic disconnect with individual franchises have influenced AQC's management of its overarching organization. A partial exception to this one-direction influence problem in studies of Al Qaeda affiliates can be found in recent literature about ISIS. Works written after AQC's excommunication of its affiliate have included helpful examination of how the central and affiliate leaderships responded to one another over time, particularly as ISIS and its predecessor groups repeatedly ignored AQC guidance.⁹⁰ However, even these works on the relationships between AQC and AQI/ISI/ISIS do not link their analysis to the functioning of the broader Al Qaeda network to examine how AQC's experiences with the particularly incorrigible affiliate influenced the content of its overarching strategic guidance, management methods, and rhetoric.

Finally, even Byman's and Mendelsohn's studies of the Al Qaeda franchising strategy, the existing research that most closely shares the space that this thesis occupies,

⁸⁷ For example, while Al Qaeda's internal correspondence makes it clear that bin Laden strenuously opposed AQAP's attempts to establish an emirate in Yemen in 2011 (explored in depth in Chapter 3), Charles Lister cites AQAP's actions as an example of "a more 'mature' al-Qaida grand strategy [that had begun] to emerge." Charles Lister. "Jihadi Rivalry: The Islamic State Challenges al-Qaida," *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, no. 16, (2016): 10.

⁸⁸ For example, Bryce Loidolt, "Managing the Global and Local: The Dual Agendas of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 2 (2011); Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib " *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 2 (2009).

⁸⁹ For example, Camille Tawil, "The Other Face of Al-Qaeda," *Al-Hayat* (2010), 42-43; Thomas, "Exposing and Exploiting Weaknesses in the Merger of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab," 419.

⁹⁰ For example, see Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper*, no. 19 (2015); Fishman, *The Master Plan*.

stop short in their analytical approaches. Byman and Mendelsohn do describe the affiliates' frequent departures from AQC's overarching strategy, and they acknowledge the disadvantages and challenges that this posed for the parent organization, particularly in terms of reputational risk.⁹¹ However, they do not trace the impacts of these instances of disconnect on AQC's overall approach. The drawbacks of franchise divergence are treated essentially as headaches or negative marks on a score sheet, rather than as drivers of change for AQC, with implications for the entire network.

This thesis deliberately examines AQC's relationships with the regional franchises not only to assess strategic conformity and compliance with command directives (thus revealing the extent to which affiliates were influenced by the center), but also to discern how these interactions impacted AQC's management approach and actions. This analytical focus area helps to close a gap in existing studies, which do not sufficiently investigate, and therefore fail to appreciate, the significance of reciprocal influences to a full understanding of what really was occurring across the Al Qaeda organization in terms of both organizational function and progress towards achievement of AQC's strategic objectives. This thesis provides a new interpretation by demonstrating that, on balance, AQC was more heavily influenced by the effects of its own franchising strategy than were the regional affiliates. AQC learned lessons from its experiences with affiliates that shaped its management methods and strategic guidance. Even more significantly, the franchises' patterns of non-compliance with AQC orders and advice forced the central leadership into nearly all-consuming efforts to mitigate harm caused by affiliate actions, while attempting to preserve Al Qaeda's credibility as a powerful, unified organization and its reputation as a virtuous vanguard of the *ummah*. This reactive stance, focused on damage control, essentially hijacked the central organization's strategic agenda for nearly a decade. AQC sought assiduously to conceal this organizational weakness, until ISIS' overt insubordination and egregious actions forced the central leadership's hand, leading to Zawahiri's disavowal of the affiliate and his implicit acknowledgement of the parent organization's relative powerlessness.

⁹¹ Byman, "Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations," 433; Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, 18.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 describes AQC leaders' design and intent for organizational structure and command relationships between the parent organization and its regional affiliates. It examines how the central leadership sought to assert control over the affiliates, and analyzes the franchise leaders' interactions with AQC leaders, including the extent to which they deferred to AQC's command prerogative. This chapter also includes an assessment of how organizational challenges, particularly communications difficulties and intra-affiliate dysfunction, may have impacted the franchises' compliance with AQC guidance.

Chapter 3 explores the specific instructions and advice that AQC gave to its affiliates to guide their campaign strategies, their interactions with the civilian population and other groups, their target selection and codes of conduct, and their media operations. Based primarily on newly available internal correspondence, this chapter illuminates the full extent of AQC's guidance to its franchises, which was more detailed and expansive than previously understood. The chapter assesses the affiliates' compliance with AQC instructions and advice, examines points of friction or frustration between AQC and its franchises, and analyzes how AQC adapted its own practices and strategic approach in reaction to the affiliates' behaviors, and based on lessons learned from experience at managing the network of franchises.

Next, case study chapters on two Al Qaeda affiliates, AQI/ISI/ISIS (Chapter 4) and AQIM (Chapter 5), provide in-depth illustration of the concepts explored in preceding chapters. Each case study chapter reviews the causes and processes behind the regional militant group's formal affiliation with Al Qaeda; analyzes the affiliate's rhetoric and operations to assess the extent of its conformity to AQC's strategy and its compliance with the central leadership's guidance; and traces the interplay that existed between AQC and its franchise, with particular emphasis on examining if and how AQC adjusted its strategy and/or methods in response to—or in order to accommodate—the affiliate group.

These two franchises are selected as case studies because their histories and characteristics have made them particularly representative of critical aspects of the Al

Qaeda organization. AQI/ISI/ISIS was Al Qaeda's first official regional affiliate, and also was the only affiliate to be excommunicated formally from the Al Qaeda organization. Examination of AQC's relationship with AQI/ISI/ISIS illuminates both the greatest potential benefits and the greatest risks of AQC's franchising strategy. AQC's experience dealing with AQI/ISI/ISIS strongly influenced its own organizational practices and helped to shape its guidance to and management of other affiliate groups. AQIM provides the best example of a long-standing regional militant organization—one that possessed a well-established track record and an independent identity—joining with Al Qaeda, in what arguably was the most “textbook” affiliation process. This case highlights the advantages and challenges of AQ affiliation both for the regional group and for AQC, and it provides strong examples of ways in which both the affiliate and AQC adjusted (or failed to adjust) to accommodate the other. A robust primary source record enables an in-depth look at intra-organizational dysfunction within AQIM that likely had a significant effect on its ability to act in strategic conformity with AQC.

Finally, Chapter 6 recapitulates the findings of this project, reviews this thesis' contributions to the literature, and suggests areas for further research.

Chapter 2: Command and Organizational Dynamics

2.1 Introduction

This thesis' investigation of the relationships and reciprocal influences between Al Qaeda Central (AQC) and its affiliate groups first requires understanding the central leadership's vision for the network, the ways in which the affiliate commanders have understood their own groups' places within the organization, the methods that AQC leaders have used in their efforts to influence and control their franchises, and the nature of interactions between AQC and the regional commanders. This chapter, drawing on a body of recently available and thus far underexamined Al Qaeda internal correspondence,⁹² as well as selected public statements by AQC leaders, will characterize command relationships and organizational dynamics across the network, examining both central-affiliate relationships and internal function within the regional groups to provide an organizational context within which to evaluate strategic conformity and adaptation within Al Qaeda and its component parts.

Each franchise leader publicly swore allegiance and obedience to AQC leaders as part of the affiliation process, but new access to internal documents enables cautious appraisal of the sincerity of these pledges, comparing private intent to public statement. Understanding how AQC leaders and the affiliate *emirs* viewed the command structure of the Al Qaeda organization and their respective roles within it is important to interpreting instances of disconnect between AQC guidance and affiliate actions. If the conception of the command relationship by AQC and affiliate leaders was of a decentralized, informal, or consultative arrangement, then incongruity between AQC's strategic framework and the franchises' activities would be an expected result of diverging strategic priorities, or possibly of capability shortfalls among the affiliates. Naturally, this also would apply if affiliate leaders did not see themselves as subordinate to the center, regardless of how AQC leaders viewed the organizational construct. If, however, both central organization and affiliate leaders acknowledged a hierarchical and binding senior-subordinate

⁹² See Chapter 1, sections 1.4.1 and 1.6.1 for discussion of the provenance and previous use of these documents in the literature, and of their reliability and usefulness for researchers.

relationship, then patterns of apparent non-compliance with AQC directives by affiliates, while still possibly explainable by capability gaps or simply by disingenuousness or insubordination by franchise *emirs*, likely were attributable to some other type of organizational friction, such as communication challenges or dysfunction within the affiliate groups.

Examining the organizational practices of the Al Qaeda network—the management methods employed by AQC and the nature of communication between the center and the regions—complements the assessment of command relationships by illustrating the levels of engagement and responsiveness by involved parties, as well as by illuminating the factors (administrative, logistical, security, communications, etc.) that might impact the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization.

This chapter's exploration of Al Qaeda's internal documents reveals that, despite the central leadership's relative isolation from 2001 onwards and the decentralization resulting from their franchising of regional Salafi-jihadist groups, bin Laden and his deputies continued to see Al Qaeda as a fundamentally hierarchical organization, with AQC responsible for guiding and nurturing its global network, and also entitled to its affiliates' obedience. Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other AQC officials employed a number of management tools in their efforts to exercise command and control over the affiliates, including policy issuances, reporting and consultation requirements, and training. The newly available collection of secret messages among AQC senior members, and between the central leadership and the affiliates, also show that the affiliate *emirs* generally acknowledged, at least nominally, AQC's position of command authority. However, Al Qaeda's internal correspondence reveals significant organizational challenges that may have impeded unity of effort toward pursuing the strategic objectives set forth by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. First, unreliable communication channels between the center and the regions complicated management and coordination. Second, and possibly more significantly, the franchises suffered their own intra-organizational difficulties stemming from competing agendas and indiscipline among subordinate leaders and the rank-and-file. This insight, while noted in some studies of individual affiliate groups,⁹³ has been overlooked in the literature dedicated to network-wide assessments of Al Qaeda, despite

⁹³ See footnotes 144-146, below.

its significant implications for unity of effort and strategic coherence across the Al Qaeda organization. In this sense, the franchises could be viewed as microcosms of the broader Al Qaeda organization; even if the regional *emirs* were committed to AQC's overarching strategy, internal friction and preference divergence within affiliate groups disrupted compliance with AQC guidance.

2.2 Command Relationships and Management Practices

As discussed in Chapter 1, a major point of debate among scholars and analysts studying the Al Qaeda movement has been over the nature of the command relationships between AQC and its regional affiliates. Did AQC exert direct and continuing control over its franchises, as Hoffman, Bergen, Riedel, and others argue,⁹⁴ or is affiliate-era Al Qaeda more accurately characterized by Sageman's, Burke's, and Gerges' descriptions of a diffuse network, in which the central leadership's influence over the regional branches was limited mostly to propaganda activities for encouraging fellow Salafi-jihadists and for issuing broad strategic guidance?⁹⁵ Evidence contained in Al Qaeda's internal correspondence demonstrates that, throughout the organization's regional franchising process, the central leadership continued to assert for itself an active command role over the affiliate groups.⁹⁶ Bin Laden and Zawahiri, or AQC officials who communicated with the franchises on the "two shaykhs" behalf, issued directives, demanded consultation, and reserved to themselves important decisions on affiliate activities. Many affiliate leaders, in turn, actively sought AQC's guidance or imprimatur on a range of organizational and operational issues, sometimes delaying action as they awaited orders.⁹⁷ This section examines these organizational dynamics to assess AQC's methods for attempting to control its franchises, as well as the ways in which the regional commanders interacted with the central leadership. It also explores the organizational challenges that negatively affected the network's ability to function with unity and strategic coherence.

⁹⁴ See the discussion and footnotes in Chapter 1, section 1.5.5.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ See footnotes 99-108.

⁹⁷ See footnotes 116-120.

The Abbottabad documents⁹⁸ clearly show that, up until just before his death at the hands of the U.S. military in May 2011, bin Laden saw himself as the overall commander of the Al Qaeda organization, including its regional affiliates. Often communicating through Zawahiri and other AQC lieutenants, bin Laden actively sought to direct the regional franchises by issuing guidance, arbitrating decisions, and insisting on reports and consultations from affiliate leaders. A summary of AQC's mission as the "mother organization," included in a report from one of bin Laden's subordinates, described AQC's purpose as "raising the generation, conducting external work, leading, supplying, and supervising the branches, protecting the organization, and other large requirements."⁹⁹ Bin Laden even borrowed from Western terminology to characterize how he saw his role within the organization, embracing the term "Central Al Qaeda."¹⁰⁰ In a letter to a senior assistant, Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, in May 2010, bin Laden noted that "[t]his term was coined in the media...In my opinion, there is no problem with using this term in principle in order to clarify the intended meaning."¹⁰¹ Bin Laden saw AQC's leadership role with respect to the affiliates as its rightful place within the organization's chain of command, but also as a responsibility. Writing to Abu Yahya al-Libi about affairs in Somalia, bin Laden stressed that "it is also our duty to imagine what we can possibly provide them with."¹⁰²

Reflecting this expansive view of the role that the central leadership should play in directing all branches of the Al Qaeda organization, bin Laden and other AQC senior officials were adamant on "the need to be diligent in providing advice to the brothers

⁹⁸ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.1.

⁹⁹ "Summary on Situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan," 1, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Summary%20on%20situation%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ There is no available evidence that the Western conception of "Central Al Qaeda" specifically influenced the way that bin Laden conceptualized or sought to manage the Al Qaeda organization. Rather, it is more likely that bin Laden accepted (seemingly in an almost amused way) the useful Western terminology because it described what he already saw as being the proper role of AQC.

¹⁰¹ Osama bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000019-HT (May 2010): 17, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-from-ubl-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-4-original-language-2>.

¹⁰² Osama bin Laden, "Letter to Abu Yahya," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (August 7, 2010): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Yahya.pdf>.

with leadership such as the two shaykhs...¹⁰³ Bin Laden repeatedly directed his subordinates within AQC to send out Al Qaeda's "general policy" on media and military operations to "all the regions,"¹⁰⁴ and would follow-up with his lieutenants to ensure that his policies had been disseminated and received by the affiliates.¹⁰⁵ As the strategic environment shifted, AQC circulated updates to its standing policy guidance. In early 2011, for example, as AQC leaders adapted to the tumultuous events of the so-called Arab Spring that swept through the Muslim world, bin Laden directed Atiyah to "increas[e] your care in communicating with the regions and providing them instructions on the intentions this phase requires... We shall send to the brothers the general policy during this phase to topple the regimes belonging to America."¹⁰⁶ Atiyah later reported that "[w]e have issued appropriate instructions... in our communication with our brethren in other arenas, such as: Algeria, Yemen, and others."¹⁰⁷ In addition to correspondence disseminated through clandestine channels, bin Laden and Zawahiri frequently used their public statements to deliver strategic guidance across the organization. AQC even tried

¹⁰³ "Summary of the points proposed in the session," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf>."

¹⁰⁴ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 9; "Letter from Mahmud to Bin Laden, 19 June 2010," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 421 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD): 13, accessed July 16, 2016, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf; "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 425 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD): 8, accessed July 16, 2016, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Osama bin Laden, "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud 26 September 2010," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (September 26, 2010): 5, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud%2026%20September%202010.pdf>; "Gist of Conversation Oct 11," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 5, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Gist%20of%20conversation%20Oct%202011.pdf>; Osama bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (December 4, 2010): 3, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>.

¹⁰⁶ Osama bin Laden, "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud (a)," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2011): 1-2, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, "To the honorable brother Mahmud," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (March 2011): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/To%20the%20honorable%20brother%20Mahmud.pdf>.

to use its own version of executive education to ensure broad understanding of its policy positions: when directing Atiyah to establish a “course on preparing officials to handle the tasks before them,” bin Laden insisted on including a module “making clear our general policy.”¹⁰⁸

AQC’s direction to its affiliates was not limited to broad policy issuances. The central leadership provided detailed strategic guidance, operational directives, and other advice to each affiliate, tailored to the group’s specific circumstances. AQC senior leaders also considered themselves entitled to dictate, or at least to be consulted on, many of the affiliates’ internal administrative decisions. Upon hearing reports that Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) leader Abu Umar al-Baghdadi had been killed in April 2010, AQC leaders corresponded about sending “a special message to the State that they are forming a temporary administration to handle issues until the received orders of the appointment of a new *emir*, after advice with us and the command here.”¹⁰⁹ They emphasized the role of AQC in affiliate decision-making, stating that “[t]he issue of the emirate and sovereignty there is determined here with regards to the relationship with the command here.”¹¹⁰ When Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) *emir* Nasser al-Wuhayshi sought to promote American-born militant Anwar al-Awlaki within Al Qaeda’s Yemen branch, bin Laden gently, but firmly, disapproved the move, asking instead for more information on al-Awlaki’s background so that he could make an assessment.¹¹¹

Even as AQC leaders in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region became increasingly isolated over the years due to increased international counterterrorism pressure, bin Laden and his deputies did not simply hand out orders. They also required

¹⁰⁸ bin Laden, “Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud,” 6-7.

¹⁰⁹ “In the name of God, the merciful,” U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (April/May 2010): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/In%20the%20name%20of%20God,%20the%20merciful.pdf>; Waleed Ibrahim, “Al Qaeda’s Two Top Iraq Leaders Killed in Raid,” *Reuters* (April 19, 2010), accessed July 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-violence-alqaeda/al-qaedas-two-top-iraq-leaders-killed-in-raid-idUSTRE63I3CL20100419>.

¹¹⁰ “In the name of God, the merciful,” 1.

¹¹¹ Osama bin Laden, “Letter from Usama Bin Laden to `Atiyatullah Al-Libi,” *Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000003-HT* (August 27 2010): 2, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letter-from-usama-bin-laden-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-original-language-2/>; “Three Stages Letter,” U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 8, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>.

affiliate leaders to acknowledge their understanding of the guidance they had received; they mandated progress reports on franchise operations and administration; and they dictated specific coordination requirements before regional branches were authorized to take certain actions. For example, Atiyah sternly reminded AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi that he should “abstain from making any decision on...substantial matters until you have turned to your leadership: Shaykh Usamah and the Doctor [Zawahiri].”¹¹² Bin Laden ordered the Shura Councils of “each territory” to provide AQC with annual reports “detailing the local situation, to include the progress of the local *emir* in his activity and his dealings with the *mujahidin*.”¹¹³ Reinforcing AQC’s role as a central command and coordination hub, bin Laden issued guidance that “[c]onsultation among brothers in any region will take place internally, though they will also consult with ‘Central Al Qaeda,’¹¹⁴ and “without exception...whoever has an operation outside the region where he is located must coordinate with [AQC].”¹¹⁵

The chain of command interactions between AQC and its franchises were not one-way streets; affiliate leaders regularly sought guidance and advice from AQC senior leaders, sometimes delaying certain actions or decisions until they could receive input from the central organization, and expressing frustration when AQC orders were not forthcoming in a timely manner. Affiliate leaders requested AQC consultation on a wide range of strategic, operational, and administrative matters. For example, in a March 2010 letter to “the general command and the Shaykhs,” Al-Shabaab leader Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr sought counsel on expanding operations to Kenya, explaining that “we had specific intentions to open fronts so we urge you to provide us with your thoughts concerning this matter.”¹¹⁶ Al-Zubayr continued, “We have attached for you a report on the situation, and we ask you for a quick reply, especially on the main issues because

¹¹² Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, "Atiyah's Letter to Zarqawi," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program (December 11, 2005): 5, accessed June 1, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Atiyahs-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>.

¹¹³ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 17.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹¹⁶ "Letter about matter of the Islamic Maghreb," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2010): 4, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20about%20matter%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Maghreb.pdf>.

there are several suspended issues.”¹¹⁷ AQAP leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi sought bin Laden’s blessing on a proposal to promote Anwar al-Awlaki within the organization,¹¹⁸ and, on behalf of Al-Shabaab, he passed to Atiyah a request for AQC’s strategic advice, informing him that “they need your guidance...I will send you their general key and email address...”¹¹⁹ As Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) worked to expand its membership and reach beyond its Algerian origins, group *emir* ‘Abd al-Malik Drukdal wrote to bin Laden “to consult with you [bin Laden] on this issue to benefit from your rich and invaluable experience and expertise in the area of organization and management.”¹²⁰

Despite the franchises’ poor track records of adherence to AQC guidance (detailed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5), the evidence available from Al Qaeda internal correspondence suggests that, at least among the senior leaders of AQC and the affiliates, there was shared recognition of a senior-subordinate relationship existing between the central Al Qaeda command and the regions. One apparent exception to this was the relationship between AQC and its affiliate in Iraq. While there are indications in the Abbottabad documents that Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and ISI forwarded at least some reports to AQC,¹²¹ the papers contain no instances of specific requests from the Iraqi affiliate for AQC’s guidance, and there is greater evidence that AQC leadership was frustrated by the regional group’s lack of communication and engagement with central

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁸ bin Laden, "Three Stages Letter," 8; bin Laden, "Letter from Usama Bin Laden to `Atiyatullah Al-Libi," 2.

¹¹⁹ Nasser al-Wuhayshi, "Letter to 'Atiyah-Allah," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (June 8, 2010): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20to%20Atiyah-Allah.pdf>.

¹²⁰ 'Abd al-Malik Drukdal, "The Leadership of the Organization," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 2, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/The%20Leadership%20of%20the%20Organization.pdf>. For other AQIM requests for strategic and operational guidance, see "Letter from Mahmud to Bin Laden, 19 June 2010," 12.

¹²¹ "Letter to Special Committee of al-Jihad’s Qaida of the Mujahidin Affairs in Iraq and to the Ansar al-Sunnah Army," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (January 29, 2006): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Special%20Committee%20of%20al-Jihads%20Qaida%20of%20the%20Mujahidin%20Affairs%20in%20Iraq%20and%20to%20the%20Ansar%20al-Sunnah%20Army.pdf>.

leadership. Bin Laden expressed exasperation on multiple occasions, asking for updates “[r]egarding the communications with the brothers in Iraq[.] [P]lease inform us on its progress and the reason for its scarcity.”¹²² The appearance of a disconnect between AQC and its Iraqi branch could be the result of an incomplete documentary record, but the existence of such an organizational divide is consistent with the long-running friction between AQI/ISI/ISIS and the central leadership that ultimately resulted in Zawahiri’s disavowal of the franchise in February 2014.

The content of Al Qaeda’s internal documents described above establishes that, years after Al Qaeda had begun to morph into a network of affiliates by merging with regional Islamist militant groups, AQC leaders still consistently tried to exercise a distinct command authority over the franchises, with most affiliate commanders at least nominally accepting their subordinate positions and soliciting AQC’s guidance. It is important to note, however, that decentralization of tactical planning and execution was a significant part of the Al Qaeda organizational framework. In one of bin Laden’s most explicit statements of affiliate empowerment—from a command and control perspective—he wrote to a member of his staff, “Work is directed from me to Shaykh Mahmud [another name used by Atiyah ‘Abd al-Rahman] to Shaykh Younis [AQC’s director of external operations], who is in charge of the external operations in Africa, except for the Islamic Maghreb from Libya to Mauritania, since it is under the emirate of brother Abu Mus’ab ‘Abd-al-Wudud [another name used by AQIM *emir* ‘Abd al-Malik Drukdal], and the horn of Africa is under the emirate of the al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement.”¹²³

AQC leaders also exhorted the affiliates to learn from and to assist each other. Bin Laden instructed Atiyah to “[p]ay attention to explaining the importance of

¹²² Osama bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah Al-Libi 2," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-000010-HT (April 26, 2011): 4, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-UBL-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-2-Translation.pdf>. SOCOM-2012-0010, 26 Apr 2011, p. 4; See also "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud, 26 September 2010 (from bin Laden)," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 5, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud%2026%20September%202010.pdf>.

¹²³ "Letter to Uthman," 7, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Uthman.pdf>.

coordination, as well as the dangers of neglecting it, to all the brothers in all the regions.”¹²⁴ Accordingly, Atiyah reminded the *emir* of AQAP to “[k]eep in mind that communicating with the brothers in Somalia is very important...Do not forget that you may have the help of other brothers from different areas.”¹²⁵ He previously had written to members of Al-Shabaab that “[t]he mujahidin in Somalia must learn from their brothers, the mujahidin in Iraq and Afghanistan.”¹²⁶ At least some of the affiliate leaders embraced this teamwork ethos. AQAP’s Nasser al-Wuhayshi relayed messages to AQC on behalf of Al-Shabaab, and he wrote in one of his letters to the central leadership that “[t]he important thing is to make [Al-Shabaab] feel that they are part of us.”¹²⁷ When AQIM briefly occupied a portion of northern Mali in 2012, Nasser al-Wuhayshi (who by that time was Zawahiri’s deputy *emir* within AQC, as well as remaining AQAP’s leader), sent two letters to AQIM *emir* Drukdal to share lessons that AQAP had learned during previous attempts to control and govern territory in Yemen.¹²⁸

Although the available primary sources depict Al Qaeda as having well-established, functioning organizational processes, the papers also contain evidence of a number of challenges that may have affected the network’s ability to operate efficiently and to achieve the objectives stated by AQC and its franchises. The next section will examine what Al Qaeda’s internal documents reveal about these organizational difficulties.

¹²⁴ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 33.

¹²⁵ Atiyah Abd' al-Rahman, "Letter from 'Atiyah to Abu Basir," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (March 28, 2011): 2, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>.

¹²⁶ Atiyah Abd' al-Rahman, "Letter to Mujahidin in Somalia dtd 28 December 2006," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (December 28, 2006): 3, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>.

¹²⁷ al-Wuhayshi, "Letter to 'Atiyah-Allah," 1.

¹²⁸ Nasser al-Wuhayshi, "Al-Qaida Papers: First Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb," Associated Press (May 21, 2012), accessed July 31, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>; Nasser al-Wuhayshi, "Al-Qaida Papers: Second Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb," Associated Press (August 6, 2012), accessed July 31, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>.”

2.3 Organizational Challenges

The interactions among AQC and affiliate leaders described in the previous section support characterization of the Al Qaeda movement as a fundamentally hierarchical organization, operating with strategic coherence and unity of purpose, in which the central command issued clear instructions that the subordinate leaders obediently acknowledged. However, as will be detailed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, significant discrepancies existed between the strategic guidance and operational directives emanating from AQC and the concrete actions of the franchises. It is possible that the limited documentary record, comprised mainly of secret correspondence found or captured on the battlefield, provides an incomplete portrayal of the relationships among the central and affiliate commanders. Perhaps the examples of apparent cooperativeness discussed above cannot be extrapolated to represent a trend in organizational behavior, and a more complete body of Al Qaeda's internal correspondence would reveal more instances of dissent or defiance towards AQC by the regional commanders. It also is conceivable that franchise leaders sometimes were disingenuous when expressing their subservience to AQC's dictates, and that they may have paid lip service to the central organization's leadership in order to maintain access to its financial and propaganda support, while in practice they directed their regional organizations to pursue different objectives. This question of divergent preferences between AQC and the affiliate *emirs* will be explored in greater depth in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, but the totality of the evidence suggests that Al Qaeda's central and regional leadership (with the possible exception of AQI/ISI/ISIS leaders) were in general agreement on the overarching objectives and appropriate methods of *jihad*, although they sometimes differed on prioritization or the best strategic pathways to achieve these shared objectives.¹²⁹

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, evidence of general strategic alignment between AQC leaders and affiliate *emirs* indicates that there likely were other organizational weaknesses or friction points that contributed to instances of the franchises' non-compliance with AQC guidance. Evidence provided by the available Al Qaeda internal documents highlight two areas of organizational difficulty that have

¹²⁹ See, for example, pp. 54-55 above in this chapter, and Chapter 3, section 3.2.1.

presented challenges to effective management and unity of effort across the organization. First, the same international counterterrorism pressure—and resulting security concerns—that provided the original impetus for Al Qaeda to undertake a franchising program also presented barriers to the reliable and frequent communications that facilitate management of a dispersed network.¹³⁰ Second, AQC and affiliate leaders, like all supervisors, have had to rely upon their subordinates to execute the actions necessary to turn strategies into outcomes. Group members, from sub-commanders down to foot soldiers, may have their own preferences that diverge from those of senior leadership, and they may lack discipline and commitment; both AQC officials and the regional *emirs* frequently lament in their correspondence about unruliness and poor attitudes among the “brothers.”¹³¹

2.3.1 Communication Difficulties

Considering that AQC has been forced to operate in secrecy since the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the beginning of the “global war on terror,” and that the regional groups that became Al Qaeda affiliates always have been outlawed and pursued by government security forces, an obvious and ubiquitous challenge to the organizational function of the Al Qaeda network has been the difficulty of communicating reliably and undetected. Complaints about communication problems, ranging from corrupted computer files to careless messengers, appear frequently in Al Qaeda’s internal correspondence, and are a common feature in letters from the regional affiliates.¹³² The

¹³⁰ See discussion in section 2.3.1, below.

¹³¹ See section 2.3.2 of this chapter.

¹³² For example, see "Letter about matter of the Islamic Maghreb," 4; al-Wuhayshi, "Letter to 'Atiyah-Allah," 2; "Letter to Special Committee of al-Jihad's Qaida of the Mujahidin Affairs in Iraq and to the Ansar al-Sunnah Army," 2; Abu Miqdad 'Abd-al Majid, "Letter to Shaykh Abu Abdallah dtd 2 September 2009," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (September 2, 2009): 1-2, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english2/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Abdallah%20dtd%202%20September%202009.pdf>; "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 3," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000015-HT (October 21, 2010 2010): 5, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-from-ubl-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-3-original-language-2>; "Letter to Abu-Musa'b 'Abd-al-Wadud," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 8, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf>; "Al-Qaida Papers: A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department,"

tension between operational security and effective communication clearly frustrated all parties, as illustrated in this unusually testy written exchange:

[bin Laden]: “Concerning using the internet for correspondence, it is ok for general messages, but the secrecy of the mujahidin does not allow its usage, as couriers are the only way.”

[Atiyah]: “The issue is highly complicated (My Shaykh). How can we correspond with brothers in Algeria, Iraq, Yemen and Somalia? Sometimes there is no other means after taking precautions. As for Iraq, we will try, but it is too difficult.”¹³³

Untimely communications may remove AQC senior leaders from decision-making processes, as subordinates could be forced to act before receiving command input. For example, Atiyah concluded a letter to bin Laden with a caveat: “I would like to note, my dear Shaykh, the matter for which we ask your guidance. If there is any upcoming communication within one month to one and a half [months], then we would wait for it.”¹³⁴ More dramatically, a field commander in northern Africa expressed his exasperation in a letter to AQC senior official Abu Yahya al-Libi: “I only would like to give you a message for Shaykh ‘Atiyah. We have waited a long time for his reply...I was very sorry for this delay...I consequently bear, in front of God, the responsibility of not awaiting his generous response. I consider him responsible in front of God and in front of Abu ‘Abdallah [bin Laden] and the Doctor [Zawahiri]...He is responsible for any bad encounter that we may face along the road...”¹³⁵

Clearly, the unreliability of communications among components of the Al Qaeda organization constitutes a structural impediment to Al Qaeda’s ability to function effectively as the type of integrated, hierarchical organization that bin Laden envisioned, and that many of the affiliate leaders seem to have accepted. The Abbottabad papers and

Associated Press (October 3, 2012): 8, accessed July 17, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>.

¹³³ "Gist of Conversation Oct 11," 4-5.“

¹³⁴ "Letter from Mahmud to Bin Laden, 19 June 2010," 14.

¹³⁵ 'Abd-al-Qayyum, "Letter to Shaykh Abu Yahya," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (March 20, 2011): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english2/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20%20Abu%20Yahya.pdf>.

other Al Qaeda documents show that AQC attempted to provide substantial direction to its affiliates, but it is impossible to know how many of AQC's guidance messages successfully reached the franchises, or what additional messages of acknowledgement, request, or explanation the affiliates might have sent to central leadership. AQC partially has mitigated the effects of communication difficulties through the use of public media to message their subordinates, but this method only is suitable for broad guidance, such as targeting criteria or codes of conduct for the mujahidin;¹³⁶ more specific directives would need to move by secret, less reliable means to avoid compromise. Thus, an affiliate's apparent failure to adhere to AQC instructions might not be evidence of insubordination or incompetence; it could be simply an indicator of a communication breakdown. Alternatively, it is plausible that affiliate leaders could blame failing communication channels as a way to feign ignorance of AQC's guidance in order to placate the central command, while actually pursuing their groups' separate agendas.

However, although communication challenges undoubtedly contributed to a lack of synchronization across the Al Qaeda network, they are insufficient to explain the extent of non-compliance with AQC's guidance, as will be detailed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, that characterized each affiliates' activities. Not only did AQC disseminate key pieces of broad guidance through public statements, but the available Al Qaeda internal correspondence also demonstrates that sufficient traffic successfully passed between AQC and the affiliates to reasonably assess that the franchise *emirs* understood at least the general outlines of AQC's guidance.¹³⁷ Failed communications, as discussed above, would be plausible explanations for lack of adherence to specific pieces of AQC guidance conveyed only by confidential message, yet, as will be seen, the franchises were almost uniformly non-compliant with all aspects of AQC's guidance, including the broad

¹³⁶ For example, Osama bin Laden, "A Message to Our People in Iraq," As-Sahab Media Foundation (October 23, 2007): 3, accessed June 16, 2017, <https://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/4656/OBL20071023.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>; al-Zawahiri, "A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign," 12; Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri: 'Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 2'," As-Sahab Media Foundation (February 24, 2011): 1-2, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/7269>; and Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri: 'And the Noble Knight Dismounts'," As-Sahab Media Foundation (June 8, 2011): 4, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/7264>.

¹³⁷ See discussion and footnotes on pp. 51-56, above.

issuances commonly spread through AQC's media operations. Therefore, other explanations are needed to account for patterns of affiliate failure to adhere to AQC guidance; from an organizational standpoint, the franchise-level dysfunction described in the following section is more compelling as a possible contributor to strategic disconnect.

2.3.2 Affiliate-Level Dysfunction

A second, and likely more impactful, weakness in the Al Qaeda organization that could help to explain cases in which affiliates have failed to follow AQC guidance lies in the memberships of the franchises, particularly some of the sub-commanders and the rank-and-file fighters. Even if regional group commanders, who had been involved deeply in the decision to affiliate formally with Al Qaeda, were largely receptive to the central leadership's guidance (again, with AQI/ISI/ISIS being a notable exception), they required cooperation from the lower tiers of their own organizations to conduct operations in accordance with AQC's direction. In this sense, it may be useful to view regional militant groups as microcosms of the wider Al Qaeda network, subject to the same types of organizational dynamics and potential preference divergences that might contribute to a lack of strategic and operational coherence between AQC and its affiliates.

Criticism of the quality and character of lower-ranking militants (or "brothers") is a recurring theme in correspondence among AQC and affiliate senior leaders. Veteran *jihadis* like Atiyah ruefully describe the immature and undisciplined young recruits: "We have some problems we mentioned before, like dissent and lack of discipline from some young men...who do as they wish and roam in the markets...A solution to the problem they represent has escaped us, but we are still trying. God grants success."¹³⁸ Other messages lament that "we get inflicted with people who conduct *jihad* according to their moods or as they wish...They do not take into consideration the interest of the *jihadi* community,"¹³⁹ and "we cannot guarantee the strength of the patience and stability of the new brothers who are quickly deployed."¹⁴⁰ After a field visit to the Islamic Maghreb in

¹³⁸ al-Rahman, "Letter from Mahmud to Bin Laden, 19 June 2010," 6-7.

¹³⁹ "Summary on Situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan," 1-2.

¹⁴⁰ "Report on the External Operations," 2, accessed July 16, 2016, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf.

2007, the AQC chief of external operations, Younis al-Mauritani reported that “[t]he brothers require oversight, guidance, and expert instructors,”¹⁴¹ and AQIM *emir* Drukdal observed that a “problem we face is that the number of brothers who join *jihad*... can be significant, but most of them are young (may God extend their lives) and they lack *jihadi* experience.”¹⁴² Bin Laden summed up the problem in a 2010 letter to a senior staff member: “There are many regrettable incidents and stories caused mainly by neglect and lack of excellence.”¹⁴³

Personnel deficiencies within the regional affiliates have not been limited to entry-level *mujahidin*; there is evidence of significant friction and strategic disconnect between franchise *emirs* and their subordinate commanders that has affected the groups’ abilities to operate in alignment with AQC’s strategic objectives and guidance. Documents discovered by journalists in 2012 inside an abandoned AQIM headquarters in Mali detailed severe internal dissension within AQIM, including Drukdal’s condemnation of counterproductive violence and abusive treatment of Muslim civilians by the group’s components in the Sahel, as well as mutinous activity by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of Drukdal’s most powerful sub-commanders.¹⁴⁴ Within AQI/ISI/ISIS, disagreement and miscommunication between senior leaders and their sub-commanders exacerbated conflict with other Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq. As detailed in the Chapter 4 case study, the *emirs* of AQI/ISI/ISIS often defied AQC’s directives that they should cultivate popular support and work collaboratively with other Sunni militant organizations to preserve unity among the *mujahidin*; however, even in cases when the affiliate leaders intended to make peace with communities and adjacent militant groups, lower-level

¹⁴¹ Salih al-Mauritani, "Addendum to the report of the Islamic Maghreb," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (August 20, 2007): 9, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Addendum%20to%20the%20report%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Maghreb.pdf>.

¹⁴² Drukdal, "The Leadership of the Organization," 2.

¹⁴³ "Letter to Shaykh Yunis from Bin Laden," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 433 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD): 7, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420thru433.pdf.

¹⁴⁴ "Al-Qaida Papers: A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department," 5-13; "Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," Associated Press (mid- 2012): 3-9, accessed July 17, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>.

commanders sometimes refused to set aside local grievances and persisted in fighting.¹⁴⁵ Al-Shabaab has been plagued by dissension and defections resulting from disagreement between global-jihadist and nationalist factions. These divisions, which became more pronounced after official announcement of Al-Shabaab's status as an Al Qaeda affiliate in February 2012, resulted in serious challenges to the authority of Al-Shabaab *emir* Ahmed Abdi Godane, who had fought with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and subscribed to AQC's internationalized perspective. Leaders of powerful, clan-based elements within Al-Shabaab prioritized a domestic struggle to unseat Somalia's Transitional Federal Government, making it more difficult for Godane to maintain strategic focus on the "far enemy."¹⁴⁶ Even AQAP chief Nasser al-Wuhayshi, whose organization suffered less from internal strife or dysfunction than did the other affiliates, had reservations about the quality of his junior leadership, encouraging AQC to reinforce his group with additional seasoned members from "among the staff, we need them, especially the brothers who are leaders[.]"¹⁴⁷

2.4 Conclusion

Drawing upon recently available, and heretofore academically underutilized, primary source materials, this chapter has described the organizational characteristics of Al Qaeda's network, particularly as they related to command and control relationships and procedures. Al Qaeda's internal documents reveal that, despite its regional

¹⁴⁵ Jacob Shapiro provides a thorough study of the challenges of organization and control within terrorist organizations, including a number of examples from AQI/ISI, in Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4-8, 82-100; Brian Fishman describes an instance of ISI internal friction involving conflict with other Sunni groups and townspeople in Amiriyah, Iraq, in 2007 in "Dysfunction and Decline," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (2009): 13-16, and in *Master Plan*, 108-109

¹⁴⁶ Bronwyn Bruton and J. Peter Pham. "The Splintering of Al Shabaab," *Foreign Affairs*, (2012), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2012-02-02/splintering-al-shabaab>; Muhyadin Ahmed Roble, "Somalia's al-Shabaab Movement Turns on Itself," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 11, issue 16 (2013); Christopher Anzalone, "Al-Shabab's Tactical and Media Strategies in the Wake of its Battlefield Setbacks," *CTC Sentinel* 6, issue 3 (2013): 13-14.

¹⁴⁷ Nasser al-Wuhayshi, "Letter from Basir to the Brother in Command," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 2, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20from%20Basir%20to%20the%20Brother%20in%20Command.pdf>.

franchising process, the organization's design remained fundamentally hierarchical; bin Laden and al-Zawahiri assumed responsibility for and asserted command prerogative over Al Qaeda's affiliates, employing a variety of administrative techniques in attempts to control them. Messages between AQC and the regional *emirs* also suggest that, at least at the leadership level, the affiliates generally honored AQC's position of authority (with AQI/ISI/ISIS being a notable exception).

Given the evidence that most of the affiliate *emirs* were, themselves, largely in strategic alignment with AQC, the franchises' almost wholesale non-compliance with AQC's strategic guidance (as will be detailed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5) indicates that other factors likely contributed to the franchises' failures to adhere to the central organization's strategic framework. This chapter examined evidence of two such organizational weaknesses within Al Qaeda that have challenged its centralized command structure and presented barriers to unified pursuit of AQC's overarching strategic objectives: 1) difficulty maintaining reliable communications across the network; and 2) preference divergence and indiscipline at the affiliate level. These organizational shortcomings provide possible explanations for the discrepancies between AQC's instructions and the franchises' actions, with intra-affiliate dysfunction being the most compelling.

Communication challenges certainly impacted synchronization and responsiveness between AQC and the regions, but they alone were insufficient to explain the affiliates' significant strategic misalignment with AQC. The documentary record of internal correspondence indicates that sufficient message traffic passed between the central leadership and the affiliate commanders to facilitate general strategic alignment, and AQC leaders also used public statements to issue key items of broad guidance to ensure redundant dissemination.

Intra-affiliate dysfunction within the regional groups is a more compelling explanation for the franchises' failures to adhere to AQC guidance. Incompetence within the franchise memberships, internal discord and insubordination, and preference divergence among factions within the affiliate groups all challenged their abilities to operate effectively and cohesively in accordance with AQC guidance, even when the regional *emirs'* intended agendas for their groups might have been aligned with AQC's strategic priorities.

As will be seen in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, the affiliates' routine failure to comply with AQC's strategic guidance, even when they embraced AQC's counsel in both public statements and private messages, forced AQC to adjust its own strategies or actions in order to project an appearance of organizational cohesiveness and to defend against criticism of the regional groups' counterproductive actions. Consequently, this chapter's identification of possible explanations for divergence between affiliate group actions and AQC guidance has been essential in identifying root causes for the strategic disconnect that drove some of the most important reciprocal influences between the franchises and the central organization.

Chapter 3 examines the content and outcomes of the command interactions and organizational processes described in this chapter by surveying the body of strategic guidance that AQC leaders issued to the franchises, by evaluating the affiliates' compliance with AQC's guidance in word and deed, and by assessing the ways in which AQC and its affiliates influenced each other to adjust their strategies and methods.

Chapter 3: Al Qaeda Central's Strategic Guidance, Affiliate Compliance, and Adaptation

3.1 Introduction

In keeping with their vision of Al Qaeda as the vanguard of the global Salafi-jihadist movement, AQC's senior leaders placed great importance on formulating and communicating comprehensive strategies to guide the Al Qaeda organization and its adherents toward their ultimate goal of restoring the Caliphate. Al Qaeda's internal documents illustrate the determination with which they sought to educate the franchises and steer them toward disciplined pursuit of a global plan.

A critical first step in assessing the franchises' compliance with AQC's leadership is determining exactly what guidance AQC had given to its affiliates. AQC leaders used both public statements and secret correspondence to disseminate guidance and advice on a wide range of issues. This chapter explores the strategic viewpoints that AQC leaders discussed among themselves and sought to convey to the affiliates, providing a picture of their goals for the organization, their opinions on how these objectives should be pursued, and their expectations for how members of Al Qaeda should conduct themselves.

Existing literature dedicated to exploring Al Qaeda's strategy has focused on the strategic expressions contained in AQC leaders' public messages or in the writing of Al Qaeda-linked theorists.¹⁴⁸ Works that examine Al Qaeda's network of franchises have included only abbreviated summaries of AQC's strategic framework that focus largely on the broad categories of most fundamental strategic guidance, such as prioritization of attacks against the "far enemy" (the U.S. and other Western countries) over operations targeting the "near enemy" (the local "apostate regimes" of the Muslim world), the goal of eventually reestablishing the Caliphate, and the imperative to avoid Muslim civilian casualties.¹⁴⁹ The complete body of internal Al Qaeda internal correspondence now

¹⁴⁸ Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Donald Holbrook, *The Al-Qaeda Doctrine: The Framing and Evolution of the Leadership's Public Discourse* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014)

¹⁴⁹ Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 47-54; Barak

available, however, reveals extensive, detailed guidance on a wide variety of topics that went beyond the general guidance contained in public statements. The central leadership's guidance evolved over time as they learned from experience managing the affiliates, and AQC routinely disseminated reviews of its "general policy" to the franchises.¹⁵⁰ This chapter analyzes the themes and details of AQC's full corpus of strategic guidance, expanding on limited treatments currently in the literature.

This study groups AQC's strategic guidance into four categories: campaign, diplomatic, targeting and conduct, and media. Campaign guidance relates to AQC leadership's advice to its affiliates on how they should focus their efforts, what steps they should take, and what methods they should apply to advance Al Qaeda's strategic objectives. Diplomatic guidance consists of AQC's recommendations on how its affiliates should present themselves to and interact with other militant groups, religious and ethnic sects, tribes, and the wider Muslim nation (*ummah*). Targeting and conduct guidance is most closely linked to the tactical execution of military operations, and it is comprised of AQC leaders' directives related to target selection, and to the principles that should govern the *mujahidin*'s personal and operational behavior. Finally, media guidance addresses how Al Qaeda affiliates should operate in the information sphere, instructing them in how to conduct public messaging activities directed at both Muslim and "infidel" audiences.

After describing the breadth of AQC's strategic guidance to its franchises in each of the above categories, this chapter will employ the methodology outlined in Chapter 1—examination of internal documents, comprehensive operational analysis, and survey of public statements—to assess the levels of compliance by Al Qaeda's network of affiliates with the central leadership's policies and advice. This assessment is central to the thesis' evaluation of strategic coherence across the Al Qaeda organization, and it

Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 66-68.

¹⁵⁰ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 9; "Letter from Mahmud to Bin Laden, 19 June 2010," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 421 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD): 13, accessed July 16, 2016, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf; "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 425 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD): 8, accessed July 16, 2016,

reveals ways in which the process of affiliation with Al Qaeda did or did not influence the regional groups. Finally, underpinning this thesis' key line of inquiry into reciprocal influences between the affiliates and the core, and constituting a unique element of this study's place within the literature, this chapter will trace AQC's responses to the affiliates actions, analyzing how the central leadership's experiences while attempting to manage the franchises prompted adjustments to AQC's guidance, policies, and practices.

3.2 Campaign Guidance

Bin Laden envisioned a clear strategic framework to guide the Al Qaeda network toward his ultimate goal of freeing the Muslim world from infidel influence and apostate regimes in order to usher in a new Caliphate.¹⁵¹ His campaign plan required discipline across the organization; optimal outcomes required each affiliate to accept the strategic prioritization and region-specific roles laid out by the central leadership. AQC's challenge was to influence the franchises to deemphasize their regional agendas and to resist pressure from local constituencies in deference to the center's overarching strategy. To this end, bin Laden and his deputies took pains to explain their assessments of the strategic circumstances and requirements facing each affiliate, always seeking to focus the regional commanders on the organization's strategic priorities and general policies for advancing Al Qaeda's global agenda.¹⁵²

The basic premise of bin Laden's strategy to achieve Al Qaeda's overarching objective of restoring the Muslim Caliphate remained constant from his first *fatwa* declaration in 1996.¹⁵³ Bin Laden and his lieutenants reiterated this core strategy frequently in their correspondence with affiliate commanders: the "far enemy" of the United States and its Western allies must be coerced into withdrawing their support for the "apostate" regimes (or "near enemy") that govern Muslim countries. Once abandoned by their Western patrons, these regimes would be vulnerable to overthrow by

¹⁵¹ See footnotes 153-162.

¹⁵² See the discussion of AQC's management methods and communication with the affiliates in Chapter 2, section 2.2.

¹⁵³ Osama bin Laden, "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, August 23, 1996, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-of-Jihad-against-the-Americans-Occupying-the-Land-of-the-Two-Holiest-Sites-Translation.pdf>.

the *mujahidin*, opening the way for the establishment of new Islamic states to reconstitute the Caliphate.¹⁵⁴

Bin Laden and Zawahiri shared a strong conception of how this strategy should be pursued, and they emphasized the need to progress deliberately through a multi-phased campaign. This theme in AQC's campaign guidance first appeared in Zawahiri's 2005 letter to Zarqawi, in which he described for the AQI *emir* a four-stage strategy for the *jihad* in Iraq: 1) expel the Americans; 2) establish an Islamic emirate in Iraq to fill the political vacuum created by the American departure; 3) extend the *jihad* to the countries neighboring Iraq; 4) attack Israel (this step could be undertaken concurrently with the other steps).¹⁵⁵ Bin Laden later explained in a letter directed to AQAP, "[i]t is in our interest to stick to, and not skip, the steps and stages. After we exhaust the greatest enemy, we then will start exhausting the local enemy, and then we start building the [Islamic] State later."¹⁵⁶ He elaborated in a 2010 letter to Atiyah:

The way to remove this [American] hegemony is to continue our direct attrition against the American enemy until it is broken and is too weak to interfere in the matters of the Islamic world. After this phase comes the phase in which the...rulers who have abandoned Islamic law are toppled, and this will be followed by the phase in which God's religion is established and Islamic law rules.¹⁵⁷

According to bin Laden, it was essential for the Al Qaeda organization to be disciplined in adhering to these strategic phases. His letter to Atiyah continued: "The focus must be on actions that contribute to the intent of bleeding the American enemy. As for actions that do not contribute to the intent of bleeding the great enemy, many of them dilute our efforts and take from our energy."¹⁵⁸

Senior AQC leaders believed that abiding by this phased strategic paradigm was critical for two main reasons. First, it would be too risky for the *mujahidin* to declare an emirate while the "apostate" regimes still enjoyed the protection of the United States. As

¹⁵⁴ See footnotes 155-162.

¹⁵⁵ Al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi," 3.

¹⁵⁶ bin, Laden, "Three Stages Letter," 1.

¹⁵⁷ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 22.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 22-23.

an AQC leader explained to AQAP commander Nasir al-Wuhayshi, even after the United States had been weakened militarily and economically by years of the so-called war on terror, “the enemy continues to possess the ability to topple any state we establish.”¹⁵⁹ Al Qaeda first must separate the “apostate” regimes from their Western sponsors by “continu[ing] to pressure the Americans until there is a balance in terror, where the expense of war, occupation, and influence on our countries becomes a disadvantage for them and they become tired of it, and finally withdraw from our countries and stop supporting the Jews....timing is very important...”¹⁶⁰ Second, even if an Al Qaeda-led emirate were able to defend itself militarily, it would be doomed to failure if it could not govern effectively. As AQC cautioned AQAP, “we should not attempt to control just because we have the military power to do so, while we still do not have the power to sustain the people in their livelihood, yet.”¹⁶¹ AQC leaders argued that preparedness to provide for the people’s needs and to govern credibly was paramount, “because if we fail, people will not help us the second time.”¹⁶²

AQC’s leaders saw that one of their great challenges was synchronizing the affiliates’ actions as part of a broader campaign to restore the Caliphate. They stressed that “[w]e should completely forget about having only part of the region [rather than all of the historic Muslim lands];”¹⁶³ therefore, deviation from the “far enemy” strategy by any franchise could have repercussions for the entire movement, “the effect of [which] on the greater war in general is clear, as is the resulting delay in the phases leading to the establishment of an Islamic caliphate...”¹⁶⁴

Until the unanticipated popular uprisings of the Arab Spring caused bin Laden to reappraise Al Qaeda’s strategic prioritization (discussed at the end of this subsection), AQC leadership believed that the most effective way to advance Al Qaeda’s strategic agenda was to “deplete and exhaust [the United States] throughout the open battlefield in

¹⁵⁹ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000016-HT: 1, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Letter-to-Nasir-al-Wuhayshi-Translation.pdf>.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶¹ bin Laden, "Three Stages Letter," 2.

¹⁶² "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 2.

¹⁶³ bin Laden, "Three Stages Letter," 1.

¹⁶⁴ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 23.

Afghanistan and Iraq[.]”¹⁶⁵ An even more effective approach, in their minds, would be for all elements of the Al Qaeda organization to focus on conducting operations inside the United States. As bin Laden explained to Atiyah, “Given that the difference of the impact of attacks against the foes inside or outside of America is substantial, we need to confirm to the brothers that every effort that could be spent on attacks in America would not be spent outside of it.”¹⁶⁶

In AQC’s strategic framework, each region in which Al Qaeda affiliates operated served a specific purpose, and bin Laden repeatedly admonished his subordinates to “avoid opening up less important fronts so our efforts are not drawn away from the main head of godlessness [America].”¹⁶⁷ For example, whereas Iraq, Afghanistan, and the United States itself were the optimal theaters for combat, Yemen “should be peaceful and kept as reserved military for the *ummah*... We do not see escalation [in Yemen] as necessary at this point because we are in the preparation stage...”¹⁶⁸ Similarly, Algeria should be “a place for enablement first, then second a place to break forth from to clean up all the neighboring countries from the filth of the apostate tyrants even if later on than now.”¹⁶⁹ Continuing the theme, “[w]ork in Libya... should be based on specific types of operations and appropriate times and places, and cannot be an open front for constant and continuing operations...”¹⁷⁰

Considering that the franchises had their origins as regional insurgent groups, with *raisons d’etre* of overthrowing the ruling regimes in their respective areas, AQC’s counsel to limit operations against local authorities was a lot to ask. AQC leaders seem to have realized this; AQC senior official Abu Yahya al-Libi followed up the abovementioned recommendation for restraint in Libya with a somewhat defensive

¹⁶⁵ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 10.

¹⁶⁶ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 8.

¹⁶⁷ bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud, U.S Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, December 3, 2010, 7, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Dear%20Brother%20Shaykh%20Mahmud.pdf>; Also "Three Stages Letter," 8.

¹⁶⁸ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 2-3.

¹⁶⁹ Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Letter from Abu Yahya," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (December 05 2009): 10, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

sounding clarification: “This is not to neglect the work in Libya, as it may be perceived by some; rather, it is approaching a matter the right way.”¹⁷¹ Bin Laden shared an awareness that AQC’s strategic guidance might not be popular at the local level, writing to Atiyah that “[w]e have to consider the situation of the brothers who are in the midst of the fighting arena, as is the case in Algeria and Yemen. It might be difficult for them to understand and accept our proposal to avoid attacking the army and the police force, and for that reason, we have to draw their attention to the *Shariah* evidence and the logical assessments.”¹⁷²

Nevertheless, AQC leaders insisted on “the Organization’s clear-cut policy: Rally efforts against the head of all ungodliness, the US-Israeli alliance, and neutralize everything of it that can be neutralized. The brothers must avoid opening up any fronts that are less important...”¹⁷³ AQC leaders believed that the affiliates must minimize conflict with local authorities in order to preserve capacity and operational latitude to focus on attacking the “far enemy.” To this end, AQC leaders reminded the AQAP *emir* that “it is not in our interest to rush in bringing down the regime. In spite of this regime’s mismanagement, it is less dangerous to us than the one America wants to exchange it with.”¹⁷⁴ Bin Laden and Atiyah elaborated in additional correspondence to Nasir al-Wuhayshi: “The honest advice is to avoid any trouble and any instigation of the enemy, because we need to be friendly and politicized, and put aside any unnecessary action such as declaration of [an] emirate or anything like that...”¹⁷⁵ “Therefore, we should work to minimize our military operations and concentrate more on educating and raising the awareness of the people...”¹⁷⁶ AQIM received similar advice from the central leadership to prioritize its operations carefully¹⁷⁷ and to “study the military, political and organizational effects.”¹⁷⁸ Bin Laden wanted AQIM to “uproot the obnoxious tree by

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2009): 3, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20Addressed%20to%20Atiyah.pdf>.

¹⁷³ bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 5.

¹⁷⁴ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 3.

¹⁷⁵ al-Rahman, "Letter from 'Atiyah to Abu Basir," 1-2.

¹⁷⁶ "Three Stages Letter," 6.

¹⁷⁷ "Letter to Abu-Musa'b 'Abd-al-Wadud," 7.

¹⁷⁸ al-Libi, "Letter from Abu Yahya," 4.

concentrating on its American trunk, and to avoid being occupied with the local security forces...By fighting the local enemy we don't get the result that we deployed for, which is to reinstate the wise Caliphate and eliminate the disgrace and humiliation that our nation is suffering from...avoid insisting on the formation of an Islamic State at the time being, but...work on breaking the power of our main enemy..."¹⁷⁹

Avoiding clashes with local security forces was a crucial element of the sequenced strategy that AQC laid out for its affiliates, because fighting regime elements could prompt increased pressure from government forces and dilute the efforts that *mujahidin* could direct towards attacking the "far enemy." Additionally, since the members of the army and police typically had been recruited from the local communities, targeting them meant causing additional Muslim casualties and risked alienating the populace. For these reasons, AQC leaders encouraged the franchises to pursue truces with local authorities (this advice came after substantial internal deliberation and consultation with religious scholars to confirm the practice's religious permissibility).¹⁸⁰ As Abu Yahya al-Libi noted in a letter to AQIM, "we do have neither the energy nor the capability to confront the infidel countries all at once. So what is wrong with neutralizing some of them – those countries that need to be neutralized?...This will enable us to concentrate on the fiercest among them, those enemies who can inflict the greatest harm on us."¹⁸¹ AQC leaders wrote to AQAP, "[r]egarding the truce...it is in our interest that it happens – even if it is one-sided – unless we have to defend ourselves. We should broadcast and publish that we are not after the army or the police, but after America."¹⁸² In addition to the practical benefits of reducing the threat from local security forces and

¹⁷⁹ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 1.

¹⁸⁰ "Letter on the First Day of Rabi' al-Akhar," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (March 17 2010): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>." Also "Letter from Muhammad Tayib," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 1-7, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>.

¹⁸¹ Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Letter of guidance on leadership," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (October 7 2010): 4, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20of%20guidance%20on%20leadership.pdf>.

¹⁸² "Three Stages Letter," 7.; see also Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, "Letter dtd 18 JUL 2010," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (July 18 2010), accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20dtd%2018%20JUL%202010.pdf>.

enabling operational focus against the “far enemy,” adopting truces inside Muslim countries could provide a symbolic boost to Al Qaeda’s public standing by “show[ing] the people that we are careful in keeping the Islamic *ummah* united and the Muslims safe on the basis of peace.”¹⁸³

The unexpected events of the so-called Arab Spring, which began just a few months before bin Laden’s death, prompted some adjustments to the Al Qaeda *emir*’s strategic outlook, but these adjustments ultimately conformed to AQC’s concept for a disciplined campaign of deliberate stages. The series of popular protests and civil uprisings that started in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread across the Middle East and North Africa threatened to unseat, through mass political action, many of the regimes that comprised Al Qaeda’s “near enemy.” These developments challenged bin Laden’s previously held view that the “apostate” governments in the Muslim world only could be overthrown through the *mujahidin*’s military action against them and their Western patrons. Bin Laden optimistically embraced these popular movements, however, writing to Atiyah, “These are gigantic events that will eventually engulf most of the Muslim world, will free the Muslim land from American hegemony[,]”¹⁸⁴ and “[t]hese events are the most important events that the nation has witnessed for centuries.”¹⁸⁵

Acknowledging that “my words are contradictory to what I said in previous letters,”¹⁸⁶ bin Laden saw in the Arab Spring a promising alternate path for achieving Al Qaeda’s goals,¹⁸⁷ explaining that “history and ground truth show that these revolutions are the path for restoring the Caliphate.”¹⁸⁸ Consequently, bin Laden reprioritized Al Qaeda’s efforts, directing that the *mujahidin*’s “main duty is now to support the

¹⁸³ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 3.

¹⁸⁴ "Letter from UBL to Atiyah," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2011): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20from%20UBL%20to%20Atiyah.pdf>.

¹⁸⁵ Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah Al-Libi 2," 1.

¹⁸⁶ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 4, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud.pdf>.

¹⁸⁷ Osama bin Laden, "Zamrai (UBL) letter to Unis," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2011): 1-2, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Zamrai%20UBL%20letter%20to%20Unis.pdf>; "Afghani Opportunity," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2011): 7, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Afghani%20Opportunity.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," 3.

revolutions taking place,”¹⁸⁹ and that “[o]ur greatest duty is to provide guidance...this great duty should have the greatest share of our efforts to prevent the current revolution from becoming like previous revolutions against the Western occupation.”¹⁹⁰ He even declared to Atiyah that “we should not be consumed with the front in Afghanistan...[t]his does not mean that we should stop *jihad* there; instead we should focus our efforts toward the direction that is most likely the path for liberating the nation.”¹⁹¹ While bin Laden was convinced that the Al Qaeda organization’s involvement was critical to prevent the Arab revolts from being diluted by “half-solution people,”¹⁹² he also understood that the popular movements might be more successful at gaining widespread acceptance if they were not overtly associated with Al Qaeda. Consequently, AQC counseled that Al Qaeda members “should talk about toppling the tyrants without talking about issues related to the Caliphate[,]”¹⁹³ because “emerging with a strong [Al Qaeda] appearance... could cause embarrassment to the political and popular powers in the revolutionary Arab societies.”¹⁹⁴ Affiliate leadership should “stay out of the scene and leave the people and their business alone.”¹⁹⁵ Seeking to prevent any distraction or provocation that could detract from the Arab Spring’s momentum, AQC leaders also reemphasized their guidance “not to ingress in side fronts at this stage[,]”¹⁹⁶ and to “[n]eutralize the army and the police” by ceasing operations against them.¹⁹⁷

AQC’s campaign guidance was extensive and detailed, conveyed mostly through confidential correspondence and policy issuances to the affiliates. The central leadership saw this thematic guidance as the essential roadmap to achievement of its priority goals of removing the “far enemy’s” influence in the Muslim world and establishing a

¹⁸⁹ "Letter from UBL to Atiyah," 2.

¹⁹⁰ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2011): 2, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹² "Letter from UBL to Atiyah," 3.

¹⁹³ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," 3.

¹⁹⁴ al-Rahman, "To the honorable brother Mahmud," 1.

¹⁹⁵ "Undated statement 2," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2011), accessed April 15, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Undated%20statement%202.pdf>.

¹⁹⁶ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud (a)," 1.

¹⁹⁷ "Afghani Opportunity," 7.

Caliphate, and AQC leaders adjusted the framework, as needed, as they perceived the conditions for *jihad* evolving. AQC leadership were keenly focused on ensuring that their affiliates understood and adhered to this overarching guidance, and they were understandably frustrated when, as seen in the following section, the franchises repeatedly violated these key elements of the parent organization's strategy.

3.2.1 Campaign Guidance: Affiliate Compliance and AQC Reactions

A continuous source of frustration and friction across the Al Qaeda organization was the affiliates' inability, or unwillingness, to adhere to AQC's campaign guidance. The regional franchises consistently failed to stay on track with the central leadership's strategic outlines by skipping steps in AQC's prescribed phases to prematurely pursue emirate-style governance, by losing focus on fighting the "far enemy," and by opening "side fronts" that distracted from AQC's primary objectives and risked conflict with local Muslim communities. AQC leaders struggled against these patterns of non-compliance through persistent emphasis on communicating the organization's policies and the strategic rationale behind these policies, drawing on lessons learned from early affiliate failures to bolster their attempts to guide the network. AQC also adapted to their franchises—or to circumstances created by their franchises—by adjusting its public messaging approach and its strategic prioritization to preserve the appearance of organizational unity or to accommodate its affiliate's specific concerns.

Al Qaeda in Iraq / Islamic State of Iraq / Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

Al Qaeda's franchise in Iraq provided the earliest, and arguably the most egregious, examples of resistance to the central leadership's campaign guidance. Chapter 4 discusses how AQC leaders' experiences with AQI/ISI/ISIS, their first regional affiliate, validated their initial strategic guidance and helped to shape later orders and advice to their subordinate commanders. Bin Laden gambled on a partnership with Zarqawi—with whom he had a difficult relationship dating to the 1990s in Afghanistan¹⁹⁸—in order to revive Al Qaeda's relevance by co-opting Zarqawi's access

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter 4, pp. 135-138.

to the *jihad* in Iraq. While Zarqawi and his successors as *emir* of AQI/ISI/ISIS publicly pledged fealty and obedience to AQC's leadership, the Iraqi affiliate's actions generally were not in alignment with AQC direction. Rather than focusing on fighting against the U.S.-led occupation force, Zarqawi instigated a bloody conflict against Iraqi Shia Muslims.¹⁹⁹ The group also alienated fellow Sunnis through its attacks on local security forces, comprised largely of local tribe members seeking economic opportunity.²⁰⁰ The affiliate's controversial declaration of an emirate in the form of the ISI, which occurred without AQC consultation, generated additional resentment among Al Qaeda's desired constituency. Leaders from across the Salafi-jihadist movement criticized the ISI for being theologically illegitimate, imperiously enforced, and unable to adequately govern and protect the people.²⁰¹

The unpopularity of the Iraqi affiliate's actions, taken against the central leadership's advice, placed AQC in a predicament. AQC relied upon AQI/ISI/ISIS to provide it with a claim to operational reach and leadership in the premier field of *jihad*, but the parent organization also suffered reputational harm when it was blamed for the controversial activities of a group over which it nominally had control.²⁰² This forced AQC into a challenging, sometimes contradictory position: on the one hand, it had to publicly defend AQI/ISI/ISIS in order to preserve its appearance of authority;²⁰³ on the other hand, the central leaders had to calibrate their public messaging to preserve AQC's moral reputation—sometimes by acknowledging, and even apologizing for, atrocities

¹⁹⁹ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Zarqawi Letter," U.S. Dept of State Website, February 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>; Warrick, *Black Flags*, p. 186. See Chapter 4, pp. 137-41, 155-62, and 185-90 for detailed discussion of AQC's relationship with AQI/ISI/ISIS, including instances of strategic disconnect and AQC efforts to control the unruly affiliate and to apply lessons learned from its experiences with AQI/ISI/ISIS to help guide the other affiliates.

²⁰⁰ bin, Laden, "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 13; A. G. Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50:2 (April/May 2008), p. 77-79

²⁰¹ Fishman, *Master Plan*, 90-91; Weimann, "Fatwas Clash," 56-59; Bunzel, "Paper State," 19-20

²⁰² See discussion in Chapter 4, p. 137-38, 155-59.

²⁰³ Osama bin Laden, "Letter to Abu 'Abdallah al-Hajj," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, December 17, 2007, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Abdallah%20al-Hajj.pdf>, 1.

attributed to the *mujahidin*²⁰⁴—while also working behind the scenes to influence its insubordinate franchise and to mitigate the consequences of its unruly actions.

The central precepts of the campaign guidance that AQC leaders have issued to its network of regional franchises saw their first expression in Zawahiri's and Atiyah's letters of criticism and advice to Zarqawi in 2005.²⁰⁵ This guidance, reinforced to AQI/ISI/ISIS' leaders repeatedly until Zawahiri disavowed the group in 2014, emphasized disciplined adherence to multi-stage strategies, while stressing the need to avoid the opening of unnecessary "side fronts" that might dilute strategic focus. The Iraqi affiliate consistently defied AQC leadership's campaign guidance, particularly through its premature declaration of an emirate in the form of the ISI, and by its stubborn insistence on waging war against Shia Muslims, rather than focusing its efforts on the "far enemy." The public relations and strategic challenges created by AQI/ISI/ISIS' insubordination validated for the central leadership the wisdom of their campaign guidance, and they frequently used the franchise's mistakes as object lessons when giving counsel to other affiliates.²⁰⁶

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AQIM was another affiliate that frustrated AQC due to its failure to adhere to the central leadership's campaign guidance, although the parent organization adjusted its own strategic focus areas as a result of its relationship with the Maghrebian affiliate. AQIM faithfully adopted AQC's globalist *jihadi* message in its own media operations, but its operational track record after joining Al Qaeda showed little change from its pre-merger preoccupation with combatting regional authorities. Despite AQC leadership's intent that Algeria should be "a place for enablement first, then second a place to break forth from...,"²⁰⁷ as well as their guidance to avoid becoming entangled in fighting with

²⁰⁴ Osama bin Laden, "A Message to the People of Iraq," 23 October 2007, 4-5, <https://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/4656/OBL20071023.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>; bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to Atiyatullah 4," 10.

²⁰⁵ Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi," 09 July 2005; "Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi," 11 December 2005.

²⁰⁶ See the detailed discussion in Chapter 4, p. 185-90.

²⁰⁷ Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Letter from Abu Yahya," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (December 05 2009): 10, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>.

local security forces, AQIM overwhelmingly focused its attacks against non-Western targets in Algeria, and, to a much lesser extent, the surrounding African countries. These attacks, mainly directed against local security forces, also resulted in significant civilian collateral casualties, generating major public criticism of AQIM.²⁰⁸ Much like with AQI/ISI/ISIS, AQC was forced to put its own reputation at stake to defend its affiliate publicly, even though the franchise's actions were in direct contravention of the central leadership's direction.²⁰⁹ AQC's hopes that AQIM would be able to leverage its established European support networks to take *jihad* to the West never materialized. AQIM's most ambitious undertaking, its short-lived occupation of northern Mali in 2012, which it began in concert with tribal separatists and other Islamist groups, was doomed by its premature and harsh attempts to govern, as well as by its inability to maintain positive relations with tribes and fellow militants.²¹⁰

A noteworthy reciprocal influence of the relationship, however, was AQC's incorporation of North Africa-specific concerns and opportunities into its propaganda campaigns and operational agenda. Prior to extending its franchise to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or GSPC, which eventually became known as AQIM), Al Qaeda's leaders had devoted minimal attention to the Islamic Maghreb in their public statements, and they had not prioritized targeting European interests in the region.²¹¹ After AQIM joined the Al Qaeda organization, however, the central leadership regularly included mention of Maghrebian concerns in their public statements, including calls for the liberation of Spanish exclaves on the Moroccan coast, and even for restoration of Muslim governance over Andalusia,

²⁰⁸ Camille Tawil, "The Other Face of Al-Qaeda," *Al-Hayat* (2010): 42-43, <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-other-face-of-al-qaeda.pdf>.

²⁰⁹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Al-Zawahiri Answers Questions by Al-Qaida Critics, Criticizes Al-Qaradawi, Hamas," World News Connection, National Technical Information Service (02 April 2008); "Al Libi Issues New Book In Defense of AQIM Fighters." *CBS News* (October 15, 2008). Accessed July 15, 2016. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/al-libi-issues-new-book-in-defense-of-aqim-fighters/>.

²¹⁰ "Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook;" Al-Qaida Papers: A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department;" Callimachi, "In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left Behind a Manifesto."

²¹¹ Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?," 3.

in southern Spain.²¹² Most notable was a new AQC focus on targeting French interests. France previously had not figured prominently in AQC's targeting prioritization, possibly because its government had opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. After welcoming its north African affiliate, however, the central leadership sought to capitalize on the group's potential access to vulnerable French targets in the region, with an attendant increase in anti-France messaging.²¹³ AQC's internal correspondence after AQIM's affiliation contains regular discussion and guidance related to aspirational operations against French targets,²¹⁴ and bin Laden's library, captured during the raid on his Abbottabad hideout, contained substantial reference materials on France, almost all of which were published after the union with AQIM.²¹⁵

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AQAP differs from other Al Qaeda franchises in that it originated as an outgrowth of AQC, rather than as an existing regional Islamist militant group that completed a merger process with the central organization. AQAP formed around the remnants of Al Qaeda's cells in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, which government counterterrorism efforts largely had neutralized by the early 2000s, but which were revitalized after twenty-three key members of these groups escaped from a Sana'a prison in February 2006. Among the escapees were Nasser (Abu Basir) al-Wuhayshi and Qasim al-Raymi, both of whom had been early members of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, with al-Wuhayshi serving as bin

²¹² Nazim Fethi and Said Jameh, "Zawahiri's Call for Fighting French and Spanish Desperate Attempt to Rally Support," *Magharebia* (September 24, 2007), accessed February 4, 2014, http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2007/09/24/feature-01; Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 224-26; Celso, "Al Qaeda in the Maghreb: The 'Newest' Front in the War on Terror," 86-87.

²¹³ For example, Osama bin Laden, "To...the French People," (27 October 2010), <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/handle/10066/7277>; Osama bin Laden, "Usama bin Laden: Message to the French People," (22 January 2011), <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/handle/10066/7279>.

²¹⁴ For example, "Gist of Conversation Oct 11;" "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud."

²¹⁵ "Bin Laden's Bookshelf," U.S. Office of the Director of National Defense (accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/resources/bin-laden-bookshelf>). This website is where the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) releases documents captured during the Abbottabad raid that have been declassified. While the contents of the documents that remain classified are unknown, it is noteworthy that, in the ODNI's organization system, "Materials Regarding France" is the only country-specific category (containing nineteen total documents).

Laden's personal secretary. Al Qaeda in Yemen announced its reestablishment in 2007, and, in January 2009, the group consolidated with remaining Al Qaeda elements in Saudi Arabia under the name Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, with al-Wuhayshi as its *emir*, and al-Raymi as the group's military chief.²¹⁶ United States officials have characterized AQAP as the most dangerous of Al Qaeda's affiliates,²¹⁷ and its sponsorship of the so-called Christmas Day Underwear Bombing of a commercial airliner approaching Detroit in 2009 is the only instance of an Al Qaeda franchise launching an attack (albeit a failed attempt) inside the U.S.²¹⁸ Through its English-language newsletter, *Inspire*, as well as online posts of English sermons by American-born AQAP member Anwar al-Awlaki, AQAP has been credited with influencing multiple attacks by "homegrown" extremists in Western countries.²¹⁹ Despite these widely-cited credentials for combating the "far enemy," however, not to mention the strategic affinity with AQC that might have been expected from leaders with such close ties to the central leadership, AQAP often was at odds with bin Laden's campaign guidance, particularly as it related to military operations within Yemen.

Bin Laden had very specific ideas about how AQAP's campaign in Yemen should proceed, and he began expressing them in written guidance shortly after the group's establishment. In a 2009 letter, bin Laden instructed Atiyah to inform AQAP that "[t]hey should avoid targeting the army and the police force quarters, and often declare that they aren't targeting them, but are after the Americans who are killing our families in Gaza."²²⁰ He counseled the affiliate to manage conflict with Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime by dealing with it "in a prudent way that will show that your enemy is the party that is insisting on escalating the issues[.]"²²¹ Most importantly, "[w]e

²¹⁶ Samuel Lindo, Michael Schoder, and Tyler Jones, "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," AQAM Futures Project Case Study Series, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2011, 9-10.

²¹⁷ Laura Smith-Spark, "What is Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula?" *CNN*, 14 January 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/14/middleeast/yemen-al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula/>

²¹⁸ Scott Shane, "Inside Al Qaeda's Plot to Blow Up an American Airliner," *New York Times*, 22 February 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/us/politics/anwar-awlaki-underwear-bomber-abdulmutallab.html>.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 2.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

should stress on the importance of timing in establishing the Islamic State. We should be aware that planning for the establishment of the state begins with exhausting the main influential power [the United States]... We have to continue with exhausting and depleting them till they become so weak that they can't overthrow any state that we establish. That will be the time to commence with forming the Islamic state."²²²

AQAP *emir* Nasser al-Wuhayshi had different ideas about the best strategy for operations in Yemen. In late 2009 or early 2010, he sent a situation update to AQC leadership, exclaiming, “[I]f you ever wanted Sana’a, today is the day! The political conflict is deteriorating, and the country is about to fall apart. Our fear is that, if it falls apart without us having a presence on all levels, we will face competition from the Muslim Brotherhood and Communists[.]”²²³ Bin Laden provided his rebuttal in early 2010, responding directly to al-Wuhayshi’s suggestion: “In reference to your statement, ‘If you want Sana’, today is the day,’ we want Sana’a to establish an Islamic state, but first, we want to make sure that we have the capability to gain control of it...the enemy continues to possess the ability to topple any state we establish.”²²⁴ He explained that, in order to best support the global *jihad*, “Yemen should be peaceful and kept as reserved military for the *ummah*.” He continued, “We do not see escalation as necessary at this point because we are in the preparation stage; therefore, it is not in our interest to rush in bringing down the regime. In spite of this regime’s mismanagement, it is less dangerous to us than the one American wants to exchange it with.”²²⁵ In this and several other letters written throughout 2010, bin Laden went on to argue that AQAP should not skip the “steps and stages” by prematurely attempting to overthrow the regime and to declare an emirate, until the *mujahidin* had the capability to secure the emirate from government or foreign intervention, to effectively govern the state, and to provide for the needs of the people in order to maintain their support. He asserted that this would not be possible until America’s ability and willingness to support the “apostate” regimes had been neutralized, and, therefore, efforts that did not directly target American and its allies would only delay attainment of Al Qaeda’s ultimate strategic objectives. Consequently,

²²² Ibid., 3.

²²³ “Letter from Basir to the Brother in Command,” 1.

²²⁴ “Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi,” 1.

²²⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

AQAP should not seek conflict with local security forces, and they should even explore the possibility of a truce with the regime to enable them to focus on the “far enemy.”²²⁶

Notably, bin Laden received pushback from his own lieutenants for his guidance to AQAP. After bin Laden’s first attempt to quash al-Wuhayshi’s enthusiasm for ousting the Yemeni regime, Atiyah wrote to the AQC *emir*, criticizing both the strategic wisdom and the practicality of his counsel:

Regarding Yemen, my dear Shaykh...I would ask that you focus on the current reality in its details, which is that the war has become a reality...this is a fluid operation of the utmost difficulty, so let us focus on the operational mechanisms by which we can apply what you mentioned...Saying that we should not escalate, as it seems to me, is ambiguous and will not be practical. The young men want ‘the line’ and ‘the operations’...perhaps there is another option, which is: instability and chaos. This is better than the control of apostate infidels.

In summary: Our brothers are now engaged in an actual war with the government, and of course with the Americans...Is it appropriate for us to say, ‘Stop the escalation. We don’t want a war in Yemen!’? I do not support such a position, and all my brothers here, as they have told you of their opinions, do not support it. We believe it to be a fundamental mistake.²²⁷

Bin Laden replied to Atiyah’s challenge with a lengthy, earnest letter, in which he reiterated and expanded on the arguments he had presented to al-Wuhayshi for a restrained *jihadi* strategy in Yemen.²²⁸ After this, the documentary record picks up again with a March 2011 letter from Atiyah to al-Wuhayshi, presented within the context of the Arab Spring. It is unclear if Atiyah was speaking for himself or presenting bin Laden’s guidance, but, in light of his previous statements about the desirability of “chaos,” he may have felt vindicated, as the Saleh regime bordered on collapse. Atiyah’s message urged al-Wuhayshi to capitalize on the opportunities of the moment, but also cautioned focus and moderation, echoing bin Laden’s original themes:

What I am suggesting to my brother Abu Basir is that the brothers avoid getting sidetracked in conflicts such as conflicts with Huthis, the Shiites, and others. They should be the best Yemini in this case of chaos...and take advantage of this situation of chaos to assassinate the heads of corruption very quietly. I think the

²²⁶ “Three Stages Letter;” “Letter to Abu Basir;” “Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi.”

²²⁷ “Letter to Shaykh Abu Abdallah dtd 17 July 2010,” 1-3.

²²⁸ “Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4,” 18-30.

Yemini *mujahidin* have the best situation ever, I mean the collapse of the government, and now the brothers are the strongest power in the country.

The honest advice is to avoid any trouble and any instigation of the enemy, because we need to be friendly and politicized, and put aside any unnecessary action such as declaration of [an] emirate or anything like that.²²⁹

The available Al Qaeda documents do not contain responses that al-Wuhayshi may have provided after his comment that “today is the day” to take Sana’a initiated the debate described above. AQAP’s actions during this period, however, left no doubt that its leaders had settled upon a different course than AQC was recommending. From mid-2010 onward, the franchise’s military operations against Yemeni government forces accelerated significantly,²³⁰ especially clashes over territorial control, after the regime became destabilized by Arab Spring-related protests in early 2011.²³¹ At this time, AQAP adopted the alias, Ansar al-Sharia, under which it conducted domestic insurgent activities against the Yemeni government. This name, which a senior AQAP official explained was “what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work to tell people about our work and goals,”²³² was intended to increase the Al Qaeda affiliate’s appeal and credibility with the Yemeni populace.²³³ Use of this alias to represent itself during Yemen-internal operations enabled the group to insulate its efforts to gain support for its fight against the Yemeni regime from Al Qaeda’s global *jihadi* objectives, which were less resonant with local tribes. By the summer of 2011, while operating under the moniker Ansar al-Sharia, AQAP’s insurgent campaign had resulted in the group exercising control over large portions of southern Yemen, particularly in Abyan and

²²⁹ Atiyah ‘Abd al-Rahman, “Letter from ‘Atiyah to Abu Basir,” U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden’s Bookshelf, March 28, 2011, 1-2, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Atiyah%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf>.

²³⁰ Global Terrorism Database, 2015

²³¹ Robin Simcox, “Ansar al-Sharia and Governance in Southern Yemen,” Hudson Institute, 27 December 2012, <https://www.hudson.org/research/9779-ansar-al-sharia-and-governance-in-southern-yemen#>.

²³² Abu Zubayr Adil bin Abdullah al-Abab, AQAP cleric, quoted in Aaron Y. Zelin, “Know Your Ansar al-Sharia,” *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/21/know-your-ansar-al-sharia/#>.

²³³ “Profile: Yemen's Ansar al-Sharia,” *BBC News*, Mar. 17, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-17402856>.

Shabwa governorates. In these areas, the Al Qaeda franchise declared an “emirate” and attempted to establish governance and to provide services for the population (discussed more in the next section).

AQAP’s emirate was short-lived, however. In June 2012, Yemeni security forces, supported by U.S. military advice and air support, drove the AQAP/Ansar Al-Sharia fighters out of the territory they had occupied.²³⁴ Bin Laden was not alive to witness this reversal of fortune for the franchise led by his protégé, but his repeated warnings against premature declaration of an emirate proved to be prescient. As bin Laden had predicted, AQAP’s untimely establishment of a caliphate, before the necessary conditions for success had been established, was vulnerable to overthrow. The prospect of an Al Qaeda affiliate governing territory attracted increased opposition from regional and Western governments, and the Islamist group had not yet developed the strength to withstand the inevitable counterattack. The fact that an Al Qaeda franchise essentially governed substantial territory for more than a year arguably constituted a propaganda victory for the organization, but, nevertheless, AQAP’s actions in Yemen clearly diverged from bin Laden’s strategic formulation. AQAP was the most proactive and potent affiliate when it came to targeting the “far enemy,” but al-Wuhayshi’s insistence on simultaneously pursuing a more traditional insurgency against a “near enemy,” “apostate” regime, against bin Laden’s warnings, likely diluted the group’s efforts to attack American interests and prevented it from maximizing—at least in bin Laden’s mind—its contributions to achievement of Al Qaeda’s global strategic objectives.

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab (“the Youth”) was formed in 2003, as a breakaway faction of the Islamic Union (*al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya*, or AIAI). The AIAI was the most prominent Islamist group opposing Somalia’s internationally-supported Transitional Federal Government (TFG), but Al-Shabaab’s leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane (a.k.a. Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr), who had fought with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan until 2001, believed that the

²³⁴ Charles Lister, “Jihadi Rivalry: The Islamic State Challenges al-Qaida,” Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, number 16, January 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/en-jihadi-rivalry-2.pdf>, 10.

AIAI was moving in an unacceptably moderate, politically-oriented direction.²³⁵ Al-Shabaab officially became an Al Qaeda affiliate on 09 February 2012, when Zawahiri and Godane announced the union in a joint video released by *As-Sahab*.²³⁶ Prior to this public acknowledgement, however, the Somali militant group had been a *de facto* member of Al Qaeda for a number of years. Although the East African franchise's policies and actions were problematic for AQC in a number of ways,²³⁷ Al-Shabaab's consultation with AQC leaders on the questions of whether or not to announce the merger and declare an emirate, and its compliance with their campaign guidance on these matters, provides a positive example of the Al Qaeda core-affiliate relationship functioning as AQC envisioned.

Beginning at least as early as 2006, AQC leaders provided advice directly to Al-Shabaab through secret correspondence,²³⁸ and regularly included encouragement and support for the group in their media releases.²³⁹ Al Qaeda's internal documents show that, by 2009, at the latest, a clearly understood senior-subordinate relationship existed between AQC and Al-Shabaab, with the central leadership issuing orders to Al-Shabaab on the same basis as to its other affiliates, and with Al-Shabaab leaders requesting AQC guidance on strategic matters.²⁴⁰ During this period, Al-Shabaab's public statements increasingly aligned the group with Al Qaeda's global agenda, particularly after the U.S. Department of State designated Al-Shabaab as a terrorist organization in 2008. In September 2009, an Al-Shabaab video entitled "At Your Service, Oh Osama" included a pledge of fealty to bin Laden.²⁴¹ These media releases stopped short of claiming an official affiliation between AQC and the Somali Islamist group, however, and Al-

²³⁵ David Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia," *Orbis* (Spring 2011), pgs. 204-207.

²³⁶ "Glad Tidings by the Two Sheikhs," The Global Islamic Media Front, 09 February 2012, https://archive.org/details/Abu_al-Zubayr-al-Zawahiri.

²³⁷ See pp. 98-99, 105, 126, below in this chapter.

²³⁸ "Letter to Mujahidin in Somalia dtd 28 December 2006."

²³⁹ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "The Strategic Challenge of Somalia's Al-Shabaab: Dimensions of Jihad," *Middle East Quarterly* (Fall 2009): 25-36, <https://www.meforum.org/2486/somalia-al-shabaab-strategic-challenge>; Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia," 208.

²⁴⁰ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah;" Government Exhibit 425-10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD) (07 AUG 2010); "Letter to Abu Yahya;" "Letter from Usama Bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu Al-Zubayr;" "Letter about matter of the Islamic Maghreb."

²⁴¹ Shinn, "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia," 207.

Shabaab's leaders rejected suggestions by some members that the organization should change its name to the "Islamic Emirate of Somalia."²⁴²

The Abbottabad documents contain a correspondence record showing that Al-Shabaab's restraint in these areas aligned with specific strategic guidance from AQC leaders. In late 2009, possibly responding to Al-Shabaab's increasingly explicit public statements of loyalty, bin Laden instructed Atiyah to "send a letter to the brothers in Somalia to have them avoid declaring their solidarity with Al Qaeda[.]"²⁴³ Godane—who may not have received bin Laden's message—raised this issue in a letter addressed to AQC leadership in March 2010, first explaining that "[s]ome of the obstacles we faced included the lack of communication with you and the lack of coordination with other *jihad* arenas...the absence of international affiliation."²⁴⁴ Godane continued:

Lately, the internal discussions between us revolved around two main matters – the issue pertaining to the announcement of the state and the issue of joining [Al Qaeda]; which should we give the priority to – or should we announce it all together and at once. We hope you provide us with your opinion concerning these two matters.²⁴⁵

Bin Laden's reply to Godane a few months later acknowledged the reality that, at the time, Al-Shabaab controlled large swathes of central and southern Somalia: "I see that there should be a practical working emirate on the ground."²⁴⁶ However, in keeping with his previous advice to affiliates, warning against the risks of prematurely declaring an emirate, he counseled that Al-Shabaab should proceed "without declaring [the emirate] in the media or confirming it in any paperwork[.]"²⁴⁷

²⁴² Brynjar Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 40 (endnote #14); Bronwyn Bruton and J. Peter Pham, "The Splintering of Al Shabaab: A Rough Road From War to Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, February 2, 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2012-02-02/splintering-al-shabaab>.

²⁴³ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 2.

²⁴⁴ "Letter about matter of the Islamic Maghreb," 2. Godane's letter, addressed to "the general command and the shaykhs" and dated 05 March 2010, apparently had been forwarded to bin Laden as part of a compilation of correspondence that included a message related to developments in the Islamic Maghreb.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 2.

²⁴⁶ "Letter from Usama Bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu Al-Zubayr," 1.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

On the question of Al-Shabaab's union with Al Qaeda, bin Laden communicated to Godane that "this obligation should be carried out legitimately and through unannounced secret messaging...without any official declaration by any officers on our side or your side[.]"²⁴⁸ Bin Laden explained his two-part reasoning for this position, based on both security and humanitarian considerations: 1) "If the [union with Al Qaeda] becomes declared and out in the open, it would have the enemies escalate their anger and mobilize against you; this is what happened to the brothers in Iraq or Algeria[;]"²⁴⁹ and 2) "some Muslims in Somalia are suffering from immense poverty and malnutrition, because of the continuity of wars...by not having the *mujahidin* openly allied with Al Qaeda, it would strengthen the merchants who are willing to help the brothers in Somalia, and would keep people with the *mujahidin*."²⁵⁰

The precise reasons for the AQC decision finally to acknowledge Al-Shabaab as an Al Qaeda franchise in 2012 are unclear, but they likely were linked to the change in AQC leadership after bin Laden's death in 2011. Zawahiri had expressed a preference for publicly recognizing the East African affiliate in a 2010 letter to bin Laden,²⁵¹ so the reversal simply could have been an instance of the new AQC *emir* exercising his own strategic vision.²⁵² Zawahiri also may have seen the announcement as an opportunity to provide a public relations boost to both organizations during a period of flagging fortunes. Highlighting a "new" franchise could demonstrate Al Qaeda's continued reach and relevance after bin Laden's death, and at a time when ISI activity in Iraq was at an ebb and AQC elements in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region were under great pressure. Al-Shabaab also was struggling to maintain its strategic position in Somalia, weakened by internal divisions and increasingly challenged by Somali government and other regional military forces.²⁵³ Whatever the rationale, the announcement—which

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 2

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ "Letter to Azmarai," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-20120000006-HT, December 2010, 1, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Letter-to-Azmarai-Translation.pdf>.

²⁵² Matthew J. Thomas, "Exposing and Exploiting Weaknesses in the Merger of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 3 (2013): 419.

²⁵³ Christopher Anzalone, "The Formalizing of an Affiliation: Somalia's Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen & Al-Qa'ida Central," *Al-Wasat*, February 23, 2012,

notably did not include the declaration of an emirate in Somalia, in keeping with past AQC emphasis on adherence to deliberate “stages” of *jihad*—culminated a rare case study of affiliate discipline and compliance with AQC’s strategic guidance. The documentary record of AQC’s correspondence with Al-Shabaab leadership during this deliberation provides one of the few examples of the center-region command relationship working as AQC leaders apparently intended. Although the East African affiliate failed to meet the central leadership’s expectations in a number of areas (discussed in the diplomatic and media guidance sections, below), this exception to the affiliates’ nearly universal failure to adhere to AQC’s campaign guidance is worth noting as part of a holistic assessment of compliance and strategic conformity across the network.

The remainder of this chapter will examine additional aspects of AQC’s strategic guidance that have complemented and facilitated the campaign framework described above, as well as the franchises’ levels of compliance and the interplay between the central organization and its affiliates related to these areas of guidance. The central leadership’s advice to affiliates on minimizing conflict with other Muslim groups (diplomatic guidance), protecting Al Qaeda’s reputation and legitimacy (targeting and conduct guidance), and extending the organization’s influence by connecting effectively with audiences throughout the Muslim world and beyond (media guidance), was intended to help the franchises reduce areas of friction or vulnerability that could threaten the Al Qaeda organization’s overall strategic position and impede progress towards achievement of AQC’s ultimate objectives.

3.3 Diplomatic Guidance

The diplomatic guidance that AQC issued encouraged the affiliates to nurture unity among Salafi-jihadist militant groups, to avoid conflict with other Muslim sects, and to build common cause with tribes and certain oppressed non-Muslim peoples. AQC leaders counseled pragmatism and forbearance in these dealings in order to attract new

<https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/02/10/the-formalizing-of-an-affiliation-somalias-harakat-al-shabab-al-mujahideen-al-qaida-central/>; Matthew J. Thomas, “Exposing and Exploiting Weaknesses in the Merger of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab,” 417.

adherents and allies, as well as to minimize clashes that might endanger Al Qaeda sanctuaries, sap lives and resources, or distract from strategic focus on the “far enemy.”

One of the most common themes in AQC’s strategic advice, appearing frequently in both public statements and internal correspondence, has been the need for unity among the *mujahidin*. Perceiving that fragmentation and infighting among Salafi-jihadist groups wasted lives and resources, eroded public support, and distracted from operational focus on fighting the United States and its allies, AQC regularly urged its affiliates to pursue harmony within their own organizations and with adjacent militant groups. For example, as additional bands of North African fighters became attracted to the Al Qaeda brand of *jihad* during the years after AQIM’s emergence as an Al Qaeda franchise, AQC senior leaders pressed for the Algerian core of AQIM to foster integration with other Maghrebian groups; otherwise, “[w]e will then be back to the same problem that we thought we had passed and moved on from. I am referring to the issues of regional organizations, adopting local issues, and staying on the sidelines[.]”²⁵⁴ AQC also sought ways to foster unity among the notoriously fractious insurgent groups in Iraq. During one period of negotiation between the ISI and Sunni militant group Ansar al-Shariah, bin Laden described Al Qaeda’s outreach in a letter to Atiyah: “God willing, we will continue our efforts for unity. We have done so, in fact. We wrote condolence letters to them about the two martyred leaders. Hopefully this will be an opportunity to renew the unification effort and find new structure to bring everyone together.”²⁵⁵ In another instance, AQC attempted to persuade the “brothers in Iraq” to “hold back on announcing the *emir*...in order to protect the unity of *al-mujahidin* there...Discussions with some of the faithful *al-mujahidin* groups in appointing the new *emir* can bring the groups closer. They might accept unity [if] they have a say in the appointment of the *emir*.”²⁵⁶ In an early message of advice to Al-Shabaab in 2006, Atiyah stressed that the young group must “be united like one person, be cautious of disputes and conflicts.”²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ al-Libi, “Letter from Abu Yahya,” 2, 9.

²⁵⁵ “Letter to Bin Laden from Mahmud, 17 July 2010,” 6, accessed July 16, 2016, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf.

²⁵⁶ “Tunis,” U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Tunis.pdf>.

²⁵⁷ al-Rahman, “Letter to Mujahidin in Somalia dtd 28 December 2006,” 2.“

AQC leaders took a pragmatic, long-view approach to the matter of unity among the *mujahidin*. While their preference was for like-minded militants to join the Al Qaeda organization and acknowledge its leadership, in the near-term they were more concerned with gaining cooperative allies than they were with dictating the banner under which the *mujahidin* fought. Abu Yahya al-Libi articulated this reasoning in a letter to AQIM: “Therefore, we should first of all realize that the needs for this battle are larger and grander than the means of any one organization or group...we as *mujahidin*, who want to lead the Muslim community into fighting, should have a much broader and deeper vision than just talking about the issue of pledging allegiance.”²⁵⁸ Bin Laden reinforced this viewpoint, adding counsel on the benefits of patience: “Try to have the people who are with the Al Qaeda swear allegiance, and if they don’t then don’t shun them, be open-minded, agree to their working with you, and with the passage of time they will appreciate your tolerance, which will make them close to you, and they will join up with you.”²⁵⁹

In addition to building unity among Sunni fighters, as described above, AQC also emphasized the need to avoid unnecessary conflict with non-Salafi Muslim groups, encouraging the affiliates to resist the sectarianism that often has characterized the Islamist militant landscape. In alignment with their goal of promoting Muslim unity, AQC leaders discouraged the practice of *takfir*, in which one Muslim declares another to be a heretic. Calling this “a serious and dangerous topic,” Atiyah explained in a written response to a “brother’s” inquiry that “for the general public...they are prohibited from engaging in [*takfir*]; it is the task of the people of knowledge.”²⁶⁰ Encouraging its franchises to maintain concentration on Al Qaeda’s overarching strategic objectives, AQC’s position “[w]ith respect to Shi’a...is to avoid dealing with them and having a direct clash at this time. The need is to remain occupied with the bigger and joint foe of the Islamic nation – which are the Americans.”²⁶¹ AQC leaders entreated AQI to

²⁵⁸ al-Libi, "Letter from Abu Yahya," 5-6.

²⁵⁹ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 2. Bin Laden reiterated this perspective in bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 5.

²⁶⁰ Atiyah Abd' al-Rahman, "Kind brother," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (April 2010): 3, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=10>.

²⁶¹ al-Rahman, "To the honorable brother Mahmud," 1.

moderate its vendetta against Shiites,²⁶² and they suggested to AQAP that “the brothers avoid get[ting] sidetracked in conflicts such as conflicts with...the Shiites.”²⁶³

AQC asked its affiliates to exercise forbearance for the sake of strategic focus. After directing that the “brothers in Somalia” should “do their utmost to maintain neutrality with [Sufi groups],”²⁶⁴ bin Laden added, “If [the Sufis] refuse to be neutral, [the *mujahidin*] should not generalize it upon all of their groups. Instead, they should seek in each group the neutrality of whoever accepts to be nonaligned.”²⁶⁵ Similarly, bin Laden directed that AQAP should “[not target] the Huthi, despite the major threat they pose and our loathing for them.”²⁶⁶ Once the Arab Spring began, bin Laden issued orders to “remind our brothers in the regions to be patient and deliberate, and warn them of entering into confrontations with the parties belonging to Islam...it is probable that most of the areas will have governments established on the remnants of the previous governments...our duty at this stage is to pay attention to the call among Muslims and win over supporters and spread the correct understanding[.]”²⁶⁷

Equally important to AQC’s strategic approach was maintaining positive relations with populations outside of Islamist militant circles, including the tribes that inhabit many of the regions in which Al Qaeda franchises operate, the broader Muslim community (*ummah*), and even disadvantaged non-Muslim populations. Evoking Mao Tse-tung’s famous adage about guerrilla warfare,²⁶⁸ bin Laden wrote in a letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi that “the people’s support to the mujahidin is as important as the water for fish.”²⁶⁹ Dealing with local tribes was a particularly delicate issue for Al Qaeda’s franchises, as these ancient, often heavily-armed clans had loyalties and parochial

²⁶² For example, Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Letter to Zarqawi,” (July 9, 2005): 8-9, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>; al-Rahman, “Atiyah’s Letter to Zarqawi,” 5.

²⁶³ al-Rahman, “Letter from ‘Atiyah to Abu Basir,” 1.

²⁶⁴ “Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010,” 2.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ bin Laden, “Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud,” 8. See also al-Rahman, “Letter from ‘Atiyah to Abu Basir,” 1.

²⁶⁷ Laden, “Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah Al-Libi 2,” 4.

²⁶⁸ Mao wrote that “The [people] may be likened to water, the [guerillas] to fish who inhabit it.” The more common phrasing in English language popular citations of this quotation is: “The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea.” Mao Zedong, *On Guerilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel Griffith (BN Publishing, 2007), written 1937, translated 1961, p. 53.

²⁶⁹ “Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi,” 12.

agendas that likely would trump any affinity with Salafi-jihadists, especially if they felt themselves to be mistreated or found their objectives to be at odds with those of the *mujahidin*. Drawing on hard-won lessons, bin Laden repeatedly instructed Atiyah to “warn [the affiliates] against the dangers behind a bloody fight with the tribes...”²⁷⁰ Atiyah spread this advice, recommending to Nasir al-Wuhayshi that AQAP “take care of the tribes,”²⁷¹ and urging him to learn from the mistakes committed by AQI, whose disrespect towards the tribes of Anbar Province in western Iraq caused a once-accommodating populace to become hostile to the Iraqi affiliate.²⁷²

AQC leaders endeavored to guide the affiliates in ways that would gain and maintain public support; this became particularly important after operational excesses by affiliates (especially AQI) generated widespread opprobrium of their tactics and the resulting Muslim casualties.²⁷³ Hoping to rehabilitate the Al Qaeda image, AQC leadership warned against harshness in applying *Shariah* to newly-controlled territory,²⁷⁴ and they reminded the franchises to treat their fellow Muslims with “lenience,”²⁷⁵ “kindness, and mercy.”²⁷⁶ AQC leaders sought to establish their organization as the defender of all oppressed peoples, and they have highlighted that “Al Qaeda does not have discrimination of any ethnicity against others or entities against others.”²⁷⁷ Realizing that

²⁷⁰ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 1. See also "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010," 5.

²⁷¹ al-Rahman, "Letter from 'Atiyah to Abu Basir," 2.

²⁷² "Letter dtd 18 JUL 2010," 1.

²⁷³ For example, see Gabriel Weimann, "When Fatwas Clash Online: Terrorist Debates on the Internet," in *Influence warfare: how terrorists and governments fight to shape perceptions in a war of ideas*, ed. James Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 49-74; James JF Forest, "Influence Warfare and Modern Terrorism," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2009): 18-26.

²⁷⁴ Osama bin Laden, "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud and Shaykh Abu Yahya," (December 4 2010): 1, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud%20and%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Yahya.pdf>.

²⁷⁵ Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, "Letter to Shaykh Abu Abdallah dtd 17 July 2010," 2, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english2/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Abdallah%20dtd%2017%20July%202010.pdf>.

²⁷⁶ "Letter to Abu-Musa'b 'Abd-al-Wadud," 1.

²⁷⁷ "Letter to Shaykh Abu Muhammad 17 August 2007," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (August 17 2007): 12, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/1532-bin-laden-bookshelf-features>.

“[one] of the most important battlefields that we are immersed in is people’s minds,”²⁷⁸ AQC hoped to “show that [Al Qaeda is] keen on having a strong foundation for the unity of the Muslim nation and for the safety and security of its people.”²⁷⁹

3.3.1 Diplomatic Guidance: Affiliate Compliance and AQC Reactions

The principles of AQC’s diplomatic guidance were critical enablers of the parent organization’s overarching strategic framework, and affiliates’ failure to adhere to them, by creating schisms between the franchises and the populations within which they operated, created significant obstacles to successful achievement of AQC’s, or their own, objectives. AQI/ISI/ISIS, AQIM, and Al-Shabaab all frustrated AQC through their frequent disregard of the central leadership’s diplomatic guidance. AQAP provided an exception to this pattern of non-compliance, although the Yemeni franchise’s careful attention to building relationships with tribes and avoiding sectarian conflict may have undermined its overall alignment with AQC’s strategic priorities by enabling a locally-oriented agenda that distracted from focus on the “far enemy.”

Al Qaeda in Iraq / Islamic State of Iraq / Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

The Iraqi affiliate’s breaches of AQC’s diplomatic guidance, tied closely to the violations of campaign guidance discussed above, were a continual frustration for the central leadership. Despite repeated entreaties from AQC leaders to develop bonds with Iraq’s Sunni tribes and to foster unity among the *mujahidin*, AQI/ISI/ISIS persistently pursued policies that alienated natural allies. The Sunni tribes, which had enjoyed status as a privileged minority under the rule of Saddam Hussein, found themselves disadvantaged under the Shia-dominated government that took power after Saddam was deposed. Consequently, many of the tribes initially were sympathetic to Sunni insurgents, such as AQI.²⁸⁰ The relationship soon soured, however. AQI, led by the Jordanian Zarqawi, disrespected local customs, attempted to assert dominance over tribal

²⁷⁸ al-Libi, "Letter of guidance on leadership," 6.

²⁷⁹ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 2-3.

²⁸⁰ David J. Kilcullen, "Field Notes on Iraq’s Tribal Revolt Against Al-Qa’ida," *CTC Sentinel* 1, issue 8 (October 2008): 1.

leaders, and encroached on traditional smuggling routes and other sources of revenue.²⁸¹ By late 2006, AQI's heavy-handed approach towards the Sunni tribes had driven them to abandon the early alliance, and approximately 100,000 tribesmen eventually participated in the Awakening Movement, or *Sahwa*, joining paramilitary groups that aligned with the new Iraqi government and the US-led coalition to fight against AQI.²⁸²

Similarly, AQI/ISI/ISIS' imperious and uncompromising approach created rifts with other Sunni insurgent groups, which resisted the Al Qaeda affiliate's attempts to assert control over all *mujahidin* in Iraq. These groups particularly resented the declaration of the ISI and its claim to authority over all Iraqi Sunnis, which they saw as illegitimate and presumptuous. The Abbottabad documents shed new light on numerous complaints from Sunni militant groups to AQC leaders regarding AQI/ISI/ISIS' overbearing, often violent, behavior towards fellow *mujahidin*.²⁸³ The central leadership perceived both operational and reputational threats in this intra-insurgent strife. Operationally, conflict among Sunni militants distracted from focus on fighting the US-led coalition, wasting valuable time, resources, and lives. Reputationally, AQC stood to lose credibility with the key Sunni demographic if its namesake franchise was seen as a pariah.²⁸⁴ These threats to AQC's overall strategy were such that the parent organization, after trying and failing to bring its affiliate to heel, circumvented its own decentralized organizational framework to intervene directly in attempts to broker unity with other

²⁸¹ A. G. Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50:2 (April/May 2008), 77-79; Kilcullen, "Field Notes," 1-2.

²⁸² Peter L. Bergen, *The Longest War* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 272.

²⁸³ For example, "Dear Brother Abu al-'Abbas," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, 2007, 1-5, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Dear%20Brother%20Abu%20al-%E2%80%98Abbas.pdf>; "Jihad and Reform Front 22 May 2007," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, 2007, 1-2, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Jihad%20and%20Reform%20Front%2022%20May%202007.pdf>.

²⁸⁴ "Letter to 'Atiyatullah al-Libi About Saudi Arabia Scholars," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000014-HT, 2007, 5-7, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-About-Saudi-Scholars-Translation.pdf>; "Letter Regarding Working in Islamic Countries," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, 1-3, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20regarding%20working%20in%20Islamic%20countries.pdf>.

mujahidin groups.²⁸⁵ These peacemaking attempts, which sometimes occurred behind AQI/ISI/ISIS' back, risked undermining AQC's standing by revealing the limited extent of its control over a supposedly subordinate organization, but the danger posed by AQI/ISI/ISIS' incorrigible confrontations with fellow Sunni militants justified the maneuvers.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AQIM's failure to adhere to AQC leaders' diplomatic guidance was a significant impediment to the group's ambitions, and it prevented the affiliate from gaining the regional traction that the parent organization was counting on to extend Al Qaeda's reach. AQIM and its subordinate brigades (*katibas*) failed to develop productive relationships with other Islamist groups and tribal insurgents, instead alienating these potential partners by developing partnerships with smugglers and other criminal elements.²⁸⁶ The Arab-dominated franchise also gained a reputation for arrogant and discriminatory treatment of black Africans, eroding potential bases of support and undermining the Al Qaeda narrative that the organization was a champion of all oppressed peoples.²⁸⁷ This inability to collaborate effectively with potential allies contributed to the failure of AQIM's

²⁸⁵ "Letter to Shaykh Abu-'Abdallah al-Shafi'i," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, January 26, 2006, 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Abu-%E2%80%98Abdallah%20al-Shafi%E2%80%99i.pdf>; "Letter from Special Committee of al-Jihad's Qaida of the Mujahidin Affairs in Iraq and to the Ansar al-Sunnah Army," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, January 29, 2006, 1-2, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Special%20Committee%20of%20al-Jihads%20Qaida%20of%20the%20Mujahidin%20Affairs%20in%20Iraq%20and%20to%20the%20Ansar%20al-Sunnah%20Army.pdf>; "My Dear Brother 'Adnan," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, March 15, 2007, 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/My%20dear%20Brother%20%E2%80%98Adnan.pdf>; "Dear Honorable Brother Shaykh Azmaray," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, March 5, 2008, 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Dear%20honorable%20brother%20Shaykh%20Azmaray.pdf>; Fishman, *Master Plan*, p. 94-96.

²⁸⁶ Abdelmalek Alaoui, "The Secret of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Inc.: A Resilient (and Highly Illegal) Business Model," *Forbes* (16 December 2013); Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?," p. 8-9

²⁸⁷ Lindsey Hilsum, "Insaide Gao Where Arab Jihadis Took Bloody Sharia Retribution on Mali's Black Africans," *The Guardian* (02 February 2013); Thornberry and Levy, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, p. 7

occupation of northern Mali in 2012, for which the group initially partnered with separatist tribes. These essential partnerships soon turned to parochial conflict, however, weakening the insurgents' position and preventing them from consolidating power sufficiently to defend against French-led operations to dislodge them.²⁸⁸ Critiquing his own organization's actions in Mali, AQIM *emir* Abd' al-Malik Drukdal wrote, "[t]he decision to go to war against the Azawad Liberation Movement [a Tuareg tribal group and AQIM ally], after becoming close and almost completing a deal with them... is a major mistake."²⁸⁹ Drukdal went on to note that "a wise policy in this stage is not to push people away and make sure to integrate everybody[.]"²⁹⁰

Al-Shabaab

Somali society, traditionally characterized by Sufi-style Islam, clannism, and insularity, is challenging terrain to navigate for an Al Qaeda affiliate that subscribes to Salafism and a globalist agenda. Perceiving this, bin Laden sought to "remind the brothers in Somalia to show lenience... As for the Sufi groups, make sure the brothers do their utmost to maintain neutrality with them... Direct our brothers' attention to the importance of distinguishing between the levels of enmity each of our rivals has towards us."²⁹¹ Bin Laden also dedicated pages of correspondence to recommendations for ways that Al-Shabaab could build legitimacy and address the needs of the Somali people, giving advice on topics ranging from justice administration, to agriculture, to attracting humanitarian aid.²⁹²

Despite military successes that resulted in Al-Shabaab control over substantial tracts of territory, however, the Somali franchise's uncompromising and heavy-handed attempts to govern—against bin Laden's advice—alienated the populace and fomented significant armed resistance against its attempts to consolidate power. Somalia's clan structure has underpinned local culture and governance for centuries, yet Al-Shabaab's

²⁸⁸ Pascale Combelles Siegel, "AQIM's Playbook in Mali," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 6, no. 3 (March 2013)

²⁸⁹ Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Playbook in the Sahara, p.8

²⁹⁰ Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Playbook in the Sahara, p.10

²⁹¹ Government Exhibit 425-10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD) (07 AUG 2010), 2.

²⁹² Letter from Usama Bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr," 2; Government Exhibit 425-10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD) (07 AUG 2010), 1-4.

leadership sought to replace it with their version of a more theocratic construct, declaring that “this land belongs to Allah and anyone who imposes the Islamic law in it can govern it.”²⁹³ Al-Shabaab also violated local custom through harsh implementation of *Shariah*-based law, enforced through ruthless punishment (*hudud*). The militants banned movie theaters and music recording studios, forbade the use of *Qat* (a highly popular leafy narcotic chewed by locals), stoned young rape victims for adultery, and issued lashings for minor offenses.²⁹⁴ The group also disrupted the local economy, prohibiting shops from opening during prayer times, forcing the closure of any business it considered objectionable, and placing onerous taxes on commercial activity.²⁹⁵ Perhaps most offensive to their intended constituents, Al-Shabaab destroyed Sufi shrines and tombs.²⁹⁶

Al-Shabaab’s domineering stance towards the Somali people generated resistance, such as when the group’s closure of a soccer stadium in Kismayo sparked riots in 2009.²⁹⁷ Al-Shabaab’s insensitivity to local mores also was met with armed opposition from clans and other armed groups, most significantly the Sufi paramilitary organization *Ahlu Sunna w’al-Jama’a*, which in 2008 initiated a prolonged, costly campaign against the Al Qaeda franchise, successfully capturing Al-Shabaab controlled territory and even forming an unlikely alliance with Somali government forces to defend against Al-Shabaab’s perceived overreach.²⁹⁸ Al-Shabaab’s failure to adopt bin Laden’s pragmatic approach and to heed AQC’s diplomatic guidance eroded its legitimacy within Somali society, creating distractions and dangers that undermined its ability to pursue both AQC’s and its own strategic objectives.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AQAP adhered to the tenets of AQC’s diplomatic guidance to a greater extent than did the other regional franchises. The group cultivated relationships with Yemen’s

²⁹³ From a release by the Al-Shabaab media arm, *Kataaib*, on 14 November 2008, quoted in Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge of Somalia’s Al-Shabaab,” p. 30.

²⁹⁴ Thomas, “Exposing and Exploiting Weaknesses in the Merger...,” 418; Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge...,” 32.

²⁹⁵ Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge,” 33; Bruton and Pham.

²⁹⁶ Thomas, “Exposing and Exploiting,” 418.

²⁹⁷ Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge,” 33.

²⁹⁸ Gartenstein-Ross, “The Strategic Challenge,” 33; Thomas, “Exposing and Exploiting,” 418.

tribes and attempted to institute constructive governance in territories over which it established control. These practices, informed by observation of the disastrous consequences of AQI/ISI/ISIS' confrontational approach towards Iraq's Sunni tribes,²⁹⁹ contributed to the group's survivability by limiting the group's enemies and enabling safe haven in tribal areas, and they helped to build support and legitimacy for the franchise's goal of deposing the Yemeni regime.

AQAP leaders understood that successfully "swimming in the sea" of the Yemeni populace required effective tribal engagement. Using its primary Arabic-language media publication, *Sada al-Malahim*, as a "vehicle for dialogue with the tribes,"³⁰⁰ the group calibrated its public messaging to express solidarity with tribal concerns over loss of sovereignty and governmental corruption, and to extol the tribes' martial virtues.³⁰¹ AQAP cadres undertook other outreach efforts by frequenting traditional tribal gatherings and marrying into local tribes, while taking care to acknowledge the uniquely authoritative roles of tribal shaykhs and deliberately downplaying the more hardline aspects of Salafist theology in their interactions with tribal society.³⁰² Additionally, AQAP took conciliatory approaches towards Yemeni Shiites (most of whom belong to a sect known as the Zaydis) and towards those associated with Yemen's socialist secessionist movement in the 1990s. Shiites and socialists are unorthodox allies of a Salafi-jihadist organization, but they also are segments of society that harbored particular

²⁹⁹ "Letter dtd 18 JUL 2010," 1; "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 1.

³⁰⁰ Barak Barfi, "Yemen on the Brink? The Resurgence of al Qaeda in Yemen," New America Foundation, 25 January 2010, https://www.academia.edu/28865984/Yemen_on_the_Brink.

³⁰¹ Michael Page, Lara Challita, and Alistair Harris, "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Framing Narratives and Prescriptions," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, issue 2 (2011): 154-155; Ryan Evans, "From Iraq to Yemen: Al-Qa'ida's Shifting Strategies," *CTC Sentinel* 3, issue 10 (October 2010): 14; Murad Batal al-Shishani, "An Assessment of the Anatomy of al-Qaeda in Yemen: Ideological and Social Factors," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 8, issue 9, (04 March 2010), <https://jamestown.org/program/an-assessment-of-the-anatomy-of-al-qaeda-in-yemen-ideological-and-social-factors/>.

³⁰² Sarah Phillips, "Al-Qaeda and the Struggle for Yemen," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 53, issue 1 (2011): 102-106; Bryce Loidolt, "Managing the Global and Local..." pgs. 110-112.

grievances against the Saleh regime, and positive dealings with these groups helped to reinforce relationships with tribes in central and southern Yemen, respectively.³⁰³

AQAP demonstrated similar concern with cultivating popular support after establishing its “emirate” in southern Yemen in 2011 (as discussed in the previous section, AQAP was operating under its pseudonym, Ansar al-Sharia, when it declared an emirate). In order to build legitimacy and to prove that it could govern as well as fight, the group provided a wide range of public services in the areas it controlled, including electricity, water, food assistance, education, security, and justice systems.³⁰⁴

AQAP/Ansar al-Sharia created a new media organization, *Madad News Agency*, to publicize these achievements in governance through a newsletter and video series entitled “Eyes on the Events.”³⁰⁵ As a more functional, albeit strict, alternative to the corrupt, inept administration of the Yemeni government, AQAP/Ansar al-Sharia’s management of its “emirate” was reasonably well-received by the populace, while it lasted.³⁰⁶ Al-Wuhayshi shared lessons learned from this short-lived experience at governing in a letter to AQIM leader Abd al-Malik Drukdal, when AQIM elements were attempting to establish control over portions of northern Mali in 2012. Al-Wuhayshi advised that AQIM should “be kind to [the people] and make room for compassion and for leniency. Try to win them over through the conveniences of life and by taking care of their daily needs... You have to take a gradual approach with them when it comes to their religious practices. You can’t beat people for drinking alcohol when they don’t even know the basics of how to pray.”³⁰⁷

Ironically for AQC, its Yemeni franchise’s diligent application of the central leadership’s diplomatic guidance probably detracted from its conformity with the parent

³⁰³ Barak Barfi, “AQAP’s Soft Power Strategy in Yemen,” *CTC Sentinel* 3, issue 11-12 (November 2010): 1-5, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss11-124.pdf>.

³⁰⁴ Charles Lister, “Jihadi Rivalry,” 10.

³⁰⁵ Zelin, “Know Your Ansar al-Sharia.”

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ Nasser al-Wuhayshi, “Al-Qaida Papers: First Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb,” Associated Press (May 21, 2012), accessed July 31, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>. See also Nasser al-Wuhayshi, “Al-Qaida Papers: Second Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb,” Associated Press (August 6, 2012), accessed July 31, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>.

organization's overall strategic framework. As discussed in the preceding section, AQAP rejected AQC's campaign guidance to focus its operations exclusively against the "far enemy" and to minimize conflict with the Yemeni regime, and the group violated AQC's strategic formula by declaring an emirate that it did not have the capacity to defend. The affiliate's determined tribal engagement helped it to obtain sanctuary from which it could plan and train for attacks against the West, but it also gained allies and recruits to support AQAP's campaign to topple the Yemeni government, thus distracting from focus on the "far enemy." The group's emphasis on applying principles of effective, holistic governance to captured territory likely reinforced its confidence that it could succeed at establishing an Islamic emirate in Yemen, leading the affiliate to ignore bin Laden's prescient warnings about the futility of taking such a step before all necessary conditions were set.

3.4 Targeting and Conduct Guidance

AQC leaders devoted much of their guidance to affiliates, conveyed through both public and confidential channels, to the topics of target selection and the moral standards by which the *mujahidin* should conduct their military operations. AQC targeting guidance has focused on the need to discriminate between permissible and non-permissible attack objectives, as well as on prioritization of the types of targets against which Al Qaeda's effort and resources should be directed to achieve optimal strategic impact. Underpinning the central leadership's targeting guidance is a code of conduct for Al Qaeda members that emphasizes adherence to *Shariah*, avoidance of unnecessary or accidental casualties, and a commitment to preserving the honor and integrity of the *mujahidin*. Instructing the franchises in these areas may have satisfied AQC leaders' sense of moral principle, but it also served an important strategic purpose by seeking to limit counterproductive or wasteful violence that could stain Al Qaeda's reputation, diminish support from within the *ummah*, or squander valuable resources against targets of little strategic value. Researchers have previously noted the "bind" in which the affiliates placed AQC when they committed attacks against civilians or other unpopular

acts,³⁰⁸ but exploitation of the previously underexamined Abbottabad documents provides new evidence to demonstrate the earnestness and detail with which the central leadership sought to guide their franchises away from counterproductive acts, as the Al Qaeda network suffered criticism and strategic stagnation, and struggled for support from the Muslim community.³⁰⁹

A prominent aspect of AQC's strategic guidance focused on the issue of target discrimination, differentiating between acceptable targets of *mujahidin* attacks and those targets that were unacceptable because they might violate *Shariah*, alienate the *ummah*, or tarnish Al Qaeda's reputation. This guidance buttresses much of AQC's other strategic advice, since target selection by Al Qaeda affiliates may affect the group's legitimacy in the eyes of the public, as well as influence how government security forces respond to the organization. Target discrimination by the franchises became a matter of particular concern to AQC after its Iraqi franchise's record of attacks against fellow Islamist groups and civilians resulted in significant condemnation within the Muslim community.³¹⁰ Beginning with bin Laden's notable October 2007 acknowledgment of "mistakes" by the *mujahidin*,³¹¹ public statements by AQC senior leaders contained regular admonitions to Al Qaeda members to avoid causing Muslim civilian casualties and to disassociate themselves from attacks that did not protect the "sacredness of Muslim blood."³¹² Bin Laden stressed the importance of these public communications, writing to Atiyah, "Important Note: The statement that I asked you to release about

³⁰⁸ Byman, "Buddies or Burdens?," 458. See also, for example, Hellmich, *Al-Qaeda: From Global Network to Local Franchise*, 126; and Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy," 43.

³⁰⁹ See footnotes 317-344, with associated discussion in the text, for primary source examples of AQC attempts to guide their followers away from counterproductive actions that were both reputationally and strategically damaging.

³¹⁰ Weimann, "When Fatwas Clash Online: Terrorist Debates on the Internet," in *Influence warfare: how terrorists and governments fight to shape perceptions in a war of ideas*, 49-74; Forest, "Influence Warfare and Modern Terrorism," 18-26.

³¹¹ Osama bin Laden, "A Message to Our People in Iraq," As-Sahab Media Foundation (October 23, 2007): 3, accessed June 16, 2017, <https://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/4656/OBL20071023.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>.

³¹² Ayman al-Zawahiri, "A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign," As-Sahab Media Organization (September 15, 2010): 12, accessed October 25, 2015, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/a-victorious-ummah-a-broken-crusade-english.pdf>.

sparing bloodshed is a priority. Perhaps God might make that cause for sparing the lives of some innocent Muslims...”³¹³

Bin Laden and Zawahiri used their media releases to achieve broad dissemination of guidance intended to protect Al Qaeda’s reputation and religious standing by emphasizing adherence to *Shariah* and by warning their followers away from the types of operations that provoked criticism among Muslims. For example, bin Laden’s October 2007 message condemned militants who “[don’t] comply with a verse of Allah’s Book...,” warning that “[t]hose who contradict the *Shariah* of the Messenger openly or secretly should fear and beware ‘lest a trial afflict them...or a grievous punishment overtakes them.’”³¹⁴ Zawahiri reinforced bin Laden’s message in a September 2010 statement, emphasizing that “the *mujahidin* must be diligent in abiding by the sacredness of Muslim blood...they must study every operation from all sides...we disown any operation which a *jihadi* group carries out in which it doesn’t show concern for the safety of the Muslims...”³¹⁵ Zawahiri put a finer point on this guidance in subsequent messages, such as this aside in his February 2011 speech about developments in Egypt during the Arab Spring:

But before I go forth in explaining the present, I would like to step outside the focus of this message – message of hope and glad tidings for our people in Egypt – to discuss an important and dangerous subject, which is the honor [and protection] of Muslims’ blood...There are some operations that are being attributed to the *mujahidin* truthfully or falsely, which include attacking the Muslims in their mosques, markets or their gatherings. I say: regardless of the truthfulness...of attributing these operation[s] to the *mujahidin*, my brothers and I in Qaida’t al-Jihad disown, by Allah, these operations and condemn them, whether those who commit them [are] the *mujahidin* or others.

And Shaykh Osama bin Laden – may Allah protect him – ordered me again to emphasize this matter. So, I advise each *mujahid* to take into consideration the rulings of *Shariah* and the interest of Muslims before initiating any Jihadist operation, and to remember that we only wage *jihad* to gain the grace of Allah, raised and glorified. And the grace of Allah can only be gained by following His *Shariah* and abiding by its rulings, and to be highly careful in planning any operation to avoid harming those illegitimate to attack, whether a Muslim or a

³¹³ bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 4.

³¹⁴ bin Laden, "A Message to Our People in Iraq," 4.

³¹⁵ al-Zawahiri, "A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign," 12.

non-Muslim, except what occurs unwillingly by mistake...take into consideration when attacking the enemies that have imprisoned the Muslims or those forbidden to kill, to not harm those who are taken as shields, except what the necessity of *jihad* requires or which happens involuntarily as a mistake and to be highly cautious not to magnify this matter.³¹⁶

Zawahiri returned to this topic again in June 2011:

I advise my *mujahidin* brothers everywhere, to coalesce with the populaces of the Muslim *ummah* and focus on serving them and defending them and preserving their safety and honors, and staying astray from any act that would expose them to danger in the markets, mosques or the crowded places, because we left our homes and migrated from our nations to defend them and their dignity.³¹⁷

Much of the targeting guidance contained in AQC leaders' secret correspondence echoes the general themes of the public statements described above, emphasizing the importance of avoiding unnecessary bloodshed. Bin Laden advised AQIM *emir* Drukdal, "If it is possible to strike targets far away from the innocents, then it would be desirable to target that place."³¹⁸ He similarly counseled Al-Shabaab leader Godane, "Regarding your strike against the African [Union] Forces, you must review it enough to minimize the (damages) on Muslims..."³¹⁹ Citing a negative example in which AQI had killed some members of Sunni tribes in Iraq's Anbar Province "without a reason of self-defense," thus turning the tribes against Al Qaeda's franchise in Iraq, bin Laden reminded AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi that "God's law needs to be obeyed by all the *mujahidin*...It is important to study all the *mujahidin*'s attempts and efforts to learn from their mistakes."³²⁰ Bin Laden also sought to advance these targeting principles beyond the formal Al Qaeda organization, instructing Atiyah to "[p]lease alert our brothers in

³¹⁶ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri: 'Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 2'," As-Sahab Media Foundation (February 24, 2011): 1-2, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/7269>.

³¹⁷ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri: 'And the Noble Knight Dismounts'," As-Sahab Media Foundation (June 8, 2011): 4, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/7264>.

³¹⁸ "Letter to Abu-Musa'b 'Abd-al-Wadud," 7.

³¹⁹ Osama bin Laden, "Letter from Usama Bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000005-HT (August 7 2010): 2, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letter-from-usama-bin-laden-to-mukhtar-abu-al-zubayr-original-language-2/>.

³²⁰ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 13.

Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan to spread among their ranks talk about the sanctity of Muslim blood and to put emphasis on the importance of avoiding killing Muslims.”³²¹

The recently released Al Qaeda internal documents contain examples of even more specific AQC instructions to the affiliates dealing with the selection of appropriate attack targets. AQC leaders advised the franchises to avoid killing anyone whose death might hurt Al Qaeda’s public image, such as aid workers,³²² and they emphasized the need to avoid targeting local security forces and tribes to maintain popular support and “to avoid any desire for revenge against us.”³²³ Even enemies should not be killed while they pray, lest Al Qaeda “carry a sin.”³²⁴ Bin Laden summed up his targeting principles, and the line of reasoning behind them, in a 2010 letter to Atiyah:

We ask every *emir* in the regions to be extremely keen and focused on controlling the military work and not to expand the barricade [an argument for the permissibility of killing innocents if they are being used as human shields, or “barricades”, by an enemy],³²⁵ due to the several attacks carried out by the *mujahidin* whereby several Muslims had fallen; we could have reached the target without injuring the Muslims with some effort and deliberation. Also the need to cancel other attacks due to the possible and unnecessary civilian casualties – for example, the attacks targeting several infidel Imams during their visits to public locations where most of the Muslims are located, as they should be targeted away from the Muslims. Making these mistakes is a great issue; needless to say, the greatness of the Muslim blood violation in addition to the damage impacting the *jihād*. As a result, the alienation of most of the nation from the *mujahidin*.³²⁶

Bin Laden later emphasized that “Al Qaeda’s leaders have cautioned, openly and in private, and warned several times of the ominous nature of expanding on the ‘barricade argument.’”³²⁷ The leader of AQC wanted “clear boundaries established for all the

³²¹ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010," 5. See also "Letter to Bin Laden from Mahmud, 17 July 2010," 3.

³²² "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud (a)," 2.

³²³ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 13; "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 1; "Three Stages Letter," 7.

³²⁴ "General instructions," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2011): 9, accessed April 15, 2018,

<https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/General%20instructions.pdf>.

³²⁵ Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012), 13.

³²⁶ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 9.

³²⁷ bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 4.

brothers, so that no Muslims fall victim except when it is absolutely essential.”³²⁸ He went even farther in urging caution to prevent collateral damage, extending protection to infidels when he directed that “the brothers should also be careful not to injure non-targeted Crusaders and idolaters, even when they are totally sure they can carry out well-controlled operations with no chance of Muslim casualties.”³²⁹

In order to protect the *mujahidin*'s honor and reputation, AQC also prohibited its affiliates from using certain methods to attack what otherwise would be fully permissible targets. A notable example of this is bin Laden's opposition to employing operatives to conduct attacks within countries to which they had sworn an oath of loyalty during immigration or naturalization proceedings. Bin Laden began emphasizing this subject within the Al Qaeda organization after Faisal Shahzad, a naturalized United States citizen associated with the Pakistani Taliban, was arrested for attempting to detonate a car bomb in New York City's Times Square in May 2010.³³⁰ During his trial, Shahzad praised bin Laden and openly admitted to lying when he took his oath of citizenship.³³¹ After learning of this, bin Laden indignantly wrote to Atiyah, “Perhaps you monitored the trial of brother [Faisal] Shahzad... You should know that it is not permissible in Islam to betray trust and break a covenant... This is a very important matter because we do not want *al-mujahidin* to be accused of breaking a covenant.”³³² Bin Laden highlighted this operational restriction in a letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi, in which he advised AQAP to “concentrate on the Yemeni emigrants who... would be able to conduct operations inside America as long as they have not given their promises not to harm America.”³³³

³²⁸ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 4.

³²⁹ bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 5.

³³⁰ Benjamin Weiser, "Call to Taliban After Bomb Attempt in Times Sq.," *New York Times* (September 29, 2010), accessed December 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/nyregion/30shahzad.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FShahzad%2C%20Faisal&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=13&pgtype=collection.

³³¹ Michael Wilson, "Shahzad Gets Life Term for Times Square Bombing Attempt," *New York Times* (October 5, 2010), accessed December 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/06/nyregion/06shahzad.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FShahzad%2C%20Faisal&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=7&pgtype=collection.

³³² "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 3," 7. See also bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 7.

³³³ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 4.

In addition to establishing criteria for acceptable and unacceptable attack targets and methods, AQC also provided affiliates with clear prioritization for their operations against targets that met AQC's parameters for permissibility. As discussed in the campaign guidance section above, AQC's overarching strategic guidance for waging its Salafi-jihadist campaign was to "concentrate on its external big enemy before its internal enemy."³³⁴ Bin Laden and other AQC leaders viewed the United States as the "head of disbelief,"³³⁵ and insisted that elements across the Al Qaeda organization focus their efforts against the Americans. Bin Laden likened Al Qaeda's enemies to a tree, with the United States as the trunk, and the other infidel states and apostate Muslim regimes as the branches.³³⁶ In this metaphor, cutting the trunk would cause all the limbs to fall. Consequently, bin Laden wrote to AQAP, "[e]ven though we have the chance to attack the British, we should not waste our effort to do so but concentrate on America, which will lead to defeating the others..."³³⁷ Elaborating on this targeting rationale, bin Laden explained to Atiyah that "every arrow and every explosive mine can be used to destroy an American vehicle...and prioritize them over NATO vehicles."³³⁸ In other discussion of targeting prioritization for specific theaters of *jihad*, bin Laden stipulated "[c]oncerning the brothers in the Islamic Maghreb and Somalia specifically, any efforts that cannot be directed against Americans should at this point be against France – currently the head of Europe."³³⁹

Similar AQC guidance applied to the affiliates' kidnapping operations. Kidnapping for ransom was a common means of revenue generation for some of the franchises, but bin Laden attempted to set ground rules for leveraging Western captives.

³³⁴ Ibid., 6.

³³⁵ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 16; Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," As-Sahab Media Foundation (September 13, 2013): 3, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

³³⁶ "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 7.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 3.

³³⁹ bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 5. Also "Letter about efforts in other regions," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf>; Atiyah Abd' al-Rahman, "Letter to Abu Muhammad Salah," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (December 11 2010): 2, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf>.

While issuing guidance during one particular instance of AQIM hostage-taking, bin Laden instructed a subordinate to “send a message to the brothers in the Islamic Maghreb not to negotiate with the French on releasing the hostages for money ransoms. They should negotiate on the interference in the region and the request to withdraw from Afghanistan.”³⁴⁰ Broadening his dictate to the rest of the organization, bin Laden ordered that his staff “[s]hould also inform all that negotiations with Europeans should be on Afghanistan withdrawal. As for the Americans, it should be for stopping their support to Jews.”³⁴¹

Bin Laden attempted to guide the franchises toward targets of strategic significance, such as encouraging attacks on American embassies,³⁴² or as illustrated in this critique of an Al-Shabaab operation in 2010: “Following up on the operation in the public square in Uganda, I think the focus should have gone to preparing for a well-planned operation to assassinate Ugandan President Museveni, as it is a key issue to influence the war there. If that is unachievable, then the brothers could target important military or economical targets.”³⁴³ Reinforcing AQC’s preeminent strategic focus on the “far enemy,” the central leadership’s operational guidance contains repeated exhortations to all elements of the Al Qaeda organization to focus on preparation for and execution of spectacular “external operations” in the West, “the impact of which would exceed the events of the Eleventh [of September, 2001].”³⁴⁴

This section has examined how AQC’s leaders sought to preserve the Al Qaeda organization’s credibility, reputation, and strategic impact by issuing targeting and conduct guidance intended to prevent its members from conducting counterproductive acts of violence or wasteful operations. The affiliates’ tactical military operations were their most visible activities, and therefore presented the most acute reputational risk to the

³⁴⁰ "Gist of Conversation Oct 11," 2. Also Laden, "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud 26 September 2010," 2.

³⁴¹ "Gist of Conversation Oct 11," 2.

³⁴² "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 1.

³⁴³ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010," 2.

³⁴⁴ "Letter to Shaykh Yunis from Bin Laden," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 433 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD): 9, accessed July 16, 2016, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf. Other examples, among many, include "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 1; bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 31.

Al Qaeda brand, if conducted negligently.³⁴⁵ The stakes for AQC were high if affiliates were out of synch with the central leadership's strategic guidance in this area. As the next section illustrates, patterns of affiliate non-compliance with AQC's targeting guidance prompted a number of innovations by the central organization in attempts to mitigate the negative effects of franchise attacks that caused Muslim casualties.

3.4.1 Targeting and Conduct Guidance: Affiliate Compliance and AQC Reactions

As discussed in Chapter 1, a significant and common shortcoming of existing scholarship on the Al Qaeda network and its components is a tendency to use limited samples or anecdotal examples of high-publicity attacks to draw conclusions about an affiliate group's overall operational trends and strategic direction.³⁴⁶ This thesis seeks to address this methodological gap in the literature by using information from the Global Terrorism Database to conduct comprehensive analysis of all affiliate attacks to establish an objective view of operational trends. This new approach enables more accurate and empirically justified assessments of the extent of the affiliates' compliance with AQC's targeting guidance, and therefore of their alignment with the central organization's strategic priorities.

The most straightforward way to assess strategic conformity across the Al Qaeda organization with AQC's targeting and conduct guidance is to examine the actual operations conducted by the Al Qaeda affiliate groups. Analysis of the Al Qaeda affiliates' complete operational histories reveals that deeds seldom have matched words across the network, and the affiliates' operations generally have been at odds with AQC's strategic guidance. As described above, AQC leaders have provided a wealth of direction to their subordinate commanders, conveyed both through public messages and secret correspondence, to drive operational prioritization and to establish standards for acceptable targeting. The three main elements of AQC's guidance related to target selection have been: 1) prioritize operations against the "far enemy," particularly the

³⁴⁵ Fawaz Gerges reviews a number of opinion polls from across the Muslim world showing significant drops in approval of Al Qaeda over time linked to concerns over Muslim civilian casualties. Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, 2nd ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 288-289, 301.

³⁴⁶ See discussion in Chapter 1, sections 1.4.2 and 1.6.2.

United States and its interests, over operations against “near enemy” apostate regimes; 2) minimize attacks against local security forces in order to avoid conflict that could dilute focus on fighting the “far enemy” and risk alienating the populations from which those forces were drawn; and 3) avoid attacks that cause Muslim casualties, and, therefore, undermine Al Qaeda’s credibility as virtuous defenders of the *ummah*. On the whole, the Al Qaeda franchises have failed to adhere to these guidelines, notwithstanding efforts by both AQC and affiliate propagandists to recast the franchises’ operations to appear more in line with their declared objectives. Employing the methodology described in Chapter 1,³⁴⁷ analysis of complete operational data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) shows that the process of affiliation with AQC did not substantially impact the regional groups’ operational patterns, and there is little evidence to indicate that the franchises were responsive to later instances of AQC targeting guidance.

3.4.1.A Patterns in Al Qaeda Affiliates’ Aggregate Operations

This section examines the operational patterns of the four regional affiliates, taken in aggregate. The separate circumstances of each regional group differ enough that caution is necessary when drawing conclusions based on the combination of all historical operational data, but the patterns that emerge from the aggregate statistics are notable for the stark picture they present of strategic disconnect between AQC and its constellation of regional franchises. The aggregate patterns are largely consistent with the trends evident in the group-specific operational assessments contained in the case study chapters. In the three main areas of AQC operational guidance mentioned above—prioritization of “far enemy” targets, minimization of conflict with local security forces, and avoidance of Muslim casualties—the sum of the affiliates’ operational records indicates negligible adjustment of their activities following union with AQC or in response to specific guidance from the central leadership.

³⁴⁷ Chapter 1, section 1.4.2.

Attack Location

Despite AQC leadership's "clear-cut policy" that the franchises should "[r]ally efforts against the head of all ungodliness, the U.S.-Israeli alliance,"³⁴⁸ and their insistence that "every effort that could be spent on attacks in America would not be spent outside of it,"³⁴⁹ all four affiliates together managed only one attack during this study's time frame outside of their immediate regions in the Middle East and Africa. The single attack conducted against a Western country's territory and reliably attributed to an Al Qaeda franchise was AQAP's failed attempt to down an American commercial airliner on 25 December 2009. In what became known colloquially as the Christmas Day Underwear Bombing, Nigerian student-turned-radical Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, acting on behalf of AQAP after being recruited and trained in Yemen by American-born AQAP leader Anwar al-Awlaki, unsuccessfully attempted to detonate explosives hidden in his undergarments on a Northwest Airlines flight as it approached Detroit, wounding only himself.³⁵⁰

Target Nationality

The Al Qaeda affiliates' productivity at attacking Western personnel and interests within their own regions in the Middle East and Africa also was extremely low. Prior to formal affiliation with Al Qaeda, attacks in which the primary target's nationality was of a Western country comprised 0.06 percent (19 of 306) of the regional groups' operations, and they accounted for only 0.05 percent (170 of 3,318) of total killed and wounded in the attacks. Once the regional groups were designated as Al Qaeda franchises, despite frequent threats by both AQC and affiliate leaders that the expansion of the Al Qaeda organization would spell doom for the "far enemy," the productivity of their attacks against targets of primarily Western nationality fell to even lower levels. After receiving AQC's official imprimatur, only 0.03 percent (50 of 1,610) of affiliate attacks targeted Western nationalities, accounting for just 0.01 percent of all casualties (271 of 19,824).

³⁴⁸ Bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 5.

³⁴⁹ Bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 8.

³⁵⁰ Scott Shane, "Inside Al Qaeda's Plot to Blow Up an American Airliner," *New York Times* (February 22, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/us/politics/anwar-awlaki-underwear-bomber-abdulmutallab.html>.

The affiliates' record of killing and injuring U.S. citizens, purportedly their foremost enemy, was even less impressive. Prior to Al Qaeda affiliation, all regional group attacks resulted in 16 Americans killed and 23 wounded. After affiliation, the total American casualty tally by the Al Qaeda franchises was 14 killed and 23 wounded. Both before and after union with Al Qaeda, the majority of casualties resulting from regional group attacks against Western nationality targets were local Muslims.

So, despite exultant promises by AQC leaders that the establishment of Al Qaeda franchises would be “a bone in the throats of the Americans[,]”³⁵¹ and would enable the Muslim nation to “smash the chains with which the Crusaders have fettered it[,]”³⁵² the affiliates did not focus their operations on attacking Western targets. After becoming Al Qaeda franchises, the frequency and efficacy of the regional groups' military activities targeting the “far enemy” actually decreased. This empirical finding has significant implications for this thesis' research questions, as it seems to indicate that the franchises were minimally influenced by the Al Qaeda affiliation process to adopt AQC's strategic prioritization. Despite both AQC and affiliate propaganda themes insisting on solidarity in fighting the West, the data presented here reveals a stark disconnect between words and deeds at the franchise level.

Target Type

The franchises also failed to heed AQC leaders' frequent advice not to target local security forces to avoid provoking harsh responses and alienating the Muslim populations from which local police officers and soldiers were drawn. Attacks against local militaries and police forces comprised 40 percent of regional group operations prior to Al Qaeda affiliation, and increased to 42 percent after affiliation (Figure 3a). These operations tended to be highly casualty producing, with most killed and wounded being Muslim security force members or civilian bystanders. Of the 2,339 killed and 3,269 wounded resulting from attacks against military and police targets by regional franchises following

³⁵¹ "Three Stages Letter," 7.; see also Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, "Letter dtd 18 JUL 2010," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (July 18 2010), accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20dtd%2018%20JUL%202010.pdf>.

³⁵² Quoted in BBC News “Bin Laden Tape: Key Excerpts,” Dec 27, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4129173.stm.

their mergers with Al Qaeda, only two of the deaths and 12 of the injured were Americans. Contrasted with the tiny percentage of operations conducted against Western targets, it is clear that the franchises categorically failed to demonstrate, as bin Laden recommended, “that we are not after the army or the police, but after America.”³⁵³

<i>All Affiliates - Attacks by Target Type</i>				
Target Type	Pre-Merger		Post-Merger	
	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded
Airports & Aircraft	2 (1%)	0 / 0	7 (0%)	1 / 1 (1 US)
Business	14 (5%)	13 (3 US) / 13	102 (6%)	609 (4 US) / 1312 (5 US)
Educational Institution	1 (0%)	4 / 0	11 (1%)	52 (1 US) / 214
Food or Water Supply	-	-	3 (0%)	1 / 0
Government (Diplomatic)	10 (3%)	6 / 10	30 (2%)	60 (1 US) / 77 (1 US)
Government (General)	39 (13%)	210 / 167	169 (10%)	988 / 3172 (3 US)
Journalists & Media	6 (2%)	7 / 1	19 (1%)	17 (2 US) / 10
Maritime	1 (0%)	6 (3 US) / 4 (4 US)	1 (0%)	0 / 0
Military	76 (25%)	491 (4 US) / 537 (19 US)	422 (26%)	1532 (2 US) / 1714 (11 US)
NGO	5 (2%)	0 / 0	10 (1%)	7 (2 US) / 0
Other	1 (0%)	10 (4 US) / 0	4 (0%)	9 / 32
Police	47 (15%)	228 / 253	257 (16%)	807 / 1555 (1 US)
Private Citizens & Property	74 (24%)	275 (2 US) / 628	416 (26%)	1636 (2 US) / 4754 (1 US)
Religious Fig./Inst.	2 (1%)	100 / 200	26 (2%)	248 / 367
Telecommunication	-	-	6 (0%)	0 / 0
Terrorists/Non-State Militia	12 (4%)	49 / 72	59 (4%)	200 / 176
Tourists	7 (2%)	1 / 6	6 (0%)	9 / 0
Transportation	2 (1%)	13 / 1	19 (1%)	42 / 141
Unknown	2 (1%)	1 / 0	25 (2%)	1 / 6
Utilities	5 (2%)	1 / 11	17 (1%)	8 / 27
Violent Political Party	-	-	1 (0%)	5 / 40
Total	306	1415 (16 US) / 1903 (23 US)	1610	6230 / 13594

Figure 3a (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

Operations that resulted in Muslim civilian casualties may have been most impactful to the overall credibility of the Al Qaeda network, in the eyes of its Muslim constituency.³⁵⁴ AQC leaders’ correspondence included frequent appeals to their

³⁵³ bin Laden, "Three Stages Letter," 7.; see also Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, "Letter dtd 18 JUL 2010," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (July 18, 2010), <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20dtd%2018%20JUL%202010.pdf>.

³⁵⁴ See footnote 345.

followers to guard against spilling innocent Muslim blood. Additionally, to ensure that their position on this subject was clear both to the franchises and to the broader Islamic community, the central leadership reinforced the guidance repeatedly and explicitly in their public messages.³⁵⁵ However, despite the criticality of this issue for Al Qaeda's reputation, and the emphasis placed on it by AQC leaders, the affiliates generally have been unresponsive to guidance seeking to limit their attacks against Muslim civilians. Prior to joining with Al Qaeda, 24 percent of the regional groups' operations targeted what the GTD categorizes as "private citizens and property." Rather than moderating their attacks in response to guidance from their new central leadership after formally affiliating with Al Qaeda, the franchises' increased operations against this target category to 26 percent of total attacks. Even more damaging to Al Qaeda's public image, and no doubt frustrating to leadership, were the extremely high casualty totals resulting from these operations against civilian targets. They accounted for 32 percent of all deaths and injuries caused by the affiliates' operations, more than twice the total stemming from any other category of target.

This empirical analysis of affiliate operational patterns, based on Attack Location, Target Nationality, and Target Type, demonstrates that the affiliates failed to adhere to the central leadership's targeting guidance, and it suggests that regional groups did not embrace AQC's strategic orientation after becoming Al Qaeda franchises. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are alternative possible explanations for why the affiliates' military operations would be so at odds with AQC's guidance, such as lack of capability due to incompetence by franchise members or strategic divergence by factions within the regional groups. Whatever the cause, however, these divergent and apparently insubordinate activities by the affiliates put the Al Qaeda brand at serious reputational risk. AQC found itself on a reactive footing, forced to adapt its public messaging approach to protect the reputation of the Al Qaeda network and the credibility of the central leadership's purported authority over its affiliates. These impacts on AQC's media approach are discussed below, in the section on AQC reactions to affiliate operational patterns.

³⁵⁵ See footnotes 314-17.

Affiliate Responsiveness to Specific Instances of AQC Guidance

Specific instances of AQC guidance given in public messages had little overall effect on operations against private citizens and property. Prior to bin Laden's message in October 2007,³⁵⁶ in which he acknowledged "mistakes" by the *mujahidin* and called on his followers to act in greater accordance with the principles of *Shariah*, 17 percent of franchise operations fell into the private citizens and property category, and remained generally steady at 14 percent for the three years after bin Laden's public guidance (Figure 3b). After Zawahiri reemphasized in September 2010 the need for caution against causing Muslim civilian deaths,³⁵⁷ the share of operations against private citizens and property jumped to 28 percent. As explored in more detail in the Chapters 4 and 5 case studies, however, statistics differed among franchises, suggesting that some may have been more responsive than others to these key instances of AQC guidance. For example, the overall increase in attacks on civilian targets after 2010 is attributable largely to a significant uptick in these operations by the ISI, which became increasingly defiant of AQC in the years leading up to Zawahiri's excommunication of Al Qaeda's first affiliate in February 2014. Conversely, there is statistical evidence that AQIM decreased the frequency and lethality of its attacks on private citizens and property after AQC leaders' public directives.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Osama bin Laden, "A Message to Our People in Iraq," As-Sahab Media Foundation (October 23, 2007), accessed June 16, 2017, <https://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/4656/OBL20071023.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>. The Qatari media company Al Jazeera aired portions of the audio-only Arabic recording of bin Laden's statement on 22 October 2007. On 23 October 2007, As-Sahab, Al Qaeda's media wing, released the full recording online in the form of a video that showed a still picture of bin Laden and featured English subtitles to accompany the Arabic audio message.

³⁵⁷ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign," As-Sahab Media Organization (September 15, 2010), accessed October 25, 2015, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/a-victorious-ummah-a-broken-crusade-english.pdf>.

³⁵⁸ See Chapter 5, pp. 224-26 and Figure 5f.

<i>All Affiliates - Attacks by Target Type, Before and After AQC Guidance Statements</i>						
	Prior to 1 st AQC Guidance (22 Oct 2007)		Between 1 st and 2 nd AQC Guidance (15 Sep 2010)		After 2 nd AQC Guidance	
Target Type	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded
Airports & Aircraft	-	-	1 (1%)	0 / 1 (1 US)	6 (<1%)	1 / 0
Business	8 (5%)	116 (4 US) / 138	9 (7%)	124 / 242	85 (6%)	369 / 932 (5 US)
Educational Institution	-	-	2 (1%)	37 / 125	9 (1%)	15 (1 US) / 89
Food or Water Supply	-	-	-	-	3 (<1%)	1 / 0
Government (Diplomatic)	10 (6%)	11 / 10 (1 US)	5 (4%)	22 (1 US) / 28	15 (1%)	27 / 39
Government (General)	20 (13%)	77 / 257	31 (25%)	466 / 1892 (3 US)	118 (9%)	445 / 1023
Journalists & Media	-	-	-	-	19 (1%)	17 (2 US) / 10
Maritime	-	-	-	-	1 (<1%)	0 / 0
Military	29 (19%)	200 (2 US) / 363 (10 US)	21 (17%)	74 / 131	372 (28%)	1258 / 1220 (1 US)
NGO	-	-	-	-	10 (1%)	7 (2 US) / 0
Other	2 (1%)	9 / 32	-	-	2 (<1%)	0 / 0
Police	46 (30%)	261 / 556 (1 US)	23 (18%)	101 / 164	188 (14%)	445 / 835
Private Citizens & Property	27 (17%)	472 (2 US) / 1165 (1 US)	17 (14%)	79 / 174	372 (28%)	1085 / 3415
Religious Figures/Institutions	2 (1%)	92 / 0	1 (1%)	4 / 17	23 (2%)	152 / 350
Telecom	-	-	-	-	6 (<1%)	0 / 0
Terrorists/Non-State Militia	3 (2%)	7 / 4	7 (6%)	60 / 79	49 (4%)	133 / 93
Tourists	1 (1%)	8 / 0	3 (2%)	1 / 0	2 (<1%)	0 / 0
Transportation	5 (3%)	2 / 12	2 (2%)	0 / 4	12 (1%)	40 / 125
Unknown	-	-	-	-	25 (2%)	1 / 6
Utilities	3 (2%)	2 / 8	2 (2%)	1 / 7	12 (1%)	5 / 12
Violent Political Party	-	-	-	-	1 (<1%)	5 / 40
Total	156	1257 (8 US) / 2545 (13 US)	124	969 (1 US) / 2864 (4 US)	1330	4004 (5 US) / 8185 (6 US)

Figure 3b (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

3.4.1.B AQC Reactions to Affiliate Operational Patterns

The affiliates' military activities, almost wholly at odds with AQC's targeting and conduct guidance, challenged the parent organization's pursuit of its overarching objectives by undermining the prioritization of the "far enemy" that AQC leaders held as a critical element of their strategic framework, and by provoking condemnation from the Muslim community, for which Al Qaeda saw itself as a vanguard. AQC sought to manage this disconnect between its strategic agenda and the affiliates' operational realities through its guidance to the regional groups, which included some notable

adaptations to embrace certain of the franchises' contentious practices, as well as through its media operations, which evolved as AQC reacted to circumstances resulting from its affiliates' actions.

The central leadership attempted to influence its franchises to change their behaviors by issuing ever more guidance and advice, through both clandestine and public channels. The body of guidance described above, which has not been previously examined in its full breadth and detail, reflects AQC leaders' efforts, over time, to direct and to persuade the affiliates to act in accordance with the parent organization's strategy and policies. The isolated central leadership, however, lacking enforcement mechanisms and reliant on the regional franchises for operational reach, clearly were unable to secure consistent compliance from their constellation of affiliates.

The themes of AQC's targeting and conduct guidance generally have remained consistent, but some of the franchises' habitual practices, combined with the central organization's changing circumstances, influenced AQC leadership to relax certain standards by tolerating, and even encouraging, kidnapping-for-ransom and other revenue-earning criminal activities. As described earlier in this section, AQC leaders typically admonished the affiliates to refrain from activities that could damage Al Qaeda's credibility and reputation. During the early years of AQC's franchising project, this included warnings about the impermissibility of "theft or robbery...and [accepting] funds gotten from trafficking in wine, drugs, and the like[.]"³⁵⁹ AQC initially did not discuss kidnapping as a desirable tactic, except when a Western hostage might provide leverage to achieve political concessions from the "far enemy."³⁶⁰

Over time, however, as bin Laden's personal fortune became exhausted, and as international counterterrorism operations and sanctions disrupted AQC's traditionally donation-based fundraising methods, the parent organization was forced to depend on its

³⁵⁹ "Jaysh al-Islam's Questions to `Atiyatullah al-Libi " Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000008-HT (October 24 - November 22, 2006 2006), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/jaysh-al-islams-questions-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-original-language-2>.

³⁶⁰ "Gist of Conversation Oct 11."; bin Laden, "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud, 26 September 2010 (from bin Laden)."; Ouellet, Lacroix-Leclair, and Pahlavi, "The Institutionalization of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 660; "Cash-Strapped Al Qaeda Turns to Kidnapping," Associated Press (June 20, 2011), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cash-strapped-al-qaeda-turns-to-kidnapping/>.

affiliates for financial resources.³⁶¹ AQC's internal correspondence contains multiple mentions of the central organization's need to draw on funding from AQIM and Al-Shabaab, in particular.³⁶² The African franchises were widely known to engage in prolific contraband smuggling, kidnap-for-ransom, and other criminal activities; therefore, AQC's reliance on them to subsidize the broader network meant that the central leadership supported, at least implicitly, the means by which the regional groups gained their revenues. In some cases, bin Laden was more explicit. In 2009, he directed that, rather than "declaring their solidarity with Al Qaeda," Al-Shabaab should "give their full attention to collecting ransom money and hijack[ing] ships."³⁶³ He similarly endorsed AQIM's "negotiations... established for a ransom," if using prisoners for political leverage was not feasible.³⁶⁴ Kidnap-for-ransom operations eventually became acknowledged as a critical source of revenue across the Al Qaeda organization. Ransoming captured Afghan diplomats helped to sustain the AQC elements remaining in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region,³⁶⁵ and Nasser al-Wuhayshi wrote that "[k]idnapping hostages is an easy spoil, which I may describe as a profitable trade and a precious treasure" that accounted for half of AQAP's income.³⁶⁶ AQC leaders' pragmatic willingness to compromise their previously held principles and to embrace some of the affiliates' criminal enterprises out of financial exigency is explored in greater detail in the AQIM case study (Chapter 5).

Faced with patterns of affiliate noncompliance with most of its targeting and conduct guidance, AQC also endeavored to mitigate the consequences of the franchises' divergent actions through its propaganda efforts. In this area, AQC leadership strived for a delicate balance, defending their affiliates to project an image of Al Qaeda as a unified

³⁶¹ See Chapter 5, section 5.7.2 for detailed discussion of this topic.

³⁶² bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah al-Libi 4,'" bin Laden, "Letter to Shaykh Yunis from Bin Laden," Government Exhibit 433 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD); William Maclean, "Analysis: Loss of Bin Laden Adds to Al Qaeda Money Woes," *Reuters* (May 20, 2011), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-binladen-qaeda-financing-idUSTRE74J3J220110520>.

³⁶³ bin Laden, "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 2.

³⁶⁴ bin Laden, "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud, 26 September 2010."

³⁶⁵ al-Rahman, "Letter from Mahmud to Bin Laden, 19 June 2010," 5-6; bin Laden, "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010," 8.

³⁶⁶ al-Wuhayshi, "Al-Qaida Papers: Second Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb"

organization with a functioning chain of command, while also nurturing public sympathy by attempting to disassociate the Al Qaeda brand from the franchises' most unpopular acts. This dual-track, often contradictory public messaging approach is examined in the next section of this chapter and in Chapters 4 and 5.

3.5 Media Guidance

AQC leadership consistently placed great importance on media activity as a pillar of Al Qaeda's operations.³⁶⁷ When the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and subsequent international counterterrorism efforts constrained the central organization's military activities, media operations offered a way for Al Qaeda to retain its public profile and to project an image of potency. AQC leaders also recognized that achievement of their objectives ultimately was dependent on the group's ability to mobilize the *ummah* and to influence Western audiences; as Zarqawi explained, "half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."³⁶⁸ AQC was active in attempting to steer the media activities of its affiliates. AQC senior officials repeatedly reminded the franchise commanders of the criticality of effective public messaging to mission success, and they issued extensive policy guidance and advice related to the content and methods of the affiliates' media operations.

Bin Laden and his lieutenants within AQC encouraged the affiliates to embrace the significance of public perception and use of the media, particularly at times when Al Qaeda's reputation was at risk due to criticism of the affiliates' actions. For example, in 2005, as AQI's bloody and highly publicized campaign of sectarian violence in Iraq was drawing condemnation from across the Muslim community, Zawahiri wrote to the franchise *emir*, Abu Musa'b al-Zarqawi, to urge greater care in protecting the *mujahidin's* public image, reminding him that "we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our *ummah*."³⁶⁹ This metaphor of a media battlefield was a recurring theme in Al

³⁶⁷ See, for example, Gabriel Weimann, "When Fatwas Clash Online: Terrorist Debates on the Internet," in *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas*, ed. James Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 49-74; James JF Forest, "Influence Warfare and Modern Terrorism," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2009): 18-26.

³⁶⁸ al-Zawahiri, "Letter to Zarqawi," 10.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

Qaeda's internal correspondence. Bin Laden explained to AQAP *emir* Nasir al-Wuhayshi that "[w]e need to understand that a huge part of the battle is the media,"³⁷⁰ and Abu Yahya wrote to AQIM's leaders that "[o]ne of the most important battlefields that we are immersed in is people's minds... That is why total attention must be paid and full effort must be exerted... so that we can achieve the objective of 'incitement to fight' through our media."³⁷¹

In keeping with the centrality of media operations to AQC leaders' strategic vision, bin Laden sought to impose media discipline across the franchises and to "provide them with advice and guidance to avoid the mistakes that would impact... the reputation of the *mujahidin* and the sympathy of the nation's masses[.]"³⁷² He directed Atiyah to "prepare a memorandum that would include general guidelines on how the *mujahidin* publications should be,"³⁷³ and to "send it to all the regions[.]"³⁷⁴ Bin Laden specified that the Al Qaeda media policy should "focus on the basics and the *Shariah* [rules] such as violation of the Muslim blood and their honor, as well as the importance in committing to the *Hadith* of the messenger of Allah..."³⁷⁵

AQC leaders repeatedly emphasized in their correspondence the need for media operations throughout the Al Qaeda organization to be calibrated so that their content and tone would resonate with the broad Muslim community. Bin Laden asserted that the affiliates' messaging activities should "care for the general taste of the nation's crowds, so long as it does not conflict with the *Shariah*... The purpose is for the *mujahidin* publications to be a good potential for the competition and to gain the crowds."³⁷⁶ He explained to Nasir al-Wuhayshi that "[w]e need to stay away from words that will affect the people's support for the *mujahidin*... Therefore, it is important to carefully write our statements in order to avoid all accusation against us from the enemy, who accuse us of being animals and killers... The Muslim people should feel that they are part of the battle... [t]hus, we should be careful and provide statements that would be welcomed by

³⁷⁰ bin Laden, "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 18.

³⁷¹ al-Libi, "Letter of guidance on leadership," 6.

³⁷² bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 8.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

the people...”³⁷⁷ Noting that “rough terminology” used by some Al Qaeda members in public statements had “allowed others, who speak in gentler tones, to step ahead,” Atiyah argued that harshness and the appearance of extremism risked alienating mainstream Muslims.³⁷⁸ Abu Yahya al-Libi also highlighted the risks created by immoderately worded public statements, suggesting that “using such absolute language can open a wave of excessiveness against us...Such waves are not desired and they would take us back to whatever debates that, through the generosity of God, we feel that we are beyond...”³⁷⁹

Bin Laden also took steps to exercise quality control over the affiliates’ media activities and to enforce their conformity with his “general policy.” He ordered the formation of a committee within AQC to evaluate all media operations across the organization, and he instructed the regional *emirs* to mirror this control mechanism by “task[ing] one of the qualified brothers with them, to follow up on the media section from all aspects as mentioned in the [media policy] memorandum...He would have the right to stop any publication that includes a term considered outside the general policy, whether in the context or timing.”³⁸⁰ As Abu Yahya explained to AQIM leaders, “careful review and auditing” were necessary to ensure effective messaging.³⁸¹ In order to serve as a vanguard for the *ummah*, all elements of the Al Qaeda organization needed to “elevate our media to the highest levels of truthfulness, trustfulness, [and] manners; we have to excel in production, delivering superior content and format.”³⁸²

3.5.1 Media Guidance: Affiliate Compliance and AQC Reactions

AQC leaders stressed that shrewd media operations were critical to Al Qaeda’s success within the information-dominated environment of the 21st century, and media operations were the area in which the regional affiliates most consistently aligned with Al

³⁷⁷ bin Laden, "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 17.

³⁷⁸ Atiyah ‘Abd al-Rahman, "Letter dtd March 2008," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2008): 1, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20dtd%20March%202008.pdf>.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 3.

³⁸⁰ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 10-11.

³⁸¹ al-Libi, "Letter of guidance on leadership," 6.

³⁸² Ibid.

Qaeda's strategic framework. However, the affiliates also routinely frustrated the central leadership with their lack of media discipline. AQC often found itself recalibrating its own public messaging to make up for the affiliates' shortcomings in media operations, or to defend the organization against criticism resulting from the franchises' counterproductive actions.

As with most areas of strategic instruction, the media guidance that AQC issued to its affiliates found its first expression in advice directed towards AQI, and reflected lessons learned from the Iraqi franchise's missteps. Zawahiri coined AQC leadership's oft-repeated metaphor describing the media domain as a "battlefield" in his 2005 letter to Zarqawi, as he urged AQI to place more emphasis on winning the hearts and minds of the *ummah*.³⁸³ AQI's persistence in posting online videos of beheadings prompted AQC leaders to stress the need for media operations to appeal to the sensitivities of the masses to avoid alienation and reputational harm.

Apart from AQI/ISI/ISIS' penchant for grisly and off-putting propaganda, however, the franchises generally attempted to emulate the themes and methods of AQC's media strategy. Public messaging enabled the franchises to demonstrate solidarity with AQC's global *jihadi* agenda and to assert that their military activities were focused on virtuous attacks targeting the "far enemy," even if their operational track records did not match their declared priorities. One obvious explanation for the affiliates' seemingly higher levels of compliance with AQC's media guidance, compared to other categories of strategic guidance, is simply that most things are easier said than done; claiming a particular set of objectives or accomplishments is easier and less costly than seeing them to fruition. It also is possible that, since the franchises' propaganda activities generally were centralized under the control of their principal leaders, media operations were insulated from the intra-group disorganization, indiscipline, and preference divergence that often contributed to violations of AQC's instructions in other areas.

The process of formalized affiliation with Al Qaeda typically was attended by a notable shift in regional militant groups' public messaging themes to mirror AQC's emphasis on the "far enemy," along with increased sophistication in media practices, influenced by AQC's own propaganda apparatus. Internationalization of the GSPC's

³⁸³ al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Letter to Zarqawi," 09 July 2005, 10.

media themes to match AQC strategic priorities was an important element of the north African group's courtship with the central organization prior to becoming an Al Qaeda franchise.³⁸⁴ After the union with AQC, AQIM's online messaging operations grew significantly in both quality and quantity,³⁸⁵ and they increasingly focused on denunciations of the United States, Israel, and European countries with colonial histories and residual involvement in African affairs, particularly France and Spain.³⁸⁶ AQIM even renamed its official media organ *Al-Andalus*, in reference to the group's aspirational goal of restoring Islamic governance to the region of Andalusia, in southern Spain.³⁸⁷ Similarly, Al-Shabaab ramped up its media operations in the period surrounding announcement of its merger with Al Qaeda. Relying heavily on English-language Twitter posts and thematic series released through its media wing, *Al-Kataaib*, these efforts advanced the dual narrative that Muslims in Somalia were under siege by foreigners and Western proxies, and that Al-Shabaab was capable of defeating the infidel interlopers and establishing security and order.³⁸⁸ AQAP was particularly aggressive in its Western-centric propaganda activities, leveraging the unique capabilities of American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki to reach English-speaking audiences with anti-Western messages and incitement through recorded messages and its online English-language newsletter, *Inspire*.³⁸⁹

Despite these franchises' willingness to emphasize AQC's preferred messaging themes, the central leadership expressed ongoing frustration over the affiliates' media operations. In some cases, AQC leaders objected to content that they felt distracted from strategic focus. For example, while the English-language *Inspire* was AQAP's most

³⁸⁴ Laremont, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 244; Boudali, "The GSPC: Newest Franchise," 2-3.

³⁸⁵ Mathieu Guidere, "Algeria's Al-Qaida Franchise; Torres Soriano, "The Road to Media Jihad," 83.

³⁸⁶ Black, "AQIM's Expanding Internationalist Agenda," 12-13; Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 284.

³⁸⁷ Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse," p. 290.

³⁸⁸ James Sheehan, Shiraz Maher, and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Violent Jihadism in Real Time: Al-Shabaab's Use of Twitter," START Research Brief, January 2013; Christopher Anzalone, "Al-Shabab's Tactical and Media Strategies in the Wake of its Battlefield Setbacks," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 6, issue 3 (March 2013): 14-15.

³⁸⁹ Samuel Lindo, Michael Schoder, and Tyler Jones, "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," AQAM Futures Project Case Study Series, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2011, 9-10, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula>.

internationally-famous propaganda organ, the Yemen-based group also published an Arabic e-magazine, *Sada al-Malahim* (“The Echo of Epic Battles”) since 2008, which was the group’s primary medium for connecting with Arabic-speaking populations. This publication often included material in alignment with AQC’s globalist narrative, but it also focused on localized grievances, seeking to gain support among constituencies on the Arabian Peninsula for AQAP’s opposition to the Yemeni and Saudi regimes.³⁹⁰ In a letter to Atiyah in 2010, bin Laden critiqued a series of AQAP releases, pointing out that they “conflicted with our policy of focusing on the bigger foe, and concealed our interest in the main issues that were the main reasons in initiating the *jihad*[.]” due to “their absorption on a daily basis in the fight against the Yemeni government and the strong focus on...the Peninsula rulers in their lectures[.]”³⁹¹ When Al Qaeda’s credibility was called into question after affiliates were exposed for public messaging that misrepresented their activities or exaggerated successes, the central leadership urged subordinates to ensure “truthfulness [and] trustfulness” in their media efforts.³⁹²

The central leadership often found fault in the execution or timing of the franchises’ messaging activities, reflecting AQC leaders’ keen interest in high-quality, carefully calibrated media output. Bin Laden paid close attention to the optics of Al Qaeda-affiliated media activity, scrutinizing productions for how they made the *mujahidin* appear. He directed Atiyah to “remind [the affiliates] of the importance of the people’s first impression of who is addressing them...this takes care to find out what suits the people and the path from which you can reach them[.]”³⁹³ In other letters to Atiyah, he criticized an Al-Shabaab online post that “showed a child standing next to one of the brothers while the brother was preparing explosives,”³⁹⁴ and he pressed for an overall improvement in media efforts: “I just wanted to point out that the level of interviews did not reach the desired level, and I [call] on you to do better.”³⁹⁵

³⁹⁰ Page, Challita, and Harris, “Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Framing Narratives and Prescriptions,” 154-155; Evans, “From Iraq to Yemen: Al-Qa’ida’s Shifting Strategies,” 13-14.

³⁹¹ bin Laden, “Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyatullah al-Libi 4,” 12-13.

³⁹² al-Libi, “Letter of guidance on leadership,” 6.

³⁹³ bin Laden, “Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyatullah al-Libi 4,” 34.

³⁹⁴ bin Laden, “Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyatullah al-Libi 2,” 7.

³⁹⁵ bin Laden, “Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyatullah al-Libi 3,” 5.

AQC leaders also were sensitive to the timing of certain media releases, seeking to ensure that public messaging was aligned with current events to prevent dilution or derailment of Al Qaeda narrative themes. For example, Zawahiri cancelled publication of one of his own statements critical of Turkey in mid-2010 because it coincided with the so-called “Freedom Flotilla” effort to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza.³⁹⁶ Turkey had supported the Freedom Flotilla, which was popular with much of the Muslim public.³⁹⁷ Bin Laden was understandably irritated, therefore, when AQAP released a message at the same time, focused on a dispute with the Saudi government related to the arrest of a female Al Qaeda sympathizer. Bin Laden took AQAP *emir* Nasser al-Wuhayshi to task for not providing effective oversight of his group’s media operations,³⁹⁸ pointing out that Al Qaeda’s detractors had exploited this poorly-timed message by claiming it demonstrated that “the *mujahidin* are not interested in the Palestinian cause, and the blockade of our brothers in Gaza—rather that their concern is to fight, corrupt, and argue with the security men and not with the usurper Jews.”³⁹⁹

AQC leaders reacted to their frustrations about the affiliates’ sub-standard media operations by seeking to increase centralized control over propaganda activities, and by adjusting the parent organization’s own messaging efforts to make up for the franchises’ shortcomings. As described above, AQC leadership repeatedly sent media policies to their franchises, and they insisted on the formation of committees that would review media output and veto inappropriate content. The central leadership viewed these checks and balances on the Al Qaeda network’s media operations as essential measures “to avoid the mistakes that would impact...the reputation of the *mujahidin* and the sympathy of the nation’s masses.”⁴⁰⁰ In light of repeated messaging missteps, bin Laden assessed that “[w]e are in need of an advisory reading, with constructive criticism to our entire policy and publications at the center and in the regions[.]”⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁶ al-Rahman, “Letter to Shaykh Abu Abdallah dtd 17 July 2010,” 4-5.

³⁹⁷ Isabel Kershner, “Israel Intercepts Gaza Flotilla; Violence Reported,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2010,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/world/middleeast/31flotilla.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

³⁹⁸ bin Laden, “Letter from Usama Bin Laden to ‘Atiyatullah Al-Libi,” 3.

³⁹⁹ bin Laden, “Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyatullah al-Libi 4,” 12.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

AQC adapted its own media strategy in response to its franchises' controversial behavior and inadequate public messaging. The central organization sought to accommodate the challenges presented by unruly affiliates by undertaking double-pronged, often contradictory, public messaging campaigns. Determined to portray Al Qaeda as a unified *jihadi* organization, with the central leadership firmly in command at its head, AQC publicly supported its subordinate groups, even when their operations and policies were not in alignment with the central leadership's guidance and garnered criticism from across the Muslim community. At the same time, in order to mitigate reputational damage to the parent organization stemming from association with the franchises' unpopular actions, AQC leaders deflected criticism by denouncing "mistakes" committed by the *mujahidin* that resulted in unnecessary Muslim casualties. Bin Laden made it clear that, in these cases, "the brothers in all the regions [should] apologize and be held responsible for what happened."⁴⁰² However, since the consequences of these mistakes could be "the alienation of most of the nation from the *mujahidin*," bin Laden instructed his staff that "[s]hould some of the brothers fail to carry out their duties in this respect, [AQC] should then assume the responsibility and apologize for what had happened."⁴⁰³ Additionally, the central leadership began to use their public platforms to issue explicit guidance to their followers to avoid shedding "innocent" blood, seeking to prevent further counterproductive violence and to burnish their legitimacy in the eyes of their desired constituents. These public statements, which acknowledged objectionable acts by some *mujahidin*, while seeking to differentiate them from Al Qaeda's policies and to prevent further transgressions, formed much of AQC's conduct and targeting guidance discussed in the previous section.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to trace reciprocal strategic influences across the Al Qaeda organization, examining the substance and outcomes of the command interactions and organizational processes described in Chapter 2, and providing an empirical basis for assessing strategic coherence across the network, getting at the heart of this thesis'

⁴⁰² Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 9-10.

research questions. First, this chapter combined a review of key AQC public statements with new exploitation of previously underutilized Al Qaeda internal correspondence to achieve an appreciation of the full body of strategic guidance with which AQC sought to steer the affiliates' behaviors. Then, this chapter applied the methodological tools and approaches laid out in Chapter 1 to test compliance by the franchises with the four categories of AQC's strategic guidance—campaign, diplomatic, targeting and conduct guidance, and media—finding that, with very few exceptions, the affiliates consistently violated every tenet of AQC's strategic counsel. Finally, this chapter examined the ways that AQC adapted its own strategic approaches, policies, and actions to accommodate its relationships with the regional affiliates, particularly in reaction to the franchises' strategic divergences, as the central leadership sought to mitigate harm to Al Qaeda's reputation and legitimacy caused by the regional groups' patterns of non-compliance with the parent organization's guidance.

The most fundamental strategic disconnect across the Al Qaeda organization was the affiliates' failure to align with AQC's prioritization of directing operations against the "far enemy" of the United States and its Western allies. The franchises directed ample threats towards the West in their media statements, but methodical analysis of attacks conducted by the affiliates demonstrates that their military operations remained overwhelmingly focused on localized agendas, targeting either "near enemy" government security forces, rival militant groups, or civilian populations who were attacked due to their religious affiliations (particularly Shia) or their associations with other targeted groups. Indiscriminate attacks by affiliates also resulted in substantial collateral damage among ordinary Muslim civilians. These operational patterns, which persisted despite numerous attempts by AQC leaders to guide the affiliates along more productive trajectories, violated AQC's grand strategy and alienated the Muslim community. High numbers of Muslim casualties resulting from the franchises' operations provoked significant criticism of both the regional groups and their parent organization, undermining Al Qaeda's reputation and legitimacy with its desired constituency.

The regional franchises further frustrated AQC through their ill-fated attempts to govern territory, in some cases declaring "emirates" against the advice of the central leadership. AQC leaders repeatedly stressed that the *jihad* should progress according to

stages, and that emirates only should be declared once the appropriate conditions were set, and the *mujahidin* were capable both of defending and effectively governing their state. The central leadership supplemented this campaign framework with diplomatic advice on maintaining positive relations with adjacent militant groups, tribes, and other civilian populations. This guidance was intended to help maintain the unity of the *mujahidin*, to reduce the number of enemies that would oppose the affiliates, and to gain the support of the people who lived in the areas that the affiliates sought to control. With the exception of AQAP's careful cultivation of tribal relationships, the franchises routinely flouted this counsel, instead undercutting their strategic positions by indulging in intra-*jihadi* conflicts and alienating civilian populations through disrespect for local custom and overzealous *Shariah* enforcement. Finally, although the franchises generally adopted the parent organization's propaganda themes of criticizing and threatening the "far enemy," the central leadership continued to find fault in the affiliates' media operations due to poor execution and offensive or unfocused content.

The central leadership constantly adjusted their own policies and practices in response to the affiliates' actions. In some cases, these adjustments were opportunistic, such as leveraging AQIM's access in north Africa to increase attack targeting and propaganda focus on previously low-priority "far enemy" countries, like France and Spain, or compromising AQC's ethical positions to embrace the affiliates' habitual kidnap-for-ransom practices in order to shore up the parent organization's failing financial circumstances.

More often, the affiliates' patterns of noncompliance with AQC's guidance forced the central leadership into a reactive mode, constantly evolving their own approaches in attempts to protect Al Qaeda's image and reputation and to preserve as much strategic progress as possible. Behind the scenes, AQC developed and disseminated to the franchises numerous iterations of policy guidance, seeking to correct shortcomings in both military and media operations. In some cases, AQC leaders circumvented their own affiliate commanders to intervene in the franchises' local affairs, particularly in attempts to broker agreements with other Islamist militant organizations to prevent conflict that threatened both the affiliates' viability and the center's strategic objectives.

AQC's most notable adaptations were in its own public messaging strategy. Faced with mounting criticism from across the Muslim community over the franchises' unpopular actions, AQC leaders undertook a dual approach. On the one hand, they publicly defended their affiliates to protect Al Qaeda's image as a powerful, unified, and globe-spanning *jihadi* organization under the firm control of the central leadership. On the other hand, AQC leaders used their public statements to deflect criticism and to disassociate the parent organization from the affiliates' most egregious actions, while also seeking to dissuade their followers from further counterproductive behavior. AQC leaders' attempts to walk this tightrope of largely contradictory public messaging themes came to dominate the central organization's activities, as they struggled for relevance and control over their unruly network.

The findings of this chapter's inquiries make clear that, due to the affiliates' nearly complete failures to abide by AQC's guidance, there was virtually no strategic coherence across the Al Qaeda organization, at least in a practical sense. If affiliate leaders did intend to operate in alignment with AQC's directives, they almost uniformly failed in execution. Any appearance of strategic conformity that existed essentially was a propaganda-driven illusion, possibly sustained by AQC's energetic media efforts to conceal the strategic disconnect across its network in order to protect the Al Qaeda organization's reputation and credibility. On balance, the examined period of Al Qaeda franchising had a greater influence on the parent organization than it did on the regional groups that pledged their fealty to the central leadership. At the affiliate group level, there were few examples of concrete actions, beyond rhetoric, that were taken in alignment with AQC's strategic framework. As Chapter 2 discusses, these patterns of non-compliance by affiliates may be at least partly explained by organizational challenges other than outright insubordination at the franchise *emir* level, but this would not change the end result of *de facto* strategic divergence. The central organization, however, adapted its approaches and methods in numerous ways. Ultimately, AQC saw its aspirational strategic agenda eclipsed by the exigencies of managing its unruly network, with the central leadership struggling to preserve an appearance of strategic coherence and progress that did not actually characterize the organization.

The following case study chapters examine in detail several primary examples of the interplay between the affiliates and the central leadership, tracing the origins of much of AQC's strategic guidance, as well as its adaptations to accommodate the affiliates and to mitigate the effects of the regional groups' strategically divergent actions.

Chapter 4: Case Study – Al Qaeda in Iraq / the Islamic State of Iraq / the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

4.1 Introduction

As the inaugural Al Qaeda affiliate, and also as the first (and so far only) franchise to be disavowed by AQC leadership, AQI/ISI/ISIS is a crucial group for inclusion as a case study in this thesis. AQC's relationship with its Iraqi franchise arguably illustrates both the greatest potential advantages and the greatest potential downsides of its franchising strategy. Union with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's Islamist insurgent group in 2004 enabled AQC to gain access to the Iraq field of *jihad*, and therefore begin to restore its relevance and prestige within the Salafi-jihadist community after it was driven from its Afghan sanctuary and severely degraded by a U.S. led coalition in 2001. However, a series of AQI/ISI/ISIS *emirs* routinely ignored AQC guidance, and the franchise invited significant criticism from across the *jihadi* enterprise and the broader Muslim community through its extreme violence and divisive policies. AQC's relationship with AQI/ISI/ISIS went from bad to worse for nearly a decade until Zawahiri finally could not tolerate ISIS' overt insubordination and counterproductive violence, and he publicly excommunicated the group from the Al Qaeda organization, ultimately accepting that AQC's powerlessness to control and guide the strategy of its affiliate no longer could be hidden.

This affiliate case study is important to the central aims of this research not only because AQI/ISI/ISIS is the archetype of a non-compliant, strategically divergent franchise, but also because AQC's decade-long experience struggling to handle the group laid much of the foundation for the strategic guidance, management methods, and propaganda approach that the central leadership applied in attempts to steer the rest of their affiliate network and to defend the overarching organization against reputational risk. Recently released Al Qaeda internal documents provide improved insight into AQC leaders' frustrations with the Iraqi affiliate, as well as their simultaneous attempts to publicly defend their franchise and to mitigate the harm of its unpopular actions. Due to the notoriety of ISIS, the former Al Qaeda affiliate has received substantial recent

scholarly treatment that has traced its relationship with AQC,⁴⁰⁴ but the existing literature has not methodically connected the lessons learned, methods tested, and precedents set during the tumultuous relationship to the broader context of AQC's interactions with its network of franchises. Drawing out that connection, in the service of this thesis' broader research objectives, is a primary purpose of this case study.

On 27 December 2004, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's Islamist insurgent group in Iraq, Tawhid w'al Jihad, became the first regional militant organization to join Al Qaeda as a formal affiliate when Osama bin Laden "warmly welcome[d] their union with us" in a publicly released audio message.⁴⁰⁵ Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), as Zarqawi's group became commonly known, provided a near-term boost to a weakened AQC by enabling it to portray a leadership role in the burgeoning resistance against American forces and the U.S.-supported government in Iraq,⁴⁰⁶ but the affiliate soon created significant challenges to the central organization's overarching strategy and to its self-appointed role as a vanguard of global Salafi-jihadism. AQI's wanton violence against fellow Muslims—conducted counter to AQC leaders' advice—generated significant criticism from across the Islamic community, tarnishing the Al Qaeda brand.⁴⁰⁷ The franchise further demonstrated its disregard for AQC's strategic guidance through its heavy-handed treatment of tribes and other Sunni militant groups,⁴⁰⁸ its zealous pursuit of sectarian conflict with Iraq's Shia majority,⁴⁰⁹ and its premature declaration of a governing emirate, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).⁴¹⁰

AQC's bid to bolster its visibility and relevance by co-opting the access and capabilities of Zarqawi's group in Iraq turned out to be costly. Unruly or insubordinate activities by AQI and its successor group—the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which later

⁴⁰⁴ For example, Fishman, *The Master Plan.*; Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper*, no. 19 (2015).; and Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Doubleday, 2015).

⁴⁰⁵ BBC News, "Bin Laden Tape: Key Excerpts," 27 Dec 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4129173.stm

⁴⁰⁶ See pp. 136-37.

⁴⁰⁷ See pp. 137-38, 142, and 151-55.

⁴⁰⁸ See pp. 151-55.

⁴⁰⁹ See pp. 138 and 141-42.

⁴¹⁰ See pp. 146-51.

renamed itself, against Zawahiri's orders, as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)—undermined progress towards AQC's strategic objectives, forcing the parent organization into a reactive mode. Before finally cutting ties with ISIS in February 2014, the central leadership spent nearly a decade futilely attempting to control its affiliate. The Iraqi affiliate's intransigence forced AQC to resort to damage control measures to protect Al Qaeda's image and credibility.⁴¹¹ AQC violated its own organizational model and circumvented its franchise in attempts to foster unity among militant groups in Iraq,⁴¹² and the central organization's efforts to mitigate reputational damage caused by AQI and its successors resulted in significant, lasting changes to its media strategy.⁴¹³ AQC's frustrations with AQI/ISI/ISIS didn't prevent it from engaging in subsequent regional franchising activity, but its experiences with the Mesopotamian affiliate provided lessons that influenced much of AQC senior leadership's future strategic guidance.⁴¹⁴

This chapter first discusses the origins and rationale for the union between AQC and Zarqawi's Tawhid w'al Jihad to form AQI. It traces the early strategic interplay between the two groups, including AQC leadership's initial attempts to control the activities and strategic direction of their new affiliate, and the Iraqi franchise's repeated disregard for AQC's guidance, leading to its controversial declaration of an Islamic emirate in the form of the ISI. Next, the chapter examines criticism of AQI/ISI/ISIS—and, by association, of AQC—from other Sunni militant groups in Iraq and from the wider Salafi-jihadist community stemming from AQI/ISI/ISIS' divisive policies and indiscriminate violence towards other Muslims. Then, this study explores reactive measures taken by AQC in continued efforts to influence AQI/ISI/ISIS and, as necessary, bypass its affiliate to deflect criticism and to foster greater unity among rival groups of *mujahidin*. After considering ways in which AQI/ISI/ISIS' own organizational shortcomings exacerbated the effects of strategic disconnect with its parent organization, the chapter describes the events culminating in Zawahiri's disavowal of ISIS as an Al Qaeda affiliate. Finally, this chapter assesses a number of areas in which AQC's

⁴¹¹ See pp. 155-59.

⁴¹² See pp. 159-62.

⁴¹³ See pp. 177-85.

⁴¹⁴ See pp. 185-90.

relationship with its first regional franchise had a lasting influence on the central organization's strategic approach, particularly its media operations and how it advised and managed other affiliate groups.

4.2 AQC's Opportunism and the Establishment of AQI

When the United States and its "coalition of the willing" invaded Iraq in March 2003, AQC leaders saw an opportunity to revive Al Qaeda's failing fortunes after the U.S. overthrow of the Afghan regime in 2001 had deprived bin Laden's organization of most of its operational capacity and freedom of movement. If AQC could insert itself into the growing resistance in Iraq, it could resume its self-appointed role as "vanguard" of the Salafi-jihadist movement by demonstrating that it retained influence and operational reach.⁴¹⁵ The weakened and isolated core organization required a proxy through which to assert itself in Iraq, so AQC leadership settled on a franchising strategy, negotiating a union with Zarqawi's militant group to form its first formally recognized affiliate, AQI. Bin Laden and his lieutenants were familiar with Zarqawi's independent streak and his tendency towards extremism, but they gambled on merger with his Tawhid w'al Jihad in order leverage the group's access to the Iraqi field of *jihad* to enable an Al Qaeda resurgence.⁴¹⁶ Although establishment of AQI as an Al Qaeda affiliate did result in some early publicity gains, AQC leaders quickly found themselves struggling to manage popular backlash in response to Zarqawi's harsh, sectarian policies.

Strategic disconnect between bin Laden and Zarqawi was evident prior to 9/11, when both men were leading Arab militant groups within the sanctuary of Taliban-governed Afghanistan.⁴¹⁷ In 1998, bin Laden had formed the World Islamic Front, with Al Qaeda at its head, in an attempt to create a global consortium of *mujahidin* organizations to confront "the Jews and Crusaders."⁴¹⁸ Zarqawi, after being released from prison in his home country of Jordan, had travelled to Afghanistan in 1999 and established a training camp near Herat for his group, Jund al-Sham (Soldiers of the

⁴¹⁵ See the discussion in Chapter 1, sections 1.5.2, 1.5.3, and 1.5.4.

⁴¹⁶ See pp. 135-37.

⁴¹⁷ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 16-19.

⁴¹⁸ Brooke, "Strategic Fissures," p. 49-50

Levant).⁴¹⁹ Bin Laden provided support to Zarqawi's group and invited him to align with Al Qaeda, hoping that his largely Levantine membership might facilitate opportunities to attack Israel. Zarqawi declined to join with bin Laden, however, because he disagreed with Al Qaeda's focus on the "far" enemy, instead prioritizing overthrow of "near" enemy apostate regimes in the Middle East.⁴²⁰ In a foreshadowing of strategic friction to come, Al Qaeda members who were involved in the negotiations with Zarqawi in Afghanistan observed that his views on the broad permissibility of *takfir* and his unwillingness to compromise with other militant groups placed him at odds with Al Qaeda's more measured approach.⁴²¹

In the fall of 2001, during the overthrow of the Taliban by U.S. and Afghan Northern Alliance forces, bin Laden and Zarqawi both fled, separately, to Pakistan. While bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leadership went underground in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and focused on avoiding death or capture, Zarqawi traveled via Iran to northern Iraq, arriving in mid-2002. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Zarqawi fell in with Islamist extremist elements that were using the autonomous region to avoid Saddam Hussein's security forces. He formed the group Tawhid w'al Jihad and began building networks throughout Iraq and the Levant.⁴²² After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Zarqawi and his followers became prominent among Sunni insurgents, gaining notoriety through highly-publicized beheadings of foreign prisoners, use of online propaganda, and occupation of the western Iraqi city of Fallujah, where Zarqawi's fighters had famously ambushed and killed four American security contractors in spring 2004, hanging their burned and mutilated bodies from a bridge across the Euphrates River.⁴²³

⁴¹⁹ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 16-20.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Vahid Brown, "Al-Qa'ida Central and Local Affiliates," *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within Al-Qa'ida and its Periphery*, edited by Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman. (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010), 94-5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05617.9>.

⁴²² Fishman, *Master Plan*, p. 22-29.

⁴²³ CNN, "Official: Al-Zarqawi May be in Fallujah," June 17 2004, <https://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/06/16/iraq.main/index.html>; Fishman, *Master Plan*, p. 41-58.

The opportunity for *jihād* in Iraq from 2003 onwards bridged the gap between Zarqawi's and bin Laden's strategic priorities, causing the near and far enemies to overlap to a greater extent than elsewhere in the Middle East due to the country-wide occupation by the United States and its allies. Despite the galvanizing effect that the U.S.-led invasion had on Islamist militancy, Al Qaeda found itself on the sidelines at first, unable to offer more than encouraging rhetoric to the insurgency in Iraq. Despite AQC leaders' understanding of Zarqawi's extremist impulses and stubborn independence, they saw the opportunity to capitalize on his access to the Iraqi field of *jihād* to demonstrate Al Qaeda's continued relevance and potency, and so, in early 2004, began a new round of discussions with him about a possible merger of the two organizations.⁴²⁴ For Zarqawi, association with the feared Al Qaeda name stood to immediately raise his profile, credibility, and recruitment potential, while the distant and isolated AQC leadership posed little practical threat to his operational autonomy. On 17 October 2004, Zarqawi released a message stating that "Tawhid wa'l Jihad pledges both its leaders and its soldiers to the *mujahid* commander, Shaykh Osama bin Laden..."⁴²⁵ Bin Laden's subsequent acknowledgement of the union on 27 December 2004, and his designation of "brother Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi [as] the *emir* of the Al Qaeda organization in the Land of the Two Rivers" cemented AQI as Al Qaeda's first official regional affiliate.⁴²⁶

The establishment of AQI had an immediate publicity impact. The Al Qaeda name was vaulted from the sidelines to the center of discussions about the growing insurgency in Iraq, and Zarqawi's group grew in mystique through association with the infamous architects of the 9/11 attacks. Western media outlets, in particular, raised alarms about an expanded and strengthened Al Qaeda,⁴²⁷ and many in the Salafi-jihadist

⁴²⁴ Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, 126-128, 174-175.

⁴²⁵ Jeffrey Pool, "Zarqawi's Pledge of Allegiance to Al-Qaeda: From Mu'asker al-Battar, Issue 21," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 2, issue 24 (2004), <https://jamestown.org/program/zarqawis-pledge-of-allegiance-to-al-qaeda-from-muasker-al-battar-issue-21-2/>

⁴²⁶ BBC News, "Bin Laden Tape: Key Excerpts". Although bin Laden designated the affiliate as 'Al Qaeda in the land of the Two Rivers,' the group became more commonly known (at least among English-speakers) as 'Al Qaeda in Iraq' (AQI), until AQI was subsumed by the Islamic State of Iraq in late 2006.

⁴²⁷ For example, see Dan Murphy, "In Iraq, A Clear-Cut bin Laden-Zarqawi Alliance, *Christian Science Monitor* (December 30, 2004), <https://www.csmonitor.com/2004/1230/p01s03->

community welcomed a boost for the Sunni militant movement in Iraq. AQI's recruiting during this period also was strong, with an estimated 100 to 150 foreign fighters per month infiltrating Iraq to join Zarqawi's aggressive group.⁴²⁸

Within months of its integration with Al Qaeda, however, AQI's actions began to undermine any surge in support that it may have enjoyed as a result of the merger. AQI's gory propaganda (particularly video-taped prisoner beheadings), its relentless violence against Shia Muslims, its heavy-handed treatment of Sunni tribes, and its often violent rivalries with fellow Sunni insurgent groups prompted wide-ranging criticism from its Sunni constituency and from the online Salafi community.⁴²⁹ By the summer of 2005, leaders of other Sunni militant groups publicly were challenging AQI's strategy, arguing that "the call to kill all Shiites is like a fire consuming the Iraqi people, Sunnis and Shiites alike...The resistance [should] not target any Iraqi, whatever his sectarian or ethnic affiliation, unless he is connected to the occupation."⁴³⁰ Even Zarqawi's onetime collaborator and spiritual advisor, the Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, questioned whether AQI's "indiscriminate attacks might distort the true *jihad*."⁴³¹

AQC leaders should not have been surprised by Zarqawi's actions. Not only had they been exposed to his extreme ways of thinking in pre-2001 Afghanistan, but Zarqawi bluntly outlined his strategy in a letter to bin Laden written in February 2004, as the two *jihadi* leaders were exploring the possibility of uniting their organizations. Zarqawi explained,

"[The Shia] in our opinion are the key to change...If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans [Shia]...the only solution is for us to strike the religious, military, and other cadres among the Shia with blow after blow until they bend to the Sunnis. Someone may say that, in this matter, we are being hasty and rash and leading the [Islamic] nation into a battle for which it is not ready, [a battle] that will be

woiq.html; Stephen Smith, "Chilling' Al Qaeda Memo Obtained," CBS News (October 6, 2005), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/chilling-al-qaeda-memo-obtained/>

⁴²⁸ Warrick, *Black Flags*, 187.

⁴²⁹ Weimann, "When Fatwas Clash Online," 57-58.

⁴³⁰ Salah Al-Din Brigade online media release, quoted in Weimann, 58.

⁴³¹ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, quoted in Weimann, 57.

revolting and in which blood will be spilled... This is what we want, and, whether they like it or not, many Sunni areas will stand with the *mujahidin*.”⁴³²

Zarqawi signaled that he intended to follow through with this strategy in the same online statement in which he pledged fealty to bin Laden later that year, prefacing his oath of obedience by claiming that “our most generous brothers in Al Qaeda came to understand the strategy of the Tawhid w’al Jihad organization in Iraq...and their hearts warmed to its methods and overall mission.”⁴³³

It is unlikely that bin Laden, who already had established his record as an advocate of Muslim unity,⁴³⁴ explicitly had concurred with Zarqawi’s sectarian strategy. Perhaps bin Laden thought that Zarqawi was exaggerating his stratagem, or was confident that AQC would be able to influence the franchise in Iraq, based on Zarqawi’s promise that “if you [bin Laden] bid us plunge into the ocean, we would follow you. If you ordered it so, we would obey. If you forbade us something, we would abide by your wishes.”⁴³⁵ Bin Laden also may have reasoned simply that the benefit of gaining Al Qaeda’s entrance into the Iraqi *jihad* outweighed the risks presented by a potentially controversial and unruly affiliate. Whatever his rationale, when bin Laden “warmly welcome[d]” AQI as an official affiliate of Al Qaeda in December 2004, he bound the parent organization’s reputation to that of the new franchise. As AQI – and, by association, all of Al Qaeda – received increased criticism for Zarqawi’s violent and sectarian campaign in the months following the merger, AQC senior leadership attempted to intervene.

4.3 AQC Intervention with Zarqawi

Zawahiri wrote to Zarqawi in July 2005 in an attempt to influence the new Al Qaeda franchise to correct its course. Zawahiri took a diplomatic tone, opening the letter by praising Zarqawi’s and his followers’ battlefield exploits and by assuring him of

⁴³² U.S. Department of State, “Zarqawi Letter,” February 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

⁴³³ Pool, “Zarqawi’s Pledge of Allegiance to Al Qaeda”.

⁴³⁴ For example, see “Bin Laden Message Urges Islamic Factions to Unite, Fight ‘External’ Enemy

⁴³⁵ Pool, “Zarqawi’s Pledge of Allegiance to Al Qaeda”.

AQC's continuing support. AQC's second-in-command then laid out his vision of a four-stage strategy for the *jihad* in Iraq: 1) Expel the Americans; 2) Establish an Islamic emirate in Iraq to fill the political vacuum created by the American departure; 3) Extend the *jihad* to the countries neighboring Iraq; 4) Attack Israel (this step could be undertaken concurrently with the other steps).⁴³⁶ Finally, Zawahiri transitioned to the heart of the matter, which was addressing the steady erosion of popular support for AQI. Zawahiri linked this issue to the goals of the *mujahidin*'s campaign in Iraq:

“If we look at the two short-term goals, which are removing the Americans and establishing an Islamic emirate in Iraq, or a caliphate if possible, then [we] will see that the strongest weapon which the *mujahidin* enjoy – after the help and granting of success by God – is popular support from the Muslim masses in Iraq and the surrounding Muslim countries...In the absence of this popular support, the Islamic *mujahid* movement would be crushed in the shadows.”⁴³⁷

Zawahiri insisted that “it’s very important that you allow me to elaborate a little here on this issue of popular support”⁴³⁸ and came to his bottom line: “the *mujahid* movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve...”⁴³⁹ He expanded on this concept in several areas that impacted the Islamist campaign in Iraq. First, reiterating the ultimate goal of establishing an emirate in Iraq, Zawahiri cautioned that “the establishment of a governing authority – as soon as the country is freed from the Americans – does not depend on force alone...it doesn’t appear that the *mujahidin*, much less the Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, will lay claim to governance without the Iraqi people...Therefore, I stress to you and to all your brothers the need to direct the political action equally with the military action, by the alliance, cooperation, and gathering of all leaders of opinion and influence in the Iraqi arena.”⁴⁴⁰ Second, Zawahiri emphasized the need for unity among *jihadis*, arguing that “if the *mujahidin* are scattered, this leads to the scattering of the people around them.”⁴⁴¹ Third, he encouraged Zarqawi to gain support of the *ulema* (clerics), even if it meant overlooking disagreements in

⁴³⁶ al-Zawahiri, “Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi,” 09 July 2005, 3.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 5-6.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 6.

religious doctrine. Fourth, Zawahiri dealt with Zarqawi's determined fight against the Shia majority of Iraq. Acknowledging the treachery of Shia support to the U.S. occupation and some intractable theological differences between Shia and Sunnis, he nevertheless pointed out that "the majority of Muslims don't comprehend this and possibly could not even imagine it. For that reason, many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques..."⁴⁴²

Consequently, Zawahiri explained, "My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue."⁴⁴³ At any rate, Zawahiri questioned, "is the opening of another front now in addition to the front against the Americans and the government a wise decision?"⁴⁴⁴

Finally, Zawahiri challenged Zarqawi's practice of publicizing AQI's acts of extreme violence, such as beheading prisoners. Zawahiri was firm on this point: "Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim population who love and support you will never find palatable...are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages."⁴⁴⁵ He reminded Zarqawi that "we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."⁴⁴⁶

The available documentary record does not reveal what, if any, specific instructions AQC leaders previously had given to Zarqawi leading up to or during the first few months of AQI's operations, but Zawahiri's letter of July 2005 presented a crystal-clear strategic framework that would be echoed and refined in future guidance to the Al Qaeda affiliates. U.S. forces discovered a copy of the letter in September 2005, while raiding the home of AQI's sub-commander responsible for Baghdad, so it is likely that Zarqawi was aware of Zawahiri's advice, despite the fact that AQI claimed the letter to be a fake after the U.S. government published it online.⁴⁴⁷ AQC leaders must have

⁴⁴² Ibid., 7-8.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Fishman, *Master Plan*, 73-74.

been particularly vexed, therefore, when many of Zarqawi's actions in late 2005 seemed to be in direct contradiction of Zawahiri's counsel.

Rather than heeding Zawahiri's guidance and seeking to mend AQI's relationships with the Muslim masses, Zarqawi intensified his sectarian campaign with an audio recording released in September 2005, two months after Zawahiri had written his letter. Zarqawi announced, "The Al Qaeda organization in the Land of Two Rivers is declaring all-out war on the Rafidha [Shia], wherever they are in Iraq."⁴⁴⁸ His threats were not limited to the Shia, however; he also took aim at Sunnis who did not align with AQI's agenda: "You much choose between the good side and the bad side. Any tribe...whose allegiance to the crusaders and their agents is proven will be targeted by the *mujahidin* in the same way the crusaders are."⁴⁴⁹

Later that fall, Zarqawi's group escalated again with an attack that would have serious repercussions for public sentiment towards both AQI and its parent organization. On 09 November 2005, Zarqawi's followers conducted suicide bombings of three hotels in downtown Amman, Jordan, killing more than fifty Arab civilians, the majority of whom had been attending a wedding party.⁴⁵⁰ AQI claimed responsibility the day following the attacks, prompting more than 100,000 people to march through the streets of Amman in protest, shouting, "Zarqawi, you coward, what brought you here?"⁴⁵¹ A week later, Zarqawi released another message to defend the attack, claiming that AQI had intended to target a meeting of U.S. and Israeli intelligence officers. He "ask[ed] God to have mercy on the Muslims, who we did not intend to target, even if they were in hotels which are centers of immorality."⁴⁵² This tone-deaf defense did little to mollify Jordanians, many of whom previously had been sympathetic towards Al Qaeda and the *jihadi* agenda. A poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at Jordan University in early December 2005, less than a month after the Amman hotel bombings, showed that this support had degraded significantly, with 72.2 percent of respondents classifying AQI

⁴⁴⁸ Quoted in Warrick, *Black Flags*, 186.

⁴⁴⁹ Quoted in Warrick, *Black Flags*, 186.

⁴⁵⁰ BBC News, "Zarqawi Defends Jordan Attacks," Nov 18 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4450590.stm.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

as a “terrorist group,” and only 6.2 percent characterizing it as a “legitimate resistance group.”⁴⁵³ The public opinion survey also illustrated how closely tied AQC’s reputation was to its affiliate’s. Whereas a 2004 poll (conducted before the emergence of AQI) had shown that 67 percent of the Jordanian public viewed Al Qaeda as a “legitimate resistance group,” that number dropped to 20 percent in the 2005 poll conducted after AQI’s Amman hotel bombings.⁴⁵⁴

AQC leadership was keenly aware of the threat that AQI’s divisive violence posed to the standing of the entire Al Qaeda organization, and they intervened again in an attempt to bring the insubordinate affiliate under control. On 11 December 2005, roughly one month after the Amman bombings, Atiyah ‘Abd al-Rahman wrote a stern letter to Zarqawi, opening his message by warning that “my discourse will be primarily about the negatives and cautioning against things that are perilous and ruinous.”⁴⁵⁵ Atiyah confirmed that Zawahiri’s message to Zarqawi several months earlier had been “a genuine letter and it represents the thoughts of the brothers, the shaykhs, and all of the intellectual and moral leadership [of AQC].”⁴⁵⁶ Squarely addressing the reputational problems that AQI was causing for the broader movement, Atiyah reminded Zarqawi, “My dear brother, today you are a man of the public...and your actions, decisions, and behavior result in gains and losses that are not yours alone...”⁴⁵⁷ Consequently, Atiyah continued, “Policy must be dominant over militarism...unless our military actions are servant to our judicious *Shariah* policy, and unless our short-term goals and successes are servant to our ultimate goal and highest aims, then they will be akin to exhaustion, strain, and illusion.”⁴⁵⁸

Reinforcing many of Zawahiri’s earlier points, Atiyah laid out a number of strategic precepts that he and “the brothers” saw as critical to the *mujahidin*’s success.

⁴⁵³ Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Jordanian Poll Indicates Erosion of Public Support for al-Qaeda,” *The Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Focus* 3, issue 6 (2006),

<https://jamestown.org/program/jordanian-poll-indicates-erosion-of-public-support-for-al-qaeda/>.

⁴⁵⁴ al-Shishani, “Jordanian Poll Indicates Erosion of Public Support for al-Qaeda”.

⁴⁵⁵ “Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi 11 December 2005”, Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, p. 2, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

First and foremost, AQI must be diligent in “[w]inning over the people...gaining their sympathy...using the utmost caution not to be harsh with them or degrade them or...cause them provocation, wherein they would turn on us and you with hostile animosity.”⁴⁵⁹ In order to avoid losing support among the people, Atiyah cautioned that AQI should avoid killing Sunni religious scholars and tribal leaders “no matter what.”⁴⁶⁰ He expanded on this by “warn[ing] against all acts that alienate, from killing to any sort of other treatment...if we come and kill some people whom we know to be corrupt and treasonous, but who are respected and beloved by the people, then this leads to great trouble and it is an act against all of the fundamentals of politics and leadership.”⁴⁶¹ Addressing the aggressively sectarian nature of AQI’s military actions and public statements, Atiyah argued that “whoever belongs to the brothers from other sects and many different people...those are people we should get along with...”⁴⁶² Atiyah stressed that the *mujahidin* should “not merely be people of killing, slaughter, blood, cursing, insult and harshness, but rather...people who are unopposed to mercy and gentleness.”⁴⁶³ In order to achieve the respect among the *ummah* that would be necessary to sustain Al Qaeda and enable attainment of its ultimate goals, he advised that Zarqawi and his organization should take a long view and exercise forbearance: “[T]here is no harm in a certain amount of keeping quiet, overlooking things, forgiving, and reserving things to a time of an end to weakness and the attainment of complete authority or something close to it; otherwise there would occur a greater harm than what we are striving to eliminate!”⁴⁶⁴ Finally, Atiyah asserted that AQI must preserve the people’s confidence by acknowledging mistakes and proving that it would take action to correct them: “Indeed, it is necessary to try rapidly to treat [mistakes] and rectify them...If it is not in our power to right ourselves, reform ourselves...then how can we aspire to reform the Muslim nation?”⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 13.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 11-12.

In addition to counseling Zarqawi on strategic approaches to cultivating popular support among the wider Muslim community, Atiyah also addressed Zarqawi's responsibilities as a leader within the Iraqi insurgency, emphasizing the need to "to make a great effort to educate and guide our cohort, because there are within our *mujahidin* cohort a lot of bad qualities that need to be treated."⁴⁶⁶ Atiyah focused most of his advice in this area on the imperative to preserve the unity of the *mujahidin*, regardless of whether or not they were sworn members of AQI. He cautioned against "being zealous about the name 'Al Qaeda,' or any name or organization...whether [the *mujahidin*] come into [Al Qaeda] with us or not...they are our brothers, our friends, and our loved ones. We should cooperate with them, support them, and work together. Besides, how do you know you won't be humbled tomorrow, while they will be strengthened?"⁴⁶⁷ Atiyah charged Zarqawi to "preserve the integrity of the ranks of the *mujahidin*, irrespective of organization and designation, and you must preserve the fraternity, solidarity, harmony, and mutual support."⁴⁶⁸

Finally, Atiyah used the letter to reassert AQC's primacy over its Iraqi franchise, and he attempted to implement command and control measures intended to preclude additional counterproductive actions by the affiliate. Atiyah directed Zarqawi to "abstain from making any decision on a comprehensive issue (one with a broad reach), and on substantial matters until you have turned to your leadership, Shaykh Osama and the Doctor [Zawahiri]...and consulted with them."⁴⁶⁹ He made clear which of Zarqawi's decisions AQC leaders did not wish to see repeated: "An example of this is the issue of announcing a war against the Shi'ite turncoats and killing them. Another is expanding the arena of the war to neighboring countries, and also undertaking some large-scale operations whose impact is great and whose influence is pervasive, and things of that nature."⁴⁷⁰ Atiyah went even farther in his efforts to reign in AQI, "command[ing]" Zarqawi to send liaisons to co-locate with the central leadership in order to facilitate monitoring and further guidance. His pointed explanation of this directive left no doubt

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 5.

as to what AQI action had been the last straw that prompted AQC senior leaders to make an attempt at tightening control: “[P]reparing [liaison representatives] to be messengers between you and the leadership here is more important than preparing and sending the brothers for some operations like the recent operation of the hotels in Amman!”⁴⁷¹

There is no available record of an AQI reply to either Zawahiri’s or Atiyah’s letter, but Zarqawi took several steps in early 2006 that may have been intended to mollify AQC leadership, or at least to mitigate the negative publicity that his organization had received following its controversial hotel attacks in Amman. On 15 January 2006, in an attempt to demonstrate unity among the *mujahidin* in Iraq, AQI’s spokesman announced the formation of the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC), an umbrella organization comprised of AQI and several other Sunni militant groups.⁴⁷² In a possible accommodation of Zawahiri’s suggestion in his July 2005 correspondence that Iraqis might be more receptive towards a Iraq-born *jihadi* leader,⁴⁷³ a little-known figure named Abdallah bin Rashid al-Baghdadi was named *emir* of the MSC.⁴⁷⁴ Zarqawi also lowered his own media profile; during the last six months of his life (January – June 2006), he released only three public statements, compared to ten releases during the previous six months (July – December 2005).⁴⁷⁵

4.4 Rejection of AQC’s Counsel and Establishment of the ISI

These gestures to improve AQI’s palatability to AQC leadership and to the Iraqi *jihadi* community proved to be little more than window dressing, as Zarqawi and his successors proceeded over the next year to violate, almost line-by-line, much of the guidance contained in Zawahiri’s and Atiyah’s letters. AQI intensified its polarizing attacks on the Shia, and its extreme violence and heavy-handedness alienated other Sunni

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁷² Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate,” 16.

⁴⁷³ al-Zawahiri, “Letter from Zawahiri to Zarqawi,” Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, p. 10-11, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>.

⁴⁷⁴ Fishman, *Master Plan*, 79.

⁴⁷⁵ Brian Fishman, “Redefining the Islamic State,” *New America Foundation National Security Studies Program Policy Paper*, (2011): 8, https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/4343-redefining-the-islamic-state/Fishman_Al_Qaeda_In_Iraq.023ac20877a64488b2b791cd7e313955.pdf.

militant groups and tribes, ensuring continued outrage over the group's actions within the Muslim community.

Despite AQC leaders' advice that Zarqawi should moderate his attacks on Shia Muslims, AQI again intensified its efforts to foment sectarian conflict by bombing the Al-Askariyya, or "Golden," Mosque in Samarra on 22 February 2006. The destruction of the Golden Mosque, one of the most sacred Shia religious sites in Iraq, prompted a surge of factional fighting, as Shia militias took revenge on Sunnis, resulting in spirals of retaliatory violence.⁴⁷⁶ AQI also flouted AQC's guidance regarding the importance of cultivating popular support among Iraq's Sunni tribes. These tribes, which occupied central positions within Iraqi Sunni society, initially allied in many cases with AQI and other militant groups in order to resist what they perceived as a Shia-favoring U.S.-led coalition.⁴⁷⁷ AQI fighters' extreme religious views, disrespect of local customs, violent attempts to supplant tribal leadership, and infringement on traditional smuggling routes and revenue streams alienated many Sunni tribe members, whose offense at AQI's overbearing treatment outweighed their earlier affinity.⁴⁷⁸ Tribal dissatisfaction with AQI grew throughout 2006, culminating in mid-September, when several Anbar tribes publicly denounced AQI during an event they termed the "Day of Awakening."⁴⁷⁹ Tribal resistance against AQI, which became known as the Awakening Movement, or *Sahwa*, included formal collaboration with coalition and Iraqi security forces; about 100,000 Sunni tribesman eventually joined the Sons of Iraq, a paramilitary force organized and paid by the U.S. military.⁴⁸⁰

Throughout 2006, AQI's relations with other Sunni insurgent groups also deteriorated, in spite of Zawahiri's and Atiyah's exhortations to prioritize fostering unity

⁴⁷⁶ Robert F. Worth, "Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Sectarian Fury," *New York Times*, February 22, 2006; Fishman, *Master Plan*, 80-81.

⁴⁷⁷ David J. Kilcullen, "Field Notes on Iraq's Tribal Revolt Against Al-Qa'ida," *CTC Sentinel* 1, issue 8, (2008): 1.

⁴⁷⁸ A. G. Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50, no. 2 (2008): 77-79; Kilcullen, "Field Notes," 1-2.

⁴⁷⁹ Craig Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29439>.; also Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline", 3-4.

⁴⁸⁰ Peter Bergen. *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda*. New York: Free Press, 2011, 272.

among the *mujahidin*. Prominent Sunni militant organizations such as the Islamic Army of Iraq and the 1920 Revolution Brigades publicly lambasted AQI for its violence against Muslims and its treatment of fellow Sunni fighters, arguing that “a Muslim is a brother of another Muslim; he neither oppresses him nor does he lie to him nor does he look down upon him or humiliate him.”⁴⁸¹ These groups claimed that the Al Qaeda affiliate “began to liquidate scholars...[t]his was followed by attacks on the very livelihoods of Muslim Sunnis...[t]hey also went too far in the issue of *Al-Tatarrus*, exceeding all limits...”⁴⁸²

In a video message posted on 24 April of that year, Zarqawi boasted that formation of the MSC had served as “the starting point for establishing an Islamic state.”⁴⁸³ In an unreleased portion of the same video, captured by U.S. forces the following month, he provided more detail about his intent: “[w]e hope to God that within three months from now the environment will be favorable for us to announce an Islamic emirate.”⁴⁸⁴ Zarqawi did not live to see this goal realized, however, because he was killed in a U.S. military airstrike on his safe house north of Baghdad on 07 June 2006.⁴⁸⁵

Shortly thereafter, AQI named Zarqawi’s successor as Egyptian Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir (a.k.a. Abu Ayyub al-Masri), a close aide to Zarqawi who previously had been a member of Zawahiri’s Islamic Jihad Group and had been in Afghanistan with Al Qaeda in the late 1990s.⁴⁸⁶ A few months later, as tensions continued to rise with AQI’s potential allies and bases of support, al-Muhajir led the MSC in declaring establishment

⁴⁸¹ Islamic Army of Iraq spokesman Ibrahim al-Shammari in an online interview posted 05 October 2006, quoted in Fishman, “Dysfunction and Decline”, 6.

⁴⁸² Abu Usamah al-Iraqi, a spokesman apparently aligned with the 1920 Revolution Brigades, in an online video statement posted October 12, 2006, quoted in Fishman, “Dysfunction and Decline”, 7; see also Weimann, “When Fatwas Clash Online,” 54. The reference to *Al-Tatarrus*, or the “barricade argument,” relates to a justification for the permissibility of killing innocents if they are being used as human shields, or “barricades,” by an enemy.

⁴⁸³ Quoted in Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate,” 16.

⁴⁸⁴ Quoted in Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate,” 16.

⁴⁸⁵ John F. Burns, “Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, is Killed in U.S. Airstrike,” *New York Times*, June 8, 2006,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/world/middleeast/08cnd-iraq.html?action=click&contentCollection=World&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article>

⁴⁸⁶ Abdul Hameed Bakier, “A Profile of al-Qaeda’s New Leader in Iraq: Aby Ayyub al-Masri,” *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Focus* 3, issue 24, (2006), <https://jamestown.org/program/a-profile-of-al-qaedas-new-leader-in-iraq-abu-ayyub-al-masri/>

of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) on 15 October 2006.⁴⁸⁷ Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, a relatively obscure (and unknown to AQC leaders) Iraqi militant and former police officer who purportedly was a member of the Prophet Muhammad's tribe of Quraysh, was announced as leader of ISI, or "Commander of the Faithful," the traditional title of Islamic caliphs.⁴⁸⁸ The ISI was presented as the rightful authority over Sunni Muslims in Iraq, and al-Muhajir proclaimed "the integration of all the formations that we have established, including the Mujahidin Shura Council...under the authority of the Islamic State of Iraq," himself assuming a nominally subordinate role as the ISI's minister of war.⁴⁸⁹ In support of its claim to legitimacy as an Islamic political entity, the ISI established a comprehensive governance framework, including ten "ministries" to administer a wide range of portfolios, such as agriculture and fishing, war, health, public relations, and oil.⁴⁹⁰ The ISI's official media wing, Al-Furqan Media, published a ninety-page pamphlet, *Informing the People About the Islamic State of Iraq*, to explain the State's governing precepts, structure, and religious justifications for its establishment.⁴⁹¹ ISI leaders called on all Iraqi Sunnis to pledge fealty to al-Baghdadi, asserting that those who did not would be guilty of sin.⁴⁹²

According to AQC internal correspondence and public statements, AQI did not consult the central leadership before declaring the establishment of the ISI.⁴⁹³ Al-

⁴⁸⁷ "The Islamic State of Iraq," Media Commission of the Mujahidin Shura Council, October 15, 2006.

⁴⁸⁸ Bunzel, "Paper State," 17-18.

⁴⁸⁹ Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, "The Command Is for None but God," Al-Furqan Media Establishment, November 10, 2006, quoted in Fishman, *Master Plan*, 92.

⁴⁹⁰ Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (July 2015), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297420>.

⁴⁹¹ Uthman bin Abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi, *Informing the People About the Islamic State of Iraq*, Al-Furqan Media (January 2007), <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/ilam-al-anam.pdf>; see also Brian Fishman, "Fourth Generation Governance: Sheikh Tamimi Defends the Islamic State of Iraq," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (2007), https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2010/06/ISI-Fourth_Gen4.pdf.

⁴⁹² Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 18.

⁴⁹³ Adam Gadahn, "Letter from Adam Gadahn," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT, January 2011, 8, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Adam-Gadahn-Translation.pdf>. Gadahn reiterated this point in a 2015 interview with *Resurgence* magazine: Assam al-Amriki, "In This Interview: Adam Tells Resurgence," *As-Sahab Media*, June 25, 2015, <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/16612/AAM20150625.pdf?sequence=1>, 47; Zawahiri also made this point clear in a 2014 public statement: Ayman al-

Muhajir may not have been privy to Atiyah's order to Zarqawi to consult bin Laden and Zawahiri before "making any decision on a comprehensive issue,"⁴⁹⁴ but al-Muhajir's relationship with Zawahiri, going back more than two decades,⁴⁹⁵ makes this circumvention of the Al Qaeda chain of command surprising. It is possible that communication challenges prevented consultation with AQC, or perhaps this instance should be seen as evidence that the independence and insubordination that eventually would result in a schism between AQC and its affiliate already had taken root firmly within the Iraqi franchise.

If al-Muhajir had sought the AQC leaders' counsel in 2006, he likely would have been urged strongly not to declare an emirate at that time. Zawahiri and Atiyah both had expressed in their letters to Zarqawi that they saw Iraq as a promising location for the eventual establishment of an Islamic state—a prospect that Zawahiri reinforced in his publicly-released eulogy for the AQI founder in June 2006⁴⁹⁶—but their writings described a phased strategic approach, with emphases on the conditions that were necessary to achieve this objective. Zawahiri stipulated multiple times in his letter to Zarqawi that establishment of an emirate in Iraq should be undertaken after the expulsion of American forces.⁴⁹⁷ Atiyah, in referencing AQI's goal "to destroy a power and a state and erect on its rubble an Islamic state," qualified this lofty ambition by adding, "or at least form a building block on the right path towards that..."⁴⁹⁸ More importantly, both AQC leaders stressed repeatedly that AQI's project in Iraq would fail unless the *mujahidin* were united and supported by the people.

The situation in Iraq in 2006 met none of the conditions laid out by AQC leaders. Although the U.S.-led military effort was struggling to stabilize Iraq, and there was public debate within the U.S. over whether troop levels should be drawn down, there still

Zawahiri, "Testimonial to Preserve the Blood of Mujahidin in as-Sham," May 3, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/16377>, 2.

⁴⁹⁴ al-Rahman, "Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi 11 December 2005"

⁴⁹⁵ Bakier, "Profile of Abu Ayyub al-Masri".

⁴⁹⁶ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Elegizing the Ummah's Martyr and Commander of the Martydom-seekers Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, May Allah Have Mercy on Him," As-Sahab Media, 26 June 2006: 2-3, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1508618-2006-06-26-zawahiri-eulogy-for-zarqawi-mp3.html>.

⁴⁹⁷ al-Zawahiri, "Letter from Zawahiri to Zarqawi," 3, 5.

⁴⁹⁸ al-Rahman, "Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi 11 December 2005," 13.

were roughly 140,000 American troops deployed to the country in mid-2006, and the so-called “Surge” strategy, which would result in an additional 30,000 U.S. troops being sent to Iraq in 2007, already was being discussed.⁴⁹⁹ As described above, AQI was in open conflict with significant segments of the Sunni insurgent movement, and it was the target of condemnation from across Muslim society. AQI’s decision to proceed with declaration of the ISI, despite these circumstances, would further damage the organization’s reputation and relationships with fellow Sunni insurgents.⁵⁰⁰ Additionally, as examined in a later section, AQI’s premature establishment of the ISI would complicate AQC’s efforts to defend its Iraqi franchise and would strongly influence the central leadership’s strategic guidance to other regional affiliates.

4.5 Opposition to the ISI and Requests for AQC Intervention

AQI’s move to reinvent itself as the ISI did manage to bring a few additional minor Sunni factions into what previously had been the MSC,⁵⁰¹ but it did not diminish overall opposition to the organization from within the Salafi-jihadist and Iraqi insurgent communities, as numerous Sunni militants and scholars sustained or amplified their public criticisms. The ISI’s detractors, unmoved by the new group’s claim to authority over all Iraqi Sunnis, argued that ISI did not possess the capacity to govern a state, that

⁴⁹⁹ Nicholas J. Schlosser, *The Surge, 2007-2008*, U.S. Army Center of Military History (2017), 13-17, https://history.army.mil/html/books/078/78-1/cmhPub_078-1.pdf; Amy Belasco, “Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues,” *Congressional Research Service* (2009): 37-38, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>; Kelly McHugh, “A Tale of Two Surges: Comparing the Politics of the 2007 Iraq Surge and the 2009 Afghanistan Surge,” *SAGE Open* 5, issue 4, (October-December 2015): 1-16, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244015621957>; Stephen Biddle, “Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 2-14. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2006-03-01/seeing-baghdad-thinking-saigon>.

⁵⁰⁰ For example, see Ansar Al Islam, “Letters to the Leadership of ISI About Single-Party Control,” *Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program Document* NMEC-2007-637001, (2007) <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letters-to-the-leadership-of-isi-about-issues-of-single-party-control-original-language-2/>. This document is a letter sent by the Shariah and Judiciary Bureau of Ansar Al Islam, a Sunni Islamist insurgent group, to the leadership of ISI in early 2007. In the message, Ansar Al Islam challenges the premise that all Muslims must pledge allegiance to the ISI, accuses the ISI of unjustly killing *jihadis* who had declined to swear loyalty to the group, and blames the ISI’s actions for turning the Muslim nation against the *mujahidin*. Ansar Al Islam demanded that ISI leadership issue a written statement to answer these charges.

⁵⁰¹ Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate,” p. 17.

Abu Umar al-Baghdadi lacked qualifications and had not been selected through the appropriate process to serve as leader, and that the ISI's threats and use of force against other Muslims who did not pledge their allegiance were illegitimate.⁵⁰² Particularly objectionable to many jihadists was al-Baghdadi's proclamation that Sunnis who failed to swear an oath of loyalty to him were "sinners."⁵⁰³ A prominent Salafi cleric, Kuwaiti Hamid al-Ali, issued a *fatwa* in April 2007 based on these lines of reasoning, calling on the ISI to renounce its claim to statehood and return to being "a *jihadi* faction among the other *jihadi* factions."⁵⁰⁴

Members of the Sunni militant community also leveled familiar charges against the ISI regarding its treatment of other Sunni insurgent groups and its operations resulting in Muslim casualties. Reflecting a commonly held view that establishment of the ISI was nothing more than a cynical rebranding attempt, the spokesman of the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI) condemned AQI and the "other names under which it operates," for the "actions of its followers against the Sunnis in general and the *mujahidin* in particular."⁵⁰⁵ The ISI continued to come under fire for killing Muslim civilians and stealing from tribes, and it was accused of falsifying its own media releases to exaggerate its influence within the Sunni insurgency and to whitewash the effectiveness and target discrimination of its operations.⁵⁰⁶ Public criticism of the ISI was at times accompanied by overt appeals from Iraqi insurgent groups to bin Laden and Zawahiri to reign in their Iraqi affiliate.⁵⁰⁷ Such was disapproval of the ISI within some Sunni militant circles that one jihadist website went so far as to post a message challenging the ISI to emulate "the courage of the West led by America in its practice of self-criticism."⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰² Fishman, *Master Plan*, p. 90-91; Weimann, "Fatwas Clash," p. 56-59; Bunzel, "Paper State," p. 19-20.

⁵⁰³ Bunzel, "From Paper State," p. 20.

⁵⁰⁴ Quoted in Bunzel, "From Paper State," p. 20; see also Weimann, "Fatwas Clash," p. 56-57.

⁵⁰⁵ Audio statement by Ali al-Nu'aymi, posted online June 4, 2007, quoted in Weimann, "Fatwas Clash," p. 55.

⁵⁰⁶ Weimann, "Fatwas Clash," p. 54.

⁵⁰⁷ Islamic Army in Iraq, *Reply of the Islamic Army in Iraq to the Speeches of Brother Abu Umar al-Baghdadi* (Al-Boraq Media Center, April 5, 2007), cited in Bunzel, "Paper State," p. 20; Weimann, "Fatwas Clash," p. 54

⁵⁰⁸ Abu Hamzah al-Ansari, jihadist website, December 7, 2006, quoted in Weimann, "Fatwas Clash," p. 59.

In addition to the public criticism described above, AQC leaders also received substantial feedback about the ISI through private correspondence. Confidential messages from Sunni militants in Iraq elaborated on their public complaints in blunt terms and urged action by the central leadership. These letters ranged from pleas from Iraqi insurgent groups for AQC to intervene in disputes with the ISI, to bitter accusations against AQC leadership for complacency and impotence in failing to control its franchise in Iraq.

In a letter sent to AQC officials in late 2006 or early 2007, the deputy *emir* of Ansar al-Sunnah emphasized that “[e]verything you hear in the media about the confrontations between the brothers in the [ISI] and all the rest of the groups is true...the matter has reached a level of complexity in some areas in that the general public from the Sunni population clashed with them due to some of their behaviors to which we can’t find an explanation in the law.”⁵⁰⁹ Lamenting that “we have yet to see on the real ground any change to the issues that the *ummah* unanimously described as grave mistakes,”⁵¹⁰ he suggested that AQC “at least issue a statement to clarify that those who are undertaking these actions are not from Al Qaeda and do not represent the group. This will be a reason to redeem some of the trust that was lost.”⁵¹¹

The Jihad and Reform Front, a consortium of Iraqi Islamist groups, struck a more confrontational tone in a May 2007 letter addressed directly to bin Laden and Zawahiri. Frustrated by what they saw as a pattern of neglect and inaction by AQC leadership, despite repeated appeals, the authors opened:

“Your brothers at the Jihad and Reform Front strongly reproach you because we have sent you written and voice messages which we underwent the trouble of overcoming obstacles to deliver them to you. We did that as of the early days in which brother Abu Mus’ab swore allegiance to you, and in our letters we informed you of the consequences of his action, with the complications and the *Shariah* breaches that took place, and with the escalating damage that is inflicting [on] the *jihad* progress in Iraq and is committed in the name of Al Qaeda and in

⁵⁰⁹ “Dear Brother Abu al-‘Abbas,” *ODNI: Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*, (March(?) 2007), p. 1. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20Dear%20brother%20Abu-'Abdallah%20al-Haj%20Uthman.pdf>.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

your name... We demand that you send a clear reply to our previous letters indicating your own position on what is taking place...”⁵¹²

Escalating in rhetoric, the letter continued:

“You should be aware that in the day of reckoning, you are responsible in front of God for blessing the work done by the Al Qaeda in Iraq organization without disavowing the scandals that are committed in your name... If you still can, then this is your last chance to remedy the *jihad* breakdown that is about to take place in Iraq, that is mostly caused by your followers.”⁵¹³

Groups in rivalry with the ISI might be expected to seek advantage by disparaging them to the central leadership, but AQC also received earnest input from members of the Salafi scholarly and clerical communities. An AQC “middleman” to the “senior shaykhs and clerics” in the Arabian Peninsula provided a report to AQC in early 2007, cautioning that certain shaykhs previously believed to be Al Qaeda supporters “will turn on you. They generally are against you, as is a majority of the Senior Shaykhs in the Arabian Peninsula.”⁵¹⁴ He also warned of “a wicked campaign to have a statement issued against the ISI laying bare its practices, and saying that it is expanding its *takfir* and killings...”⁵¹⁵ The AQC liaison went on to recount a meeting of senior shaykhs, during which supporters of other *jihadi* factions “told them some stories against the ISI, saying they did this and that, and that Abu Hamzah [al-Mujahir] is the problem and [Zarqawi] is heaven compared to him. They said Abu Hamzah is much more bloodthirsty and more enthusiastic about *takfir*, is tyrannical in his dealings with others, and has no patience for anyone who disagrees with him, etc.”⁵¹⁶

An unidentified scholar with a close connection to affairs in Iraq used much more pointed language in a message to bin Laden, with whom he apparently had a longstanding relationship: “Please, allow me to relay to you the blame of your jihadist brothers in Iraq... I am afraid that you need to vouch for some of it. This is if you are not

⁵¹² “Jihad and Reform Front 22 May 2007,” *ODNI: Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*, p. 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Jihad%20and%20Reform%20Front%2022%20May%202007.pdf>.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵¹⁴ “Letter to `Atiyatullah al-Libi About Saudi Arabia Scholars,” 5.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

going to stop it and distance yourself from those who carry it out. Because the bloodshed, stolen rights, and disgraced honor are being carried out in your name and under your command.”⁵¹⁷ He expressed his surprise that bin Laden, with “all the knowledge and expertise in *jihad*,” would have “bless[ed] this rushed, dangerous step” of declaring the ISI, and he suggested that the AQC *emir* was out of touch with events in Iraq.⁵¹⁸ Finally, the scholar challenged bin Laden: “Your eminence, you have an historic responsibility toward what is happening in Iraq, where Muslims who have built many hopes on *jihad*, and who know you, are expecting you to intervene and play an important role in rescuing the fruit of *jihad* from getting lost.”⁵¹⁹

Along with condemnation received in public forums, the private feedback received from within the Salafi-jihadist community would shape AQC leaders’ decisions as they sought to influence their affiliate and manage perceptions of the broader Al Qaeda organization.

4.6 AQC Maneuvers in Reaction to the ISI

Criticism of the ISI did not fall on deaf ears among AQC leaders, whose concerns over the ramifications of the ISI’s unpopular and unruly actions are evident in their internal correspondence. For example, in a March 2007 letter to an AQC colleague, Atiyah commented on letters he had received from Ansar Al Sunnah that complained of various malign activities by the ISI. While Atiyah cautioned that “we cannot rush to accept some of these allegations,” he asked that the letters be passed to bin Laden for “his opinion and guidance,” adding his own comment that “[i]f [the ISI] continue like this they will perish and make others perish..!!”⁵²⁰ Another central organization official shared similar concerns in a letter written the same month and forwarded to bin Laden,

⁵¹⁷ “Letter Regarding Work in Islamic Countries,” To UBL from unidentified scholar, *ODNI*, p. 1-2, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20regarding%20working%20in%20Islamic%20countries.pdf>.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵²⁰ “My Dear Brother ‘Adnan,” From Atiyah to Adnan (Hafiz Sultan, probably a.k.a. Mohammed Islambouli) 15 March 2007,” *ODNI: Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20My%20Dear%20Brother%20Adnan.pdf>.

urging AQC intervention with ISI leadership: “I am worried about the brothers [in Iraq] making political gaffes...if they continue using techniques such as this, they will spoil [things and] alienate the people...”⁵²¹ Conveying a sense of frustration over Al Qaeda’s vulnerability to self-inflicted wounds, he remarked, “None of the enemies scare me, I swear...But I do worry about ours and our brothers’ mistakes, bad behavior, and lack of wisdom at times.”⁵²²

AQC leaders clearly were sensitive to the fact that the entire Al Qaeda organization’s reputation, and, therefore, its self-appointed role as vanguard of the Salafi-Jihadist movement, was tied to the standing of the ISI within the Muslim community. AQC’s own stature benefited from the appearance of strength and reach created by having a franchise in Iraq, the preeminent field of *jihad*, yet it received blame for its affiliate’s transgressions and blunders. The challenge before AQC leaders, therefore, was to attempt to control the controversial behavior by the ISI that had generated such widespread opprobrium, while also defending its affiliate in order to protect its reputation (and, by extension, AQC’s own reputation) and to project the image of a unified and strong Al Qaeda organization. In pursuit of these objectives, the central leadership continued efforts to assert authority and influence over its franchise to persuade it to reign in its counterproductive actions and to take steps to mend relations with fellow Sunni militants. AQC’s direct interventions with the ISI met with much the same fate as previous attempts to guide AQI’s actions under Zarqawi’s leadership, however, and generally were ignored by the affiliate’s leaders. AQC’s consistent failure to exert its will over the ISI forced the central leadership to take matters into their own hands and to adopt alternative tactics to address the problems that the ISI had caused for the wider organization. First, AQC circumvented its affiliate to reach out directly to the ISI’s rivals within the Iraqi *jihadi* community, seeking to foster unity among the *mujahidin* in spite of the ISI’s imperious treatment of other Sunni groups. Second, as discussed later in this chapter, the central organization undertook a carefully balanced public messaging campaign, setting aside its own internal misgivings about the ISI’s activities to

⁵²¹ “Letter from Hafiz Sultan,” Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000011-HT, 28 March 2007, 1, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Hafiz-Sultan-Translation.pdf>.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 2.

vigorously defend its franchise, while simultaneously acknowledging the serious criticisms against the ISI and attempting to deflect them from the Al Qaeda organization.

4.6.1 AQC's Continued Attempts to Influence the ISI

Despite multiple instances of AQI essentially rejecting AQC leaders' attempts to guide its policies during Zarqawi's tenure as *emir*, the central leadership continued their attempts to maintain influence with and to guide their affiliate group. A collection of four letters captured by coalition forces in April 2008 from a senior ISI operative killed at a Baghdad checkpoint reveal their persistence, as well as their frustrations.⁵²³ In correspondence dated between November 2007 and March 2008, Zawahiri and other AQC senior officials wrote to al-Muhajir and al-Baghdadi, expressing their support, but asking that the ISI leaders respond to some of the criticisms that had been leveled against them. In particular, they sought a rebuttal to claims made by Abu Sulayman al-'Utaybi, a former judge and head of the ISI's judicial system, who had travelled to Pakistan in late 2007 to complain directly to AQC leadership about the state of the ISI and about al-Muhajir's leadership, in particular.⁵²⁴

The AQC correspondence summarizes Abu Sulayman's critique, in which he charged that "[al-Muhajir] is too weak to handle this great responsibility;" that "the declaration of the [Islamic] State, in the manner with which it was declared and formed, [was] a mistake;" that "there are influential men in the [Islamic] State...[who] are not righteous but corrupt corruptors;" and that "there is exaggeration in [the ISI's media practices] to the degree of lying."⁵²⁵ The letters from AQC assure the ISI leaders that they are not necessarily accepting the accuracy of Abu Sulayman's accusations, but that the central leadership "want to have a full response from you about them, so that God

⁵²³ Bill Roggio, "Letters from Al Qaeda Leaders Show Iraqi Effort is in Disarray," *Long War Journal* (2008), https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/09/letters_from_al_qaed.php.

⁵²⁴ Tony Badran, "Intercepted Letters from al-Qaeda Leaders Shed Light on State of Network in Iraq," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, (2008), <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2008/09/12/intercepted-letters-from-al-qaeda-leaders-shed-light-on-state-of-network-in-iraq/>.

⁵²⁵ Letter to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, January 25, 2008, excerpted in Badran, "Intercepted Letters from Al Qaeda Leaders."

might lift the ambiguity and remove suspicion and bring us together,”⁵²⁶ and so that AQC could “help you fix things, propose practical and feasible solutions...”⁵²⁷

The messages from AQC also conveyed some “advice and suggestions” from bin Laden regarding specific operations and organizational practices, as well as offering the central leadership’s support to provide the ISI with “required needs and expertise.”⁵²⁸ The tranche of letters contains repeated requests for more frequent and complete communication from ISI, adopting an almost badgering tone and betraying AQC’s frustration as it attempted to manage its franchise from afar: “And all our previous requests, we are still waiting on them[;]”⁵²⁹ “[w]e also would like to reiterate our request that you write us complete detailed reports about your current conditions.”⁵³⁰ AQC leadership may have hoped for greater responsiveness from the ISI’s senior officials due to al-Muhajir’s long association with Zawahiri, but there is no available evidence to suggest that the affiliate’s leaders provided responses to any of these queries from AQC.

AQC leadership saw another opportunity to influence the ISI after both al-Muhajir and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi were killed in a combined US-Iraqi military operation in April 2010.⁵³¹ A letter summarizing consultations among AQC’s senior officials regarding the ongoing strife between the ISI and Ansar Al Sunnah describes the central organization’s reaction to reports of the ISI leaders’ deaths: “Based on this news, the issue [of dealing with conflict between the ISI and other Iraqi militant groups] was proposed differently than before.”⁵³² Noting that “the issue of the emirate and

⁵²⁶ Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, March 6, 2008, excerpted in Badran, “Intercepted Letters from Al Qaeda Leaders”.

⁵²⁷ Letter to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, January 25, 2008, excerpted in Badran, “Intercepted Letters from Al Qaeda Leaders”.

⁵²⁸ Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, March 6, 2008, excerpted in Badran, “Intercepted Letters from Al Qaeda Leaders”.

⁵²⁹ Letter to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, November 19, 2007, excerpted in Badran, “Intercepted Letters from Al Qaeda Leaders”.

⁵³⁰ Letter to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, March 10, 2008, excerpted in Badran, “Intercepted Letters from Al Qaeda Leaders.” Similarly worded pleas for information appear in numerous spots throughout the four-letter tranche of AQC correspondence.

⁵³¹ Tim Arango, “Top Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Reported Killed in Raid,” *New York Times* (April 19, 2010), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/world/middleeast/20baghdad.html>.

⁵³² “In the Name of God the Merciful,” AQC internal correspondence, April/May 2010, *ODNI: Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*, p. 1. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20in%20the%20name%20of%20Al%20lah,%20the%20merciful%20the%20compassionate.pdf>.

sovereignty there is determined...with the command here,”⁵³³ the letter relates that “[i]t was agreed that if the brothers were killed and their death was confirmed...[w]e send a special message to the State that they are forming a temporary administration to handle issues until they receive orders of the appointment of a new *emir*, after advice with us and the command here...”⁵³⁴ The AQC strategists perceived the need to select a new commander for the affiliate who would be more effective than his predecessors had been at bridging the divide between the ISI and other Sunni insurgent groups. Replacing the ISI leadership provided “an opportunity for unity and to set aside division.”⁵³⁵ AQC sought to put this plan into action, and another letter, probably written by bin Laden, elaborated on the plan and its rationale: “In reference to my request to the brothers in Iraq to hold back on announcing the *emir*, I did that in order to protect the unity of *mujahidin* there...”⁵³⁶ Acknowledging the potential downsides of “delaying the announcement of the *emir*,” he explained that “[d]iscussions with some of the faithful *mujahidin* groups in appointing the new *emir* can bring the groups closer together. They might accept unity [if] they have a say in the appointment of the *emir*.”⁵³⁷

This effort to guide the ISI’s leadership succession could have marked a turning point in the relationship between AQC and its franchise in Iraq. Instead, rather than consulting with AQC and other Sunni groups, as the central leadership had directed, the ISI took less than a month to declare Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, head of its Shariah Committee, as the next “Commander of the Faithful,” thus setting the stage for wider conflict with fellow Islamist militant groups and eventual excommunication from Al Qaeda.⁵³⁸

⁵³³ Ibid., 1.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ “Tunis,” Letter apparently written by bin Laden to an unknown recipient, April/May 2010, *ODNI: Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*, 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20Tunis.pdf>.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Testimonial to Preserve the Blood of Mujahidin in as-Sham,” May 3, 2014, Homeland Security Digital Library. <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/16377>; Anthony Shadid, “Iraqi Insurgent Group Names New Leaders,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2010, <https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/iraqi-insurgent-group-names-new-leaders/>; see also Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate,” 23; and Fishman, *Master Plan*, 153.

4.6.2 AQC's Circumvention of the ISI to Promote Unity Among Mujahidin in Iraq

Al Qaeda's organizational concept, described in Chapter 2, relies heavily on decentralization through its regional franchises. The leadership of the parent organization typically has sought to guide its network through orders and advice to the affiliate commanders, while delegating to them broad responsibilities within their designated purviews. This framework has been fundamental to the logic of Al Qaeda's franchising strategy, with the purpose of enabling the overarching group to maintain its prominence while the original core of the organization has been weakened and in hiding after being driven from its Afghanistan sanctuary in 2001. However, the ISI leaders' stubborn refusal to make peace with fellow Sunni insurgent groups prompted AQC to circumvent its franchise in attempts to foster unity among the *mujahidin* in Iraq. These measures had the potential to undermine the credibility of AQC's declared affiliate and expose fissures in the Al Qaeda command structure, as well as jeopardize security due to increased communications traffic, but the central leadership's awareness that intra-*jihadi* conflict threatened both their practical objectives in Iraq and Al Qaeda's global brand outweighed these risks.

Captured correspondence shows that AQC maintained lines of communication with multiple Sunni militant groups in Iraq, as detailed above. The Abbottabad documents contain the outlines of one particular campaign by the central leadership to make up for the ISI's diplomatic shortcomings that spanned at least four-and-a-half years. Despite the fact that Ansar al-Sunnah (at the time known as Ansar al-Islam) had hosted Zarqawi in northern Iraq when he first arrived from Afghanistan in 2002,⁵³⁹ tensions emerged after Zarqawi established AQI, and his erstwhile allies would not subordinate themselves to his leadership. Atiyah chided Zarqawi for his confrontational stance toward Ansar al-Sunnah in his December 2005 letter,⁵⁴⁰ and, by at least January 2006, AQC began reaching out directly to the group in a series of attempts to mend relations, notwithstanding its franchise's intransigence.

Zawahiri wrote to Ansar al-Sunnah *emir* Abu-'Abdallah al-Shafi'i on 26 January 2006, explaining that bin Laden had "commissioned us to follow-up with you on the

⁵³⁹ Fishman, *Master Plan*, 22-23.

⁵⁴⁰ al-Zawahiri, "Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi 11 December 2005", 5.

subject of unity, per his concern to grant Islam victory in Iraq.”⁵⁴¹ He bluntly asked if “the brothers in Ansar al-Sunnah Army [would] agree on the unity with the Qa’ida al-Jihad group in principle...” and he even invited the group to send a representative to “stay with us for several months until we are able to make contacts to complete this serious issue.”⁵⁴² Simultaneously, as relayed in a letter sent three days later by AQC’s “Special Committee of the *Mujahidin* Affairs in Iraq,” the central organization was attempting to send one of its own senior members—whom Ansar al-Sunnah would know “very well”—to Iraq as an emissary “toward improving the conditions and toward reaching for the better,”⁵⁴³ because “[bin Laden] is very keen on the unity of the line with you and considers it of the first priority in this period...”⁵⁴⁴ This AQC envoy most likely was Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, a Kurdish former Iraqi Army officer who at the time was serving as AQC’s senior field commander in Afghanistan. Abd al-Hadi never completed his mission, however; he was arrested by Turkish authorities in October 2006, while still en route to Iraq.⁵⁴⁵ It is unclear whether AQC ever informed Zarqawi of its overtures towards Ansar al-Sunnah. These early moves to broker unity among Iraqi Islamist groups failed, but they demonstrated AQC leaders’ willingness take bold, risky action to try to rectify their franchise’s strategic missteps.

Over the next several years, while AQC continued its vain attempts to guide its Iraqi affiliate towards greater accommodation of other Sunni jihadist groups, the central leadership persisted in its parallel outreach to Ansar al-Sunnah. After receiving complaints from the group about ISI aggression, Atiyah emphasized in March 2007 that “there must be an effort to speak with [Ansar al-Sunnah] and with our Brothers...in an

⁵⁴¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Letter to Shaykh Abu-‘Abdallah al-Shafi’i, 26 January 2006,” *ODNI: Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*, 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Abu-'Abdallah%20al-Shafi'i.pdf>.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁴³ “Letter from Special Committee of al-Jihad’s Qaida of the Mujahidin Affairs in Iraq and to the Ansar al-Sunnah Army 29 January 2006,” *ODNI: Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*, p. 2, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Special%20Committee%20of%20al-Jihads%20Qaida%20of%20the%20Mujahidin%20Affairs%20in%20Iraq%20and%20to%20the%20Ansar%20al-Sunnah%20Army.pdf>.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁴⁵ Fishman, *Master Plan*, 94-96.

attempt to resolve the issue and for future unity.”⁵⁴⁶ After the arrest of Abd al-Hadi in October 2006, AQC apparently attempted to send two more representatives to Iraq over the subsequent eighteen months, including Atiyah himself, but neither mission was successful.⁵⁴⁷ Finally, in a March 2008 letter, an AQC lieutenant counseled bin Laden against his suggestion to try sending yet another delegation to Iraq. Citing the failure of the previous two attempts, he argued that “sending someone from here in these conditions...would be impossible.”⁵⁴⁸ Betraying a hint of pessimism at the prospects for facilitating peace between the ISI and other *mujahidin*, the same author addressed another bin Laden proposal: “In regard to establishing a committee to settle differences [in Iraq], it is a good suggestion, but it must be accepted by the various parties...”⁵⁴⁹ A letter from bin Laden to Atiyah, written in late May 2010, showed signs of increasing alienation between the ISI and its parent organization, with AQC relying even more heavily on its back-channel relationship with Ansar al-Sunnah. Shortly after the ISI had ignored AQC attempts to influence the affiliate’s leadership succession following Abu Umar al-Baghdadi’s and Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir’s deaths, bin Laden asked Atiyah to gather information about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his deputy, recommending that he “ask our brothers in Ansar al-Islam Organization where they stand on the new *emirs*...” (Ansar al-Sunnah had, by this time, reverted to its original name).⁵⁵⁰

AQC’s dogged efforts to foster unity between the ISI and other Sunni militant factions in Iraq never achieved their desired outcomes. It is conceivable that AQC’s direct engagement with groups such as Ansar al-Sunnah/Ansar al-Islam may have helped marginally to reduce strife among the *mujahidin* by giving aggrieved insurgent groups a forum to vent their frustrations and to appeal to the ISI’s purported masters. Ultimately, however, conflict continued within the Iraqi insurgent community, and the ISI failed to secure the universal allegiance of Iraqi Sunnis to which it claimed entitlement. AQC’s diplomatic maneuvers highlighted the central leadership’s inability to control the policies

⁵⁴⁶ al-Rahman, “My Dear Brother ‘Adnan 15 March 2007,”

⁵⁴⁷ “Dear Honorable Brother Shaykh Azmaray 05 March 2008”, *ODNI: Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*, 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Dear%20honorable%20brother%20Shaykh%20Azmaray.pdf>

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ bin Laden, “Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyatullah Al-Libi 4,” 34.

and behaviors of their Iraqi franchise, which forced them to circumvent their own organizational framework and to incur security risks in their efforts to protect Al Qaeda's broader strategic goals.

4.6.3 *ISI's Decline*

Between 2007 and the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, the ISI steadily diminished in capacity and operational reach. Tribal opposition, including the *Sahwa* movement, as well as constant conflict with other Sunni insurgent groups, deprived the ISI of many of its early safe havens. Additionally, the group suffered tremendous attrition at the hands of coalition and Iraqi security forces. In early 2008, American officials stated that military operations had resulted in the deaths of 2,400 ISI militants and the capture of 8,800, reducing the organization's strength from approximately 15,000 fighters to an estimated 3,500.⁵⁵¹ ISI recruitment and external support also was significantly degraded; by early 2009, the flow of foreign fighters entering Iraq to join the ISI had dropped from an estimated average of 120 per month in 2005/2006 to only five or six fighters per month.⁵⁵² As a captured ISI militant told U.S. interrogators in August 2008, "foreign fighters in Iraq are on the brink of extinction...[the] biggest concern right now is where to sleep at night without being arrested."⁵⁵³ Another ISI operative captured at the same time commented on the organization's overall trajectory; in his view, the ISI had "lost the overall fight,"⁵⁵⁴ and did "not presently have any long time plan and [was] only focused on short time fighting."⁵⁵⁵ Reflecting the ISI's falling status during this period, in February 2008 the U.S. government reduced the reward offered for information leading to the death or capture of Abu Hamzah al-Mujahir—whom intelligence analysts suspected at the time remained the true leader behind the ISI⁵⁵⁶—from \$5 million to a mere \$100,000, because,

⁵⁵¹ Bergen, *The Long War*, 271.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 270.

⁵⁵³ Quoted in Roggio, "Letters from Al Qaeda Leaders Show Iraqi Effort is in Disarray"

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁶ M.J. Kirdar, "Al Qaeda in Iraq," AQAM Futures Case Study Series, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, June 2011, p. 5, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/al-qaeda-iraq>.

in the words of a Department of Defense spokesman, “he’s not as effective a leader on the battlefield...he’s just not as valuable to us.”⁵⁵⁷

On 18 April 2010, both al-Muhajir and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi were killed in a combined US-Iraqi raid near Tikrit, Iraq.⁵⁵⁸ Following their deaths, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, supervisor of the ISI Shariah Committee and another ostensible descendant of Prophet Muhammad from the Quraysh tribe, was selected by the ISI Shura Council to be the group’s new *emir*.⁵⁵⁹ However, with the exception of a written eulogy for Osama bin Laden issued in May 2011, it was more than two years before al-Baghdadi released a public statement. This low profile by the ISI’s new “Commander of the Faithful,” was in keeping with an overall decline in the ISI’s media and operational activity during this period.⁵⁶⁰ A spokesman implicitly acknowledged the group’s limited operational capacity in a rare media release in April 2011, in which he attempted to spin the ISI’s deteriorated condition by explaining that “the soldiers of the Islamic state have chosen to resort to guerilla war...they now decide the form, time, and place of the confrontation...”⁵⁶¹

4.7 Affiliate-Internal Organizational Challenges

It is clear, based on the accumulation of evidence presented throughout this chapter, that AQI/ISI/ISIS senior leadership were responsible for many instances of insubordination and divergence from AQC’s strategic guidance. However, much like other Al Qaeda affiliates (and extremist militant organizations, in general), AQI/ISI/ISIS suffered from indiscipline, poor communication, and unsynchronized operations across its own subordinate elements.⁵⁶² Although the uncompromising and overbearing nature

⁵⁵⁷ Mike Nizza, “An Al Qaeda Chief’s Bounty Is Slashed,” *New York Times* (May 13, 2008), <https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/an-al-qaeda-chiefs-bounty-is-slashed/>

⁵⁵⁸ Arango, “Top Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Reported Killed in Raid.”

⁵⁵⁹ William McCants, “Who is Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi?” BBC News (March 8, 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35694311>

⁵⁶⁰ Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate,” 23.

⁵⁶¹ Abu Ubayday Abd al-Hakim al-Iraqi, “Interview and Press Conference,” Al-Furqan Media (April 11, 2011), quoted in Fishman, “Redefining the Islamic State,” 15.

⁵⁶² Jacob Shapiro provides a thorough study of the challenges of organization and control within terrorist organizations, including a number of examples from AQI/ISI, in Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, 4-8, 82-100.

of AQI/ISI/ISIS policies made conflict with Sunni tribes and other insurgent groups inevitable, careless or overzealous implementation of these policies by sub-commanders and rank-and-file exacerbated their alienating effects on fellow militants and the broader Muslim community. As the ISI's district commander in Samarra explained in a February 2008 newspaper interview, part of the "splurge in blood" created by ISI operations could be attributed to "driven young men who were not controlled by any Islamic law restraints. This was [made worse] by the difficulty in communication between the cells and the factions[.]"⁵⁶³

Captured ISI documents provide insight into the disconnects that occurred between different levels of ISI leadership, such as in one illustrative instance of battle between the ISI and other Sunni insurgent groups in the Baghdad neighborhood of Amiriyah in late May and early June 2007.⁵⁶⁴ On 01 June, after several days of particularly bitter fighting, during which local Sunni residents had joined the Islamic Army of Iraq and other insurgents in confronting the ISI,⁵⁶⁵ Abu Umar al-Baghdadi released a message, distributed as pamphlets throughout the area, stating that "a [cease] fire to all the soldiers of the Islamic State has been ordered in the area of Amiriyah[.]" The ISI fighters were directed "to stay in their homes[.]" and "not to become part of the strife and turmoil." Finally, al-Baghdadi instructed his followers to

"bite [their] wounds and suppress their rage and fury despite any provocations because...[there is] no difference between the soldiers of the Islamic State and any other *mujahidin* when it comes to bloodshed...we are treating our brothers according to their [Sunni] history and we [are] trying to maintain a friendly relationship understanding that soon we will be fighting together under the leadership of one army."⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶³ Quoted in Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline," 13.

⁵⁶⁴ Brian Fishman provides good treatments of the ISI actions surrounding the events in Amiriyah in "Dysfunction and Decline," 13-16, and in *Master Plan*, 108-109.

⁵⁶⁵ John Ward Anderson, "Sunni Insurgents Battle in Baghdad," *Washington Post*, 01 June 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/31/AR2007053100455.html>; Bill Roggio, "Amariyah, the Anbar Salvation Council and Reconciliation," *Long War Journal*, 01 June 2007, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/06/amariyah_the_anbar_s.php

⁵⁶⁶ "Press Release of an ISI Amir in Reaction to Attacks in the Amireah Region 01 June 2007," *Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program*, NMEC-2007-639155, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/press-release-of-an-isi-amir-in-reaction-to-attacks-in-the-amireah-region-original-language-2/>

The ISI *emir*'s forbearance was out of synch with his subordinates' view of the situation. In a report written to ISI leadership the same day, Abu al-Hasan Safir, an ISI district commander in Amiriyah, explained the "religious origin of fighting with the Islamic Army," arguing that "[w]e, in Baghdad, are aware of the true nature of the Islamic Army and its leadership, and how they perform open conspiracies and scandalous ambushes...[t]hey have revealed their true feelings and extreme resentfulness towards the *mujahidin*."⁵⁶⁷ Stressing that "we understand the Islamic religious law policy of our state in dealing with the other groups," Abu al-Hasan went on to enumerate the IAI's outrages, including failure to return the bodies of some ISI members they had killed, concluding with a declaration that "[w]e have fought them legitimately, without mystery or secrecy."⁵⁶⁸ One day later, on 02 June (the day after al-Baghdadi released his public cease-fire order), Abu al-Hasan provided a follow-up report, proudly describing a day's battle in which the ISI fighters had routed the IAI and seized a large number of weapons and ammunition. An addendum to the 02 June report asks for clarification on ISI policy towards the IAI: "I would like to request from you the big picture of dealing with the Islamic Army, knowing that they didn't release the dead and the prisoners they hold. I want a quick response...What is the guidance from the leadership about this issue[?]"⁵⁶⁹

It is unclear if the ISI subcommander in Amiriyah simply wasn't aware of al-Baghdadi's order to stop fighting the IAI due to a communication breakdown, if he was ignoring the guidance and feigning ignorance, or even if his messages were intended to be respectful challenges, conveying his ground-level view of the situation as a way of obliquely suggesting that al-Baghdadi reconsider his position. Whatever the explanation, this is a clear case of ISI field commanders being out-of-step with their *emir*, resulting in increased conflict between the ISI and their fellow Sunnis. In another example, an ISI leader wrote to chide a subcommander in Anbar, "I have a feeling you are going very easy with the brothers...Be more strict and responsible."⁵⁷⁰ He went on to issue guidance

⁵⁶⁷ "Incident Comment from the ISI Ministry of Defense June 1-2, 2007," *Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program*, NMEC-2007-637011, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/incident-comment-from-the-isi-ministry-of-defense-dated-622007-original-language-2/>.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁵⁷⁰ "Instructions to Abu Usama," *Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program*, IZ-060316-02, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/instructions-to-abu-usama-original-language-2/>.

of which bin Laden and Zawahiri would have approved, ordering the cell in Anbar to “[s]top the killing of people unless they are spying, military, or police officers...if we continue using the same method, people will start fighting us in the streets.”⁵⁷¹ Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir sometimes explained away grievances brought against the ISI by blaming this sort of unauthorized action by lower-ranking fighters, such as in a 2007 letter he wrote to the *emir* of Ansar al-Sunnah, claiming that ISI leaders were “willing to hand over any person [who] committed a crime of blood or [has taken] your money.”⁵⁷²

Given AQC leaders’ frequent complaints about sparse communication from their Iraqi affiliate, and the difficulty they had in sending emissaries to Iraq, they may not have had a view of the ISI’s inner workings to this level of detail. If they did, however, they undoubtedly were frustrated to realize that, even in the (possibly rare) instances in which ISI leadership sought to mend relationships with rival Sunni groups and cultivate public support, as AQC leadership had advised them, internal disorganization and/or preference divergence within the ISI threatened to undermine progress towards unity among the *mujahidin* and rehabilitation of the ISI’s—and, by extension, AQC’s—public image.

4.8 ISI’s Resurgence and Schism with AQC

Notwithstanding its inherent organizational weaknesses, the ISI’s period of decline was temporary. In late 2011 and early 2012, emboldened by the advent of the Arab Spring and benefiting from the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq and growing Sunni discontent over the Shia-aligned administration of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the group began to increase the scope and sophistication of its operations in Iraq.⁵⁷³ By July 2012, al-Baghdadi was ready to declare publicly the ISI’s resurgence, announcing that the ISI “is returning anew, advancing to take control of the ground that it had and

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, “Letter from Abu Hamza al-Muhajir to Abi ‘Abdullah al-Shafi’i 29 April 2007,” *Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program*, NMEC-2007-636898, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letter-from-abu-hamza-al-mujahir-to-abi-abdullah-al-shafii-original-language-2/>

⁵⁷³ Charles Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 14 (November 2014): 11, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/en_web_lister.pdf.

more... The Islamic State does not recognize synthetic borders nor any citizenship besides Islam.”⁵⁷⁴

Operationalizing his rejection of the Middle East’s political borders, al-Baghdadi began seeking opportunities during this time to capitalize on the instability and burgeoning civil war in Syria in order to expand his organization’s field of *jihad*. In August 2011, al-Baghdadi dispatched Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani, a native Syrian who had served as the ISI’s operations chief in Iraq’s Ninewah province, to travel to Syria. Al-Jowlani connected with some of Zarqawi’s old Syrian facilitation networks and other local militant groups, eventually announcing in January 2012 the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), or “the Salvation Front,” to join the opposition to Bashar al-Assad’s regime.⁵⁷⁵ Al-Baghdadi’s foray into Syria set in motion the series of events that ultimately would lead AQC to renounce its original regional franchise.

JN did not initially publicize its linkage to the ISI or to Al Qaeda, but it grew rapidly over the next year, assuming a prominent position among the Syrian *mujahidin*. By early 2013, the group numbered roughly 2,000 members and had achieved several significant victories over al-Assad regime forces, primarily in northern Syria.⁵⁷⁶ On 09 April 2013, possibly in an attempt to restore control over his onetime lieutenant and an increasingly powerful JN, al-Baghdadi released a statement “announc[ing] to the people of the Levant and to the whole world that Al Nusra Front is merely an extension of the Islamic State of Iraq and a part of it,”⁵⁷⁷ and declaring that the combined group thenceforth would be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS), whose banner would become “the banner of the caliphate, God willing.”⁵⁷⁸

Al-Jowlani immediately resisted al-Baghdadi’s move to subordinate JN under the ISI. On 10 April 2013, al-Jowlani released his own message, in which he defended JN’s independence from ISI by “renew[ing]” his “pledge of allegiance” directly to AQC *emir* Zawahiri, clarifying that “the Front’s banner will remain as-is, without changing

⁵⁷⁴ Quoted in Bunzel, “Paper State to Caliphate,” 24.

⁵⁷⁵ Warrick, *Black Flags*, 251-252; Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 12.

⁵⁷⁶ Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 12-13.

⁵⁷⁷ Quoted in Hania Mourtada and Rick Gladstone, “Iraq’s Branch of Al Qaeda Merges With Syria Jihadists,” *New York Times* (April 9, 2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/world/middleeast/Iraq-and-Syria-jihadists-combine.html>

⁵⁷⁸ Quoted in Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate,” 25.

anything, despite our pride in the [ISI's] banner.”⁵⁷⁹ Al-Jowlani continued his message with an implied rebuke of the ISI's divisive methods, explaining that JN's cautious delay in acknowledging its links to al-Baghdadi's group had been to ensure “*Shariah*-compliant policies that suit the reality of the Levant and upon which the decision-making people in the Levant agreed...without excluding any of the main people among those who participated with us in *jihad* and fighting in the Levant from among the *jihadi* factions, the authentic Sunni Shaykhs, and our emigrant brothers...”⁵⁸⁰

Zawahiri was quick to interject AQC's guidance into this internecine dispute. In a message released in early June 2013, he explained that he had initiated contact with both al-Baghdadi and al-Jowlani on 12 April 2013, within forty-eight hours of their dispute becoming public. Based on responses received from both parties, Zawahiri “made a decision on the matter” and asserted AQC's authority in a multi-point edict, in the process revealing the extent to which the central leadership was playing catch-up in developments related to its affiliates:

“a) Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was in error in his announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham without seeking our order, consulting us, or even informing us.

“b) Sheikh Abu Mohammed al-Jowlani was in error of his announcement of the rejection of the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham and [making] clear his relation with Al Qaeda without seeking our order, consulting us, or even informing us.

“c) The Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham is cancelled, and work continues under the name of Islamic State of Iraq.

“d) Jabhat al-Nusra is a separate entity for Al Qaeda, following the general leadership.

“e) The realm of Islamic State of Iraq is Iraq.

“f) The realm of Jabhat al-Nusra...is Syria.”⁵⁸¹

Al-Baghdadi's insubordinate retort to Zawahiri's orders marked the beginning of the end of ISIS' union with AQC. In a message released on 15 June 2013, he rejected the AQC *emir's* guidance, citing “numerous legal and methodological objections,” and

⁵⁷⁹ Quoted in Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Nusrah Front Leader Renews Allegiance to Al Qaeda, Rejects New Name,” *Long War Journal* (April 10, 2013), https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/04/al_nusrah_front_lead.php

⁵⁸⁰ Quoted in Joscelyn, “Al Nusrah Front Leader Renews Allegiance.”

⁵⁸¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Guest Post: Sheikh Ayman, al-Zawahiri Annuls Islamic State of Iraq and As-Sham,” June 9, 2013, <http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu:8080/dspace/handle/10066/16408>.

declared that “the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham will endure, so long as we have a vein that pulses and an eye that bats.”⁵⁸² Throughout the remainder of 2013, ISIS fighters aggressively expanded operations in Syria, but their uncompromising approach towards other militants, indiscriminate violence, and harsh application of *Shariah* over the populations they controlled brought ISIS into conflict with JN and other anti-regime elements. Tensions increased until, in January 2014, an alliance of Islamist opposition groups launched an offensive against ISIS elements in northern Syria.⁵⁸³

In a last-ditch effort to exert influence over AQC’s rebellious franchise and to preserve unity among the Syrian *mujahidin*, Zawahiri, joined by al-Jowlani and several other *jihadi* leaders, proposed “reconciliation initiatives” that sought to resolve differences between ISIS and other Syrian militants through the appointment of an independent tribunal. Al-Baghdadi and other ISIS spokesmen rejected these proposals out-of-hand, however, arguing that ISIS, as a sovereign entity, logically could not submit to any judiciary but its own.⁵⁸⁴

Left with few options to maintain AQC’s credibility, Zawahiri disavowed ISIS on 02 February 2014. Al-Baghdadi openly had defied Zawahiri on multiple occasions, and ISIS’ divisiveness and wanton violence was alienating much of the *ummah* that AQC purported to lead. In an online statement, Zawahiri declared that ISIS “is not a branch of the Al Qaeda group...does not have an organizational relationship with it, and [Al Qaeda] is not the group responsible for their actions.”⁵⁸⁵

With that declaration, Zawahiri closed a fraught chapter of Al Qaeda’s history. After nearly a decade of desperate attempts to control its Iraqi affiliate and to manage the organizational and reputational fallout from its insubordinate and immoderate behavior,

⁵⁸² Quoted in Bunzel, “From Islamic State to Caliphate,” 26.

⁵⁸³ Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 13.

⁵⁸⁴ Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate,” 28-29.

⁵⁸⁵ Quoted in Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda Disavows Any Ties With Radical Islamist ISIS Group in Syria, Iraq,” *Washington Post* (February 3, 2014), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html; See also Aaron Y. Zelin, “Al-Qaeda Disaffiliates with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (February 4, 2014), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-disaffiliates-with-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham>.

Zawahiri finally determined that AQC had reached the extent of its influence as a parent organization, and he chose to cut ties in order to avoid further damage to the Al Qaeda brand through association with ISIS.

4.9 AQI/ISI/ISIS Operational Patterns

Review of quantitative operational data from the Global Terrorism Database reinforces the indications of strategic disconnect between AQC and AQI/ISI/ISIS outlined in this chapter's analysis of correspondence and other interactions between the central leadership, their Iraqi franchise, and other elements of the Salafi-jihadist and insurgent community. Based on the evidence of their military activities, Zarqawi and his followers arguably were in closest strategic alignment with AQC before Tawhid w'al Jihad formally merged with Al Qaeda and became AQI. After their formal merger, the organizational unity and strategic coherence between the parent organization and its affiliate that was portrayed in Al Qaeda propaganda appears to have been in word only. AQI/ISI/ISIS' operations never reflected the priorities and standards laid out in AQC's strategic guidance, and this divergence became more marked over time, culminating in the schism between AQC and its first franchise in February 2014.

Ironically, Zarqawi's militant group most faithfully adhered to the Al Qaeda strategic framework of opposition to the "far enemy" when it still was known as Tawhid w'al Jihad, prior to officially affiliating with Al Qaeda in December 2004. Between late 2002 and its merger with Al Qaeda, 26 percent (11 of 42) of the group's reliably attributed attacks had primary targets of United States nationality, resulting in the deaths of eight Americans (see Figure 4a). An additional seven percent of its attacks (3 of 42) targeted European or other non-Muslim nationality targets. This track record undoubtedly contributed to Tawhid w'al Jihad's appeal in the eyes of AQC leaders as a potential franchise, but this affinity with AQC's operational prioritization did not last. During the period when the group was known as AQI, the percentage of its operations that primarily targeted Americans dropped to eight percent (5 of 66), resulting in only two American deaths, along with an additional eight percent (5 of 66) of its attacks targeting other Western nationalities. The totality of AQI attacks during this period

resulted in 822 killed and 1627 wounded, virtually all of which were Muslims, primarily from within Iraq.

After declaration of the ISI in October 2006, the affiliate's operational patterns diverged even more from AQC's strategic guidance. Up until Zawahiri's disavowal in February 2014, less than one percent (2 of 763) of the ISI's operations were against targets of American nationality, with an additional one percent (11 of 763) targeting European nationalities. Total casualties resulting from ISI attacks were 3,091 killed and 8,825 wounded, but confirmed ISI operations killed only two Americans.

<i>Attacks by Target Nationality</i>						
	TJ		AQI		ISI	
Nationality	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded
Iraq	22	351 / --	48	709 / 1420	718	2971 / 8605
United States	11	98 (8 US) / --	5	48 (2 US) / 81 (0 US)	2	2 (2 US) / 0
Bulgaria	1	2 / --	-	-	-	-
Denmark	-	-	-	-	1	0 / 0
Egypt	1	1 / --	2	1 / 0	-	-
France	-	-	-	-	1	1 / 1
Germany	-	-	-	-	1	0 / 0
Great Britain	-	-	1	0 / 0	1	1 / 0
Iran	-	-	-	-	2	18 / 9
Italy	-	-	-	-	1	0 / 0
Jordan	-	-	3	38 / 66	-	-
Lebanon	-	-	-	-	6	12 / 85
Multi/Internatn'l	1	1 / --	2	26 / 53	4	3 / 16
Pakistan	-	-	1	0 / 0	1	3 / 11
Russia	-	-	1	0 / 5	-	-
Slovak Republic	-	-	1	0 / 0	-	-
Somalia	1	0 / 0	-	-	-	-
South Korea	1	1 / --	-	-	-	-
Spain	-	-	-	-	2	0 / 0
Sudan	-	-	1	0 / 0	-	-
Syria	-	-	-	-	19	75 / 98
Tunisia	-	-	-	-	1	1 / 0
Turkey	4	5 / --	-	-	3	4 / 0
Total	42	464 / --	66	822 / 1627	763	3091 / 8825

Figure 4a (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

Despite access to a broad selection of foreign fighters and associated support networks from across the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, 95 percent of AQI/ISI/ISIS

attacks took place inside Iraq (see Figure 4b). The group failed to demonstrate geographic reach beyond Iraq and the Levant, with the exception of a single 2013 attack on a secular politician in Tunisia.⁵⁸⁶ AQC leadership hoped, however, that AQI/ISI/ISIS would be able to leverage its international connections to more aggressively attack the “far enemy.” For example, a November 2007 letter to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir informed the ISI senior leader that “the [American] Halliburton company...has moved its headquarters to the United Arab Emirates...so they and their headquarters should be dealt with as necessary while mindful of protecting the neighbors against the damages of the action.”⁵⁸⁷ In a letter to Abu Umar al-Baghdadi in March 2008, after alluding to caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed that had appeared in the Danish press,⁵⁸⁸ Zawahiri relayed to the ISI *emir* that “Shaykh Osama bin Laden...has tasked me to urge and exhort you to focus whatever effort you or those with whom you contact abroad can muster on the Danes[.]”⁵⁸⁹ AQI/ISI/ISIS, preoccupied as it was by its sectarian conflicts in Iraq and the Levant, was either unable or unwilling to honor the central leadership’s specific operational requests.

<i>Attacks By Country Location</i>			
Country	TJ	AQI	ISI
Iraq	41	63	722
Jordan	1	3	-
Syria	-	-	34
Lebanon	-	-	6
Tunisia	-	-	1
Total	42	66	763

Figure 4b (Source: *Global Terrorism Database, 2015*)

⁵⁸⁶ Bouazza Ben Bouazza, “Video claims responsibility for Tunisia killings,” *Associated Press*, December 18, 2014, <https://apnews.com/07757e0932824445b611685132053c63/militant-video-claims-tunisia-assassinations>.

⁵⁸⁷ Quoted in Bill Roggio, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and Tony Badran, “Intercepted Letters from al-Qaeda Leaders Shed Light on State of Network in Iraq (sub-letter A),” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 19 November 2007, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2008/09/12/intercepted-letters-from-al-qaeda-leaders-shed-light-on-state-of-network-in-iraq/>.

⁵⁸⁸ Michael Kimmelman, “Outrage at Cartoons Still Tests the Danes,” *New York Times* (20 March, 2008), <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/20/books/20cartoon.html>

⁵⁸⁹ Roggio, Gartenstein-Ross, Badran, “Intercepted Letters from al-Qaeda Leaders Shed Light on State of Network in Iraq (sub-letter C),” 06 March 2008.

A survey of AQI/ISI/ISIS attacks by target type also illustrates the group's divergence from AQC's guidance to avoid civilian casualties and confrontation with security forces drawn from local Muslim populations. A significant plurality—39 percent—of the franchise's attacks (327 of 829) were against private citizens and property, accounting for 41 percent of all casualties caused (1,395 of 3,913 killed and 4,435 of 10,452 wounded). Although the AQC senior leader public statements in 2007 and 2010 that serve as benchmarks for this study were designed to counteract the public outcry that had been prompted in large part by AQI/ISI/ISIS' violence against fellow Muslims, the affiliate's operational patterns after those AQC releases actually trended in the opposite direction from that intended by the central leadership (see Figure 4c). Prior to bin Laden's October 2007 comment acknowledging "mistakes" made by the *mujahidin* and urging them to more closely follow *Shariah*,⁵⁹⁰ only 17 percent (15 of 87) AQI/ISI/ISIS attacks had targeted private citizens and property. After bin Laden's statement, AQI/ISI/ISIS' rate of targeting civilians rose to 21 percent (14 of 68). Remarkably, after Zawahiri reinforced bin Laden's message in September 2010 with clear orders that Al Qaeda's followers "must be diligent in abiding by the sacredness of Muslim blood,"⁵⁹¹ attacks against private citizens and property increased more steeply, jumping to 44 percent of AQI/ISI/ISIS' total operational activity.

AQI/ISI/ISIS' second most frequent and deadly category of targets were the local security forces, which accounted for 29 percent of all AQI/ISI/ISIS operations (240 of 829) and 20 percent of all casualties (992 of 3,913 killed and 1,879 of 10,452 wounded). Military and police would seem to be logical targets for attacks carried out as part of AQI/ISI/ISIS' open participation in the Iraqi insurgency; however, only three attacks primarily targeted the U.S. military, none of which managed to kill or wound a single American soldier. Therefore, the vast majority of casualties caused by AQI/ISI/ISIS attacks on security forces were Iraqi Muslims who had been enlisted from the local community or happened to be bystanders. Aside from demonstrating target selection wholly at odds with Al Qaeda's declared focus on the "far enemy," these attacks—made

⁵⁹⁰ bin Laden, "A Message to Our People in Iraq," October 22, 2007.

⁵⁹¹ al-Zawahiri, "A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign," 19.

even more lethal and indiscriminate due to AQI/ISI/ISIS' overwhelming reliance on bombing as its preferred tactic—risked further damage to public support for the Al Qaeda franchise and its parent organization by showing insensitivity to the safety and circumstances of ordinary Muslims. Bin Laden explained this reasoning in a letter to AQAP *emir* Nasser al-Wuhayshi, describing one particular AQI/ISI/ISIS attack as a cautionary tale. According to bin Laden, “there was no imminent threat” to the *mujahidin*, who attacked Sunni tribesmen “who were going to join the security forces for financial reasons[,]” and “would not [risk] themselves to protect Americans.”⁵⁹² Bin Laden pointed out that such attacks on Muslim security forces merely provoked “desire for revenge against [Al Qaeda].”⁵⁹³

⁵⁹² "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 13.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

<i>AQI/ISI/ISIS Attacks by Target Type, Before and After AQC Guidance Statements</i>						
	Prior to 1 st AQC Guidance (22 Oct 2007)		Between 1 st and 2 nd AQC Guidance (15 Sep 2010)		After 2 nd AQC Guidance	
Target Type	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded
Business	5 (6%)	90 / 107	5 (7%)	102 / 224	57 (8%)	232 / 611
Educational Institution	-	-	2 (3%)	37 / 125	5 (1%)	9 / 87
Food or Water Supply	-	-	-	-	1 (0%)	1 / 0
Government (Diplomatic)	9 (11%)	6 / 6	-	-	1 (0%)	1 / 1
Government (General)	15 (17%)	34 / 22	28 (41%)	399 / 1790	36 (5%)	206 / 571
Journalists & Media	-	-	-	-	13 (2%)	11 / 9
Military	16 (19%)	136 / 234	2 (3%)	32 / 56	61 (9%)	219 / 247
NGO	-	-	-	-	5 (1%)	4 / 0
Other	2 (2%)	9 / 32	-	-	-	-
Police	20 (23%)	217 / 503	9 (13%)	53 / 103	132 (20%)	337 / 736
Private Citizens & Property	15 (17%)	438 / 1041	14 (21%)	75 / 174	298 (44%)	882 / 3220
Religious Figures/Institutions	2 (2%)	92 / 0	1 (2%)	4 / 17	14 (2%)	101 / 264
Telecommunication	-	-	-	-	2 (0%)	0 / 0
Terrorists/Non-State Militia	2 (2%)	6 / 4	6 (9%)	57 / 79	22 (3%)	82 / 38
Transportation	1 (1%)	0 / 0	1 (1%)	0 / 4	8 (1%)	29 / 94
Unknown	-	-	-	-	16 (2%)	0 / 0
Utilities	-	-	-	-	2 (0%)	5 / 11
Violent Political Party	-	-	-	-	1 (0%)	5 / 40
Total	87	1028 / 1949	68	759 / 2572	674	2126 / 5931

Figure 4c (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

Examining quantitative data of all reliably attributed AQI/ISI/ISIS attacks confirms the overall picture of strategic disconnect between AQC and its franchise that is revealed in Al Qaeda's internal correspondence. AQI/ISI/ISIS almost completely failed to conduct effective operations against the "far enemy," instead focusing most of its tactical energies on high-casualty, often indiscriminate attacks against private citizens and Muslim security forces. Based on this data, the widespread public denunciations of AQI/ISI/ISIS from across the Muslim community were grounded largely in accurate accounts of the affiliate's actions. AQI/ISI/ISIS' defiance of AQC strategic guidance and alienation of Muslim civilians created serious challenges to the central leadership's credibility as commanders of a purportedly unified, global organization, as well as to its legitimacy as self-appointed guardians of the *ummah*. The next section will examine how

AQC maneuvered to adapt to its unruly franchise and to protect its standing among Salafi-jihadists, as well as the lasting impacts that AQC's experiences with AQI/ISI/ISIS had on the central leadership's attempts to guide the strategies and actions of its other affiliates.

4.10 AQI/ISI/ISIS' Influence on AQC

The give-and-take of AQC's relationship with its first regional affiliate had a profound and lasting influence on the central organization, which had to adapt continuously in order to address the challenges the incorrigible franchise presented to its authority, to its strategic approach, and to its reputation. In particular, as discussed in this section, AQC's public messaging practices and the body of strategic guidance that the central leadership communicated to Al Qaeda adherents were influenced by experience gained through dealing with AQI/ISI/ISIS.

4.10.1 Effects on AQC's Public Messaging Strategy

AQC's affiliation with AQI/ISI/ISIS forced the central organization to adopt a flexible public messaging strategy, in which it carefully balanced vigorous defense of its franchise with more conciliatory language intended to mollify critics and to influence followers to avoid counterproductive behavior. AQC relied upon its affiliate in Iraq for restoration of Al Qaeda's global stature and relevance after being routed from Afghanistan in 2001, but this arrangement proved to be a double-edged sword, as it left AQC vulnerable to blame-sharing when criticism was directed at its franchise. Widespread condemnation of AQI, ISI, and ISIS, combined with AQC's powerlessness to control its affiliate's unpopular actions, left the central leadership in a bind. In order to protect Al Qaeda's reputation, they had to adopt concurrent, sometimes contradictory approaches. On the one hand, AQC publicly defended AQI/ISI/ISIS in order to protect the appearance of strength and unity across the Al Qaeda organization, with the central leadership at its head, concealing AQC's inability to control its affiliate. On the other hand, AQC had to protect its own moral credibility among the *ummah* by acknowledging accusations against it and its affiliates and by reassuring the Muslim community that it was taking steps to ensure the righteousness of its campaign, even if this meant

apologizing for the actions of misguided followers. AQC leaders also began using their public messages to articulate a code of conduct for the *mujahidin*, which could serve the dual purpose of deflecting criticism and steering their adherents away from the types of actions that risked damage to Al Qaeda's standing.

As discussed throughout this chapter, AQI/ISI/ISIS was a source of great frustration and concern for AQC leaders, due to its insubordination and tendency to alienate Al Qaeda's sought-after Muslim constituency. Adam Gadahn, AQC's American-born media director, summed up the fraught relationship between AQI/ISI/ISIS and its parent organization in a 2011 letter contained in the Abbottabad documents:

Strange – I swear – the conflict between the statements of our leaders and scholars, and the acts of [the ISI]... The relations between Al Qaeda organization and [the ISI] have been practically cut off for a number of years. The decision to declare the State was taken without consultation from Al Qaeda leadership. Their improvised decision has caused a split in the *mujahidin* ranks and their supporters inside and outside Iraq. What is left between Al Qaeda organization and [the ISI]...?⁵⁹⁴

Despite these challenges, however, AQC maintained public support for its Iraqi franchise until Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's open defiance of AQC orders forced Zawahiri to disavow the affiliate in February 2014. AQC's merger with Zarqawi's jihadist group had revitalized a struggling Al Qaeda; therefore, failure to support AQI/ISI/ISIS could weaken the franchise, reducing its value to the central organization. Additionally, AQC leaders' judgment and authority could be called into question if they publicly revealed dissatisfaction with their franchise or admitted to their inability to control the subordinate group. The importance that the central leadership placed on these considerations is reflected in some of bin Laden's orders to his lieutenants. In mid-2007, as AQC was being inundated with public and private criticism of the ISI's outrages, bin Laden wrote to Zawahiri:

[I] present to you a very important subject...to remove ambiguity around the subject of the Islamic State of Iraq...the main axis for your work plan in the coming stage would be the continued support for the truthful *mujahidin* in Iraq

⁵⁹⁴ Gadahn, "Letter from Adam Gadahn," 8.

headed by our brothers in the ISI, and defending them should be the core issue and should take the lion's share and the top priority in your speeches and statements...your support for ISI must be overt and obvious.⁵⁹⁵

Similarly, when giving direction later that year to "add one more task to [Atiyah's] duties...to be one of the spokesmen for the organization[,]” bin Laden clarified that “he should support the Islamic State of Iraq and defend it from any disapproval and rumors.”⁵⁹⁶

Contrasting AQC leaders' released statements with their contemporaneous, behind-the-scenes actions, as revealed in secret correspondence, illustrates the dichotomy between AQC's public defense of its Iraqi affiliate and the friction and apprehension that actually characterized the relationship. For example, in early 2006, just months after Zawahiri and Atiyah had written letters to Zarqawi challenging him over AQI operations that killed innocent Muslims, AQC scholar and propagandist Abu Yahya al-Libi sought to deflect growing public criticism by publishing a 36-page pamphlet, *Human Shields in Modern Jihad*, that defended “permissible” collateral damage resulting from *mujahidin* operations.⁵⁹⁷ Despite Zarqawi's stubborn refusal to heed AQC's repeated guidance to moderate AQI's excessively violent and sectarian policies, bin Laden sustained AQC's public defense of AQI, using his eulogy of Zarqawi to whitewash his sub-commander's actions, declaring that “Abu Mus'ab...never committed any depraved act in violation of his faith...[he] was unyielding to the infidels and merciful towards the Muslims...”⁵⁹⁸ Although both Zawahiri's and Atiyah's letters to Zarqawi had emphasized AQC's concerns about the Muslim casualties caused by AQI operations, bin Laden took a

⁵⁹⁵ bin Laden, “Letter to Shaykh Abu Muhammad 17 August 2007,” 1-2; see also Osama bin Laden “Letter to the Generous Brother Shaykh Abu Muhammad,” ODNI, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, summer 2007, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20to%20the%20generous%20brother%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Muhammad.pdf>. This second citation appears to be an earlier draft of the letter that Zawahiri sent to bin Laden on 17 August 2007.

⁵⁹⁶ bin Laden, “Letter to Abu ‘Abdallah al-Hajj,” 1.

⁵⁹⁷ Jarret Brachman and Abdullah Warius, “Abu Yahya al-Libi's ‘Human Shields in Modern Jihad,’” *CTC Sentinel* 1, issue 6 (May 2008): 1-4, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2010/07/CTCSentinel-Vol1Iss6.pdf>.

⁵⁹⁸ Osama bin Laden, “Bin Laden Speech,” Middle East Media Research Institute, 30 June 2006, 1, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4803>.

different stance publicly by claiming that any Muslim victims of AQI's operations were "fighting with the Crusaders against the Muslims [and] must be killed."⁵⁹⁹

AQC's revisionist messaging continued in the months following Zarqawi's death. In a speech marking the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden blamed the civil war between Iraqi Sunnis and Shia – the same civil war that, much to AQC's dismay, AQI had fomented as a clear-cut element of Zarqawi's strategy – on American president George W. Bush, accusing him of orchestrating the sectarian conflict "in the belief that this will quickly decide the war in his favor."⁶⁰⁰ A few weeks later, AQC released a message from Atiyah, in which he commented on a statement by AQI's new *emir*, Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, extolling the group's commitment to respecting scholars, pursuing unity among Muslims, humility, and high morals.⁶⁰¹ Atiyah may have been optimistic that the new affiliate leader would adopt a different course than had his predecessor, but his public statement is notable for its praise of the Iraqi affiliate in the same areas, nearly point-by-point, that he had severely criticized in his secret correspondence with Zarqawi.

AQC also used its propaganda releases to promote the ISI, even though the affiliate's leaders had declared the State without consulting the central leadership, and in a manner that went against AQC's advice. Despite a steady stream of criticism from across the Salafi-jihadist community over the declaration of the ISI, as well as AQC leaders' own misgivings about the strategic wisdom of the decision, the central leadership publicly underwrote the ISI's establishment, portraying it as a bold step forward within Al Qaeda's grand strategy, rather than as an essentially rogue act by an affiliate over which they had little control. Atiyah published a long article "congratulat[ing] [the *mujahidin*] and all Muslims on the founding of the Islamic State in Iraq" and providing "sincere advice to Muslims...to help remove some of the confusion that has arisen among

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 3. Bin Laden reiterated this argument to justify AQI's attacks on tribes in another message two days later, Osama Bin Laden, "Bin Laden Speech," Middle East Media Research Institute, 02 July 2006, 1, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4804>.

⁶⁰⁰ Osama bin Laden, "The Solution," SITE Intelligence Group, 07 September 2007, 2, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/the-solution-a-video-speech-from-usama-bin-laden-addressing-the-american-people-on-the-occasion-of-the-sixth-anniversary-of-911-92007.html>.

⁶⁰¹ Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, "Shaykh Atiyatallah Praises Al-Qa'ida in Iraq Leader Abu-Hamzah al-Muhajir's Ramadan Statement," Global Islamic Media Front, 29 September 2006.

some friends concerning this great event.”⁶⁰² Zawahiri also publicly expressed approval for the declaration of the ISI, applauding its founders for being “so enlightened and sincere that they have united their ranks...in the *mujahid* steadfast state of Islam in order to foil the plans of the dealers in politics, hatchers of plots, and seekers of profits.”⁶⁰³ Glossing over the significant opposition to the ISI among jihadist scholars and other militants in Iraq, Zawahiri stated that it “is a legitimate emirate based on a proper legal methodology,” adding the dubious claim that the group had “received the pledge of allegiance of most of the *mujahidin* and tribes in Iraq.”⁶⁰⁴

AQC leaders defended their Iraqi franchise to protect Al Qaeda’s image of organizational cohesion and reach, but they also had to take steps to protect the central organization’s own reputation from being damaged through association with AQI/ISI/ISIS outrages.

The need to guard Al Qaeda’s moral authority from blowback against an affiliate’s unpopular actions compelled the central leadership to adopt new themes in its public messaging that differed dramatically from its pre-franchise era propaganda. From 2007 onwards, in addition to their familiar refrains denouncing Western and “apostate” governments and calling Muslims to *jihad*, AQC leaders also used their statements to distance themselves from unpopular actions committed in the Al Qaeda name, occasionally going so far as to apologize on behalf of their followers. Additionally, AQC messaging began to include specific guidance on standards of conduct for the *mujahidin*. By adapting the central organization’s media strategy in response to criticism of the ISI’s unruly behavior, AQC leadership sought to demonstrate their receptivity to concerns raised from across the *ummah*, to defend their moral credibility as the self-appointed vanguard of Salafi-jihadism, and to prevent continued erosion of Al Qaeda’s reputation and legitimacy by dissuading their adherents from further counterproductive violence.

⁶⁰² Atiyah ‘Abd al-Rahman, “Atiyatallah Congratulates Iraqi Mujahidin for ‘Victories,’ Explains Islamic State,” 05 January 2007, 2, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/11887>.

⁶⁰³ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Al-Sahab Video Features Bin Ladin, Al-Zawahiri, Others Discussing Afghanistan, Iraq,” World News Connection, National Technical Information Service, 20 September 2007, 3, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4668>.

⁶⁰⁴ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Al-Sahab Media Production Releases Al-Zawahiri’s ‘Review of Events’ Video,” World News Connection, National Technical Information Service, 16 December 2007, 8, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4671>.

The first, and probably the most sensational, instance of this AQC messaging innovation was bin Laden's "A Message to the People of Iraq," released in late October 2007, after AQC had received months of intense criticism from jihadists and other Muslims alienated by the ISI's violence and divisiveness, as described above. Bin Laden called for unity among the *mujahidin*, "advis[ing] myself and the Muslims in general, and the brothers in Al Qaeda organization everywhere in particular, to beware of fanatical partiality to men, groups and homelands."⁶⁰⁵ Even more notably, he acknowledged "the mistakes that take place between the brothers."⁶⁰⁶ Seeming to argue for forbearance from the Muslim community towards misguided *jihadis*, bin Laden reasoned that "the nature of man is to err...It is impossible for the people not to make mistakes...Major sins were committed in the best of eras."⁶⁰⁷ He then issued a firm warning to his followers to conduct themselves in accordance with *Shariah*, "lest a trial afflict them...or a grievous punishment overtak[e] them."⁶⁰⁸

Bin Laden's statement caused a stir, with headlines in both Western and Middle Eastern media outlets proclaiming that the Al Qaeda leader had "admit[ted] mistakes" and "wrongs."⁶⁰⁹ AQC, apparently sensing that it had ceded too much ground, moved to reassert control over the narrative by accusing the media of distorting the meaning of bin Laden's words. After Al Jazeera broadcast selected excerpts of the original audio tape, *As-Sahab* posted the complete video with English subtitles, including an editorial note: "We are publishing the whole [speech] of Shaykh Osama Bin Laden after the tremendous amount of counterfeiting of the facts and altering the purposes and objectives of the speech by Al-Jazeera Satellite channel which ignored all the pillars of honor [of]

⁶⁰⁵ bin Laden, "A Message to the People of Iraq," 23 October 2007, 5.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 4

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁹ For example, "Translation of bin Laden's message: Al-Qaeda Leader Admits Mistakes Were Made in Iraq by Mujahidin," Al Jazeera, 23 October 2007, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2007/10/2008525183555507521.html>; "Bin Laden Urges Iraq Rebel Unity, Admits Wrongs," Reuters, 22 October 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-binladen/bin-laden-urges-iraq-rebel-unity-admits-wrongs-idUSL2251391920071022>

professional media.”⁶¹⁰ Zawahiri returned to this argument a few months later, in the same *As-Sahab* interview in which he described the ISI as a “legitimate emirate” with a broad base of *jihadi* and tribal support. He complained that “the television channel manipulate[d] [bin Laden’s] message,” by “claim[ing] that the Shaykh directed his reproach and advice to the *mujahidin* of the Islamic State of Iraq, although the Shaykh directed his words to all the *mujahidin* in Iraq...”⁶¹¹

Bin Laden’s forthright remarks, and AQC’s subsequent efforts to walk back the way in which they had been received, illustrate the conundrum that the Iraqi franchise had forced on its parent organization. In order to avoid the appearance of powerlessness and irrelevance, AQC had to publicly build up its affiliate, even as the franchise group’s incorrigible violence and sectarianism undermined Al Qaeda’s moral legitimacy in the eyes of its desired constituency. AQC simultaneously sought to protect its credibility and limit further reputational damage by denouncing divisive behavior and calling for higher standards of conduct, while downplaying the inherent contradiction in its messaging by claiming that its critiques were directed at all jihadists, not just members of the Al Qaeda organization.

AQC continued to walk this rhetorical tightrope in future years, as it struggled to bring the ISI’s and other affiliates’ actions into alignment with its strategic guidance. Tempering promotional statements with expressions of mortification at Muslim casualties and exhortations for greater operational restraint became a regular feature of AQC’s public messaging. AQC internal documents contain discussions of media operations that reveal the persistent emphasis placed on this approach, particularly by bin Laden. In a letter to Atiyah in May 2010, bin Laden summarized several examples of affiliates’ operations resulting in innocent Muslim deaths, stressing that “[m]aking these mistakes is a great issue; needless to say, the greatness of the Muslim blood violation in addition to the damage impacting the *jihad*...the alienation of most of the nation from the

⁶¹⁰ “Al-Sahab Media Releases Bin Ladin Statement, Says Al-Jazirah ‘Counterfeiting’ the Facts,” World News Connection, National Technical Information Service, October 23, 2007, 1, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4656>.

⁶¹¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Al-Sahab Media Production Releases Al-Zawahiri’s ‘Review of Events’ Video,” World News Connection, National Technical Information Service, December 16, 2007, 9, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4671>.

mujahidin.”⁶¹² In order to avoid this alienation from the *ummah*, bin Laden felt that “the brothers in all the regions [should] apologize and be held responsible for what happened. They would be questioned about the mistake causing the flaw that occurred and about the measures to be taken to avoid repeating the same mistakes.”⁶¹³ Apparently resigned to AQC’s role in making up for the shortcomings of its franchises, however, bin Laden also directed that “should some of the brothers in the regions fail to carry out their duties in this respect, [AQC] should then assume the responsibility and apologize for what had happened.”⁶¹⁴ Later that year, Atiyah confirmed in a letter to bin Laden that he was working on a project for the Al Qaeda *emir* to “release a statement where [bin Laden] explain[s] that [Al Qaeda is] correcting some of the things that overtook us...in the matters of naming apostates, extravagance, extremism and other issues.”⁶¹⁵ These letters show that the ISI’s excesses continued to influence bin Laden’s media planning. Shortly before his death, in early 2011, he directed Atiyah to publish a message for “all the Arab *mujahidin* in all the fields to benefit from[,]” because “there are lots of operations that were attributed to our brothers in Iraq in which civilians got harmed.”⁶¹⁶

AQC’s public statements since 2007 consistently have reflected this awareness among the central leadership of the need to use its media operations to deflect criticism and to prevent further reputational harm resulting from undisciplined or misguided affiliate operations. For example, in a March 2011 video message entitled “Glorifying the Sanctity of the Muslims’ Blood” (possibly the same message ordered by bin Laden mentioned above), Atiyah “assure[d] [Al Qaeda’s] complete disavowal of any operation(s) that target Muslims, whether in their mosques, markets, roads and gatherings.”⁶¹⁷ He then declared prohibitions on targeting mosques and other public

⁶¹² bin Laden, “Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyatullah Al-Libi 4 May 2010,” 9.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁵ Atiyah ‘Abd al-Rahman, “Letter from Mahmud to bin Laden,” Government Exhibit 423, 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD), July 17, 2010, 8, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf.

⁶¹⁶ bin Laden, “Letter to Shaykh Mahmud,” 6; see also two documents that appear to be alternate drafts of the same letter: bin Laden, “Letter About Efforts in Other Regions;” and bin Laden, “Tunis,” 2.

⁶¹⁷ Atiyah ‘Abd al-Rahman, “Glorifying the Sanctity of the Muslims’ Blood,” 14 March 2011, As-Sahab Media Foundation, 1, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/7258>.

places in order “to avoid mistakes and damage,” insisting that *mujahidin* leaders and fighters “must not go forth before having total confidence that the target is legitimate[.]”⁶¹⁸ Zawahiri regularly incorporated these themes in his messages, departing from his typical focus on encouragement to the *ummah* and vitriol against the West to “disown any operation which a *jihadi* group carries out in which it doesn’t show concern for the safety of the Muslims,”⁶¹⁹ and ordering the *mujahidin* to reject “any act that would expose [Muslims] to danger in the markets, mosques, or the crowded places[.]”⁶²⁰ As friction between the newly-named ISIS and AQC intensified in the months leading up to their schism in February 2014, *As-Sahab* released Zawahiri’s “General Guidelines for Jihad,” possibly as a final effort to assert control over the full constellation of Al Qaeda affiliates, while also distancing the central organization from the controversial activities of its most uncooperative franchise. Zawahiri’s guidelines, a compilation of strategic guidance and tactical standards, included the following stipulation: “if it becomes clear to the *mujahidin* that they have committed a particular mistake, they must seek the forgiveness of Allah for it, publicly disassociate themselves from the mistake of the person who has fallen in error and try to compensate those who have been harmed[.]”⁶²¹

4.10.2 Influence on AQC’s Strategic Guidance

The body of AQC’s strategic guidance to the Al Qaeda network shows the clear imprint of its experiences dealing with its first regional franchise. Lessons learned from observing—and attempting to manage—the consequences of AQI/ISI/ISIS’ policies and activities reinforced to central leadership the importance of providing clear direction to the affiliates and helped to crystallize the content of their advice. Many of the themes that AQC leaders stressed to followers across the Al Qaeda network over the years first were expressed as counsel given in response to the actions of AQI/ISI/ISIS,

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁶¹⁹ Zawahiri, “A Victorious Ummah, A Broken Crusade: Nine Years After the Start of the Crusader Campaign,” 12.

⁶²⁰ Zawahiri, “And the Noble Knight Dismounts,” 4; see also Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 2,” 1-2.

⁶²¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad,” *As-Sahab Media*, 13 September 2013, 6, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/43060300/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en>.

encompassing all four categories of AQC's strategic guidance described earlier in this thesis: campaign, diplomatic, targeting and conduct, and media.

Campaign Guidance

The enduring themes of AQC's campaign guidance, which stress the importance of disciplined adherence to a multi-phase plan and of maintaining strategic focus by avoiding the distraction of "side fronts," share unmistakable parallels with the early advice for AQI that Zawahiri and Atiyah provided in their 2005 letters to Zarqawi. The public relations and strategic challenges resulting from the Iraqi affiliate's premature declaration of the ISI and its stubborn refusal to abandon its war on Shia Muslims, all in defiance of AQC's counsel, validated the wisdom of the central leadership's guidance.

AQC leaders have sought to prevent their other franchises from repeating AQI/ISI/ISIS' missteps. A 2010 letter from bin Laden to the leader of AQAP reads like an after-action review of the ISI's hasty establishment: "[i]t is in our interest to stick to, and not skip, the steps and stages. After we exhaust the greatest enemy, we then will start exhausting the local enemy, and then we start building the [Islamic] State later."⁶²² Atiyah also counseled AQAP to guard against alienating the *ummah* in the way that AQI/ISI/ISIS did through its sectarian and overbearing approach, recommending that the group "be friendly and politicized, and put aside any unnecessary action such as declaration of [an] emirate or anything like that[.]"⁶²³ Similarly, bin Laden advised that AQIM should follow a deliberate strategy and "avoid insisting on the formation of an Islamic State at the time being, but...work on breaking the power of our main enemy[.]"⁶²⁴ Undoubtedly influenced by his assessment that AQI/ISI/ISIS' constant conflict with both Shia and other Sunni groups interfered with its effectiveness at combating the Iraqi government and the occupying Western coalition, bin Laden's "clear-cut policy" for Al Qaeda included orders to "avoid opening up any fronts that are less important[.]"⁶²⁵

⁶²² bin Laden, "Three Stages Letter," 1; Bin Laden echoed this theme in a 2010 letter to Atiyah, bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah al-Libi 4,'" 22.

⁶²³ al-Rahman, "Letter from 'Atiyah to Abu Basir," 1-2.

⁶²⁴ bin Laden, "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 1.

⁶²⁵ bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 5.

Bin Laden also drew lessons from the attrition of AQI/ISI/ISIS resulting from the heavily resourced coalition military campaign against the franchise. Perceiving that the forcefulness and persistence of the US-led actions were prompted largely by the notoriety of the group's affiliation with Al Qaeda, he sometimes advised his followers to minimize their public linkage to the parent organization. In a 2010 letter to the *emir* of Al-Shabaab, bin Laden recommended that the African jihadist group downplay its relationship with Al Qaeda because “[i]f the matter becomes declared and out in the open, it would have the enemies escalate their anger and mobilize against you; this is what happened to the brothers in Iraq[.]”⁶²⁶ AQC leaders issued similar guidance for affiliates to maintain a low profile during the Arab Spring, explaining that “emerging with a strong [Al Qaeda] appearance...could cause embarrassment to the political and popular powers in the revolutionary Arab societies.”⁶²⁷ Although reducing Al Qaeda's public profile would seem to run counter to the logic of AQC's franchising strategy, the central leadership understood that, in some cases, the long-term pursuit of their objectives would benefit by protecting vulnerable groups and movements from the intense security pressure that AQC and its affiliates had endured since 2001.

Diplomatic Guidance

AQC leaders considered diplomatic guidance to be inextricably linked to its campaign guidance. As evidenced in AQC's advice to AQI/ISI/ISIS commanders, and in the parent organization's attempts to broker unity among the Iraqi *mujahidin*, the central leadership believed that successful progress through the phases of a strategic campaign relied upon strong relations with adjacent organizations and with the broader community. Through both secret correspondence and public statements, AQC senior officials repeatedly urged their affiliate in Iraq to set aside its vendetta against the Shia, to reach accommodations with other Sunni militant groups and tribes, and to conduct itself in ways that would garner support from across the *ummah*. AQI/ISI/ISIS' failure to heed this advice undermined its attempts to consolidate control over the Iraqi insurgency and

⁶²⁶ bin Laden, "Letter from Usama Bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr," 2.

⁶²⁷ al-Rahman, "To the honorable brother Mahmud," 1.

damaged its—and by association, AQC’s—standing among Salafi-jihadists and other Muslims.

In the area of diplomatic guidance, as well, the central leadership has endeavored to influence other components of the Al Qaeda network to avoid the disastrous consequences caused by the Iraqi franchise’s harsh and divisive actions, primarily by reiterating the key elements of the advice they had provided to AQI/ISI/ISIS. AQC leaders’ public statements repeatedly have called for unity among the *mujahidin*, and they have reinforced these calls in private messages to the regional affiliates, stressing patience and tolerance in dealings with fellow Islamists.⁶²⁸ They discourage the practice of *takfir*,⁶²⁹ and have urged their followers to eschew conflict with Shia and other Muslim sects.⁶³⁰ AQC leaders stress the need to cultivate good will across the Muslim community; as bin Laden noted, echoing Mao Zedong’s well-known maxim about guerrilla warfare,⁶³¹ “the people’s support to the *mujahidin* is as important as the water for fish.”⁶³² AQC leaders routinely have cautioned against harsh application of *Shariah* or maltreatment of civilian populations,⁶³³ and they have placed special emphasis on urging their affiliate commanders to build strong relationships with local tribes,⁶³⁴ citing as an object lesson AQI’s alienation of the Sunni tribes in Anbar Province, Iraq, which ultimately caused the tribes to ally with the Americans against it.⁶³⁵

⁶²⁸ al-Rahman, “Letter to Mujahidin in Somalia dtd 28 December 2006,” 2; al-Libi, “Letter from Abu Yahya,” 5-6; bin Laden, “Letter Addressed to Atiyah,” 2; bin Laden, “Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud,” 5.

⁶²⁹ al-Rahman, “Kind brother,” 3.

⁶³⁰ al-Rahman, “To the honorable brother Mahmud,” 1; al-Rahman, “Letter from ‘Atiyah to Abu Basir,” 1; bin Laden, “Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010,” 2; bin Laden, “Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud,” 8.

⁶³¹ Mao wrote that “The [people] may be likened to water, the [guerillas] to fish who inhabit it.” The more common phrasing in English language popular citations of this quotation is: “The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea.” Mao Zedong, *On Guerilla Warfare*, 53.

⁶³² bin Laden, “Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi,” 12.

⁶³³ bin Laden, “Letter to Shaykh Mahmud and Shaykh Abu Yahya,” 1; al-Rahman, “Letter to Shaykh Abu Abdallah dtd 17 July 2010,” 2; bin Laden, “Letter Addressed to Atiyah,” 2-3; “Letter to Abu-Musa’b ‘Abd-al-Wadud,” 1.

⁶³⁴ bin Laden, “Letter Addressed to Atiyah,” p. 1; bin Laden, “Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010,” p. 5; al-Rahman, “Letter from ‘Atiyah to Abu Basir,” 2.

⁶³⁵ al-Rahman, “Letter dtd 18 JUL 2010,” 1; bin Laden, “Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi,” 12-13.

Targeting and Conduct Guidance

Much of AQC's targeting and conduct guidance likewise has its origin in the central leadership's response to backlash from the Muslim community over AQI/ISI/ISIS' indiscriminate or excessive violence. As discussed above, when private admonition failed to sway the Iraqi franchise leadership to moderate the group's policies and operations, and with criticism from across the *ummah* continuing to mount, AQC leaders took to the Internet in 2007 to issue thinly-veiled calls for the ISI to act in greater accord with Islamic law. Thereafter, exhortations for the *mujahidin* to exercise operational discretion in order to avoid spilling innocent Muslim blood became a standard feature of the central leadership's public statements, as they strived to protect the Al Qaeda movement's reputation and credibility among the *ummah*. AQC leaders used their secret correspondence with each affiliate group to underscore and elaborate upon the precepts of their targeting and conduct guidance.⁶³⁶ As with other areas of strategic guidance, they sometimes found that direct reference to the negative example provided by AQI/ISI/ISIS best illustrated their point, such as in a letter from bin Laden to the AQAP *emir* that recounted AQI's "mistakes [that] happened when some of al-Anbar tribe's children were attacked without a reason of self-defense."⁶³⁷ Using this story as a vehicle to convey both strategic and moral lessons, bin Laden highlighted not only how "[t]his attack resulted in the tribe working against the *mujahidin*," but also how it raised "a very important point that needs to be addressed and understood, which is that God's law need to be obeyed by all the *mujahidin*[.]"⁶³⁸

Media Guidance

Finally, AQC leaders previewed much of their overarching media guidance in the early advice they gave to AQI/ISI/ISIS, or they developed their future counsel to

⁶³⁶ bin Laden, "Letter to Abu-Musa'b 'Abd-al-Wadud," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, 7, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20to%20Abu-Musa%20b%20Abd-al-Wadud.pdf>; bin Laden "Letter from Usama Bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr," 2; bin Laden, "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," p.13; bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 4, 9; bin Laden, "Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud," 4-5.

⁶³⁷ bin Laden, "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi, 12

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

affiliates by observing the negative impacts of the Iraqi franchise's media practices. In his July 2005 letter to Zarqawi, Zawahiri first articulated a metaphor that AQC leaders would use repeatedly when instructing the affiliates: "we are in a battle, and...more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media...we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our *ummah*."⁶³⁹ Zawahiri operationalized this concept by chiding Zarqawi for driving away potential supporters through AQI's broadcasts of prisoner beheadings.⁶⁴⁰ A few years later, AQC still was trying to prevent affiliates from undercutting public support through ill-advised media operations. Echoing Zawahiri's original themes, bin Laden ordered in 2010 that a media policy be issued to all the regions in order "to avoid the mistakes that would impact...the reputation of the *mujahidin* and the sympathy of the nation's masses[.]"⁶⁴¹ This policy stressed that Al Qaeda-linked media products should "care for the general taste of the nation's crowds,"⁶⁴² and "focus on the basics and the *Shariah* such as [stopping] violation of the Muslim blood and their honor[.]"⁶⁴³ The same year, hearkening back to ISI dissident Abu Sulayman's allegations that the Iraqi franchise's media operations were rife with egregious misrepresentations, Abu Yahya al-Libi wrote that, in order to serve as a credible vanguard for the Muslim community, all Al Qaeda elements must "elevate our media to the highest levels of truthfulness, trustfulness, [and] manners; we have to excel in production, delivering superior content and format."⁶⁴⁴

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter traced the decade-long interplay between AQC and AQI/ISI/ISIS as an archetype encapsulating the most challenging aspects of organizational management and the thorniest elements of strategic disconnect at work across the Al Qaeda network. AQC's relationship with its Iraqi franchise inspired much of the strategic guidance and

⁶³⁹ al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi," 10; Examples of AQC leaders expressing this concept in future correspondence include bin Laden, "Letter to Nasir al-Wuhayshi," 18; and al-Libi, "Letter of guidance on leadership," 6.

⁶⁴⁰ al-Zawahiri, "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi," 10.

⁶⁴¹ bin Laden, "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah al-Libi 4,'" 8.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁴⁴ al-Libi, "Letter of guidance on leadership," 6.

advice that the central leadership directed towards the network as a whole, and it served as a test bed for methods that AQC used in attempts to guide recalcitrant affiliate leaders, to manage conflict with other militant groups at the franchise level, and to shape public perception through a carefully balanced propaganda approach that sought to conceal dysfunction and weakness within the Al Qaeda organization while protecting the broader network from reputational damage due to an affiliate's strategically divergent and counterproductive actions. Supported by new information contained in recently released Al Qaeda internal documents that illuminates the detailed interactions surrounding the relationship between AQC and its oldest regional affiliate, this case study provides rich, detailed insight into organizational and strategic dynamics that had a significant impact on the entire Al Qaeda organization.

The turbulent relationship between AQC and AQI/ISI/ISIS, the first regional militant group to become an Al Qaeda affiliate, exhibited both the greatest rewards and the greatest risks associated with AQC's franchising strategy. Both organizations initially gained prestige and notoriety through their merger, but fundamental strategic incompatibility and preference divergence doomed the union. This chapter traced the organizational interchange by which AQC, having staked its reputation and its claim to relevance on recruitment of Zarqawi's militant group to join the Al Qaeda network, became captive to the insubordinate and divisive actions of its unruly franchise. Broad condemnation of AQI/ISI/ISIS' excessive violence and sectarian policies threatened AQC's standing within the *ummah*, which forced the central organization into a reactive posture to protect itself. The central leadership urgently sought ways to reign in their affiliate—which suffered from its own internal difficulties at controlling counterproductive actions by subordinate elements—while simultaneously adapting the core's organizational practices and media strategies to blunt criticism and to preserve AQC's credibility as the “vanguard” of the *mujahidin*. AQC leaders would apply many of the lessons learned through their experiences with AQI/ISI/ISIS to their management of the rest of the Al Qaeda affiliate network, and much of the strategic guidance issued by the central leadership over the years had its origins in their attempts to manage their first regional franchise. Ultimately, AQC leaders were unable to bring AQI/ISI/ISIS into compliance with their orders and strategic priorities. Rather than suffer continued

defiance and reputational harm, Zawahiri disavowed the group in February 2014, thus implicitly acknowledging failure and demonstrating the limits of AQC's franchising strategy.

AQC found itself on the sidelines when a U.S.-led coalition deposed Saddam Hussein and occupied Iraq in early 2003. Despite the opportunities for *jihad* presented by a Western invasion into the heart of traditional Muslim lands, AQC was unable to become directly involved, having lost most of its operational capacity and freedom of movement after being driven from its Afghan sanctuary in 2001. Despite prior awareness of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's tendencies toward independence and extremism, AQC leaders gambled that negotiating a merger with Zarqawi's Tawhid w'al Jihad group, already active in the Iraqi insurgency, would give Al Qaeda access to the field of *jihad* in Iraq, allowing it to reestablish itself as the "vanguard" of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. Zarqawi also saw an opportunity to raise his group's profile through union with Al Qaeda, and he and bin Laden announced the formation of Al Qaeda in Iraq in late 2004. Both the parent organization and its new affiliate enjoyed an early publicity boost from the union, but AQC soon began to experience the downside of its franchising strategy. Zarqawi's imperious treatment of other Sunni militant groups and tribes, his insistence on pursuing a bloody vendetta against Shia Muslims, and his fighters' excessive violence—widely publicized in grisly Internet postings—soon drove a wedge in the Sunni insurgency and turned Muslim public opinion against AQI and its AQC sponsors.

AQC senior leaders attempted to intervene with Zarqawi, repeatedly urging him to pursue cooperative relations with Sunni tribes and other militant groups; to suspend his campaign against the Shia; to be more discriminating in his group's violent tactics and media operations; and to pursue a deliberate strategic campaign, operating within AQI's capabilities and cultivating popular support. Zarqawi continued to pursue his own strategic priorities, however, generally ignoring or making hollow gestures of conformity with guidance from AQC leadership. After Zarqawi's death in June 2006, his successors as affiliate *emirs* proved no more responsive to AQC direction, continuing AQI's sectarian actions against the Shia, its antagonistic relations with Sunni tribes and other insurgent groups, and its operations that resulted in high numbers of Muslim civilian

casualties. In October 2006, without consulting or even notifying AQC leadership in advance, AQI declared the establishment of an emirate, refashioning itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and demanding allegiance from all other Sunnis in the country. This bold action, taken against virtually every piece of advice offered by AQC leadership over the preceding years, further alienated the Salafi-jihadist community and the broader public from Al Qaeda and its Iraqi franchise.

On top of AQI/ISI/ISIS leaders' established patterns of non-compliance with the central leadership's advice, indiscipline and preference divergence among AQI/ISI/ISIS' subordinate elements sometimes amplified the disconnect between AQC's strategic guidance and the actions attributed to the affiliate. Even in instances when AQI/ISI/ISIS leadership attempted to reduce friction with other Sunni insurgent groups or to moderate violence towards civilians, reckless tactics or score-settling by lower-level fighters could exacerbate the animus directed towards the group from across Iraqi society (and thereby increase the associated reputational harm to AQC).

Over the course of nearly a decade, AQC leadership tried futilely to exert control over AQI/ISI/ISIS, all the while suffering significant damage to the Al Qaeda brand, as the central leadership was held accountable by both fellow *jihadis* and by the Muslim public for its affiliate's outrages. AQI/ISI/ISIS' divergence from AQC's guidance and strategic priorities forced the parent organization to adapt to its troublesome franchise. Rather than directing and leading AQI/ISI/ISIS as a component of a unified march toward its global strategic concept, AQC more often found itself without the initiative, spending its influence on attempts to dissuade its affiliate from counterproductive activities and altering its own approaches to protect Al Qaeda's credibility and influence.

AQC leaders adjusted their organizational practices in a number of important ways in attempts to mitigate the damage to their strategic objectives and to their standing within the *jihadi* community caused by AQI/ISI/ISIS' divisive policies and unruly operations. First, just over a year into their inaugural foray into a franchising strategy, the AQC leadership found it necessary to bypass their regional affiliate to pursue separate channels for fostering unity among the various factions of Sunni *mujahidin* in Iraq, in the process risking both the security of senior AQC emissaries and the credibility of the Al Qaeda command structure.

Second, AQC adopted a multi-layered, carefully balanced public messaging strategy as a means of dealing with controversy created by AQI/ISI/ISIS actions. On the one hand, belying AQC's determined—but largely unsuccessful—behind-the-scenes efforts to guide its affiliate's course, the central organization provided vigorous public defense of AQI/ISI/ISIS in order to present the image of a strong and unified Al Qaeda movement, moving synchronously towards shared strategic objectives. On the other hand, AQC began to use its media operations to deflect criticism by distancing itself from the types of indiscriminate violence that had tarnished the Al Qaeda reputation—and for which AQI/ISI/ISIS had become famous—making it clear that AQC abhorred violence against Muslim civilians, while avoiding explicit criticism of its own franchise. In response to their experiences with AQI/ISI/ISIS, the central leadership also began to incorporate into their public messages clear guidance for a *mujahidin* code of conduct, hoping to dissuade their followers from continuing to perpetuate the types of indiscriminate attacks that had proved so damaging to the Al Qaeda brand. AQC would extend this finely calibrated, yet often contradictory, messaging approach to its dealings with other Al Qaeda affiliate groups.

Finally, AQC's experiences with its first regional franchise strongly influenced the central leadership's corpus of strategic guidance. AQC leaders first articulated many of their main guidance themes when endeavoring to steer the AQI/ISI/ISIS' strategic direction, and they frequently cited problems stemming from the group's actions as object lessons in their counsel to other franchises. The Iraqi affiliate's frequent deviations from AQC's strategic priorities reinforced to the core leadership the importance of establishing clear policies for the Al Qaeda network, and those policies bear the marks of insight gained from enduring the repercussions of AQI/ISI/ISIS' strategic divergences.

AQC leaders took an opportunistic leap by extending the Al Qaeda franchise to the group that became AQI/ISI/ISIS. It is debatable whether the benefits of the resulting boost to Al Qaeda's image of strength and reach outweighed the organizational and reputational challenges described in this chapter, but AQC's relationship with its first regional affiliate certainly did not proceed as originally envisioned, and the experience had a significant impact on the parent organization's practices and strategy. After a

tumultuous decade of reacting to and attempting to manage AQI/ISI/ISIS' controversial and insubordinate actions, Zawahiri finally determined that it was time for AQC to cut its losses, and he announced ISIS' excommunication from Al Qaeda in February 2014. As ISIS *emir* Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi escalated and expanded his group's operations into Syria, coming into conflict with other *jihadi* organizations and becoming openly defiant of AQC directives, the threat that ISIS posed to AQC's command credibility and moral reputation had become too great. Zawahiri judged that admitting AQC's powerlessness to control its most infamous affiliate was less damaging overall for the parent organization than it was to continue to be associated with ISIS' sectarianism and ultraviolence. AQC's disavowal of its first affiliate ended what could be called the golden age of Al Qaeda franchising, acknowledging as it did the fundamental weaknesses inherent in AQC's attempts to co-opt disparate regional militant groups into a unified, global *jihadi* movement.

Chapter 5: Case Study – Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

5.1 Introduction

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) joined with Al Qaeda in 2006 as its second formal affiliate in what arguably was the most “textbook” example of AQC’s franchising process. AQIM had been a long-standing regional militant group with an established record and independent identity before undergoing a lengthy mutual vetting process with AQC that culminated in affiliation declarations by Zawahiri and AQIM *emir* Drukdal. This case study highlights the advantages and challenges of affiliation for both the regional group and AQC, and it provides strong examples of how reciprocal influences at work in the relationship resulted (or did not result) in changes by both the central organization and the franchise. The recently released Abbottabad documents provide valuable new insight into how AQIM and AQC leaders interacted and how AQC leaders sought to support the North African affiliate in a variety of areas. This thesis’ methodology for comprehensive, objective analysis of the group’s operations provides an important counterpoint to a body of literature that has tended to rely on limited samples or selected examples of high-publicity attacks to characterize AQIM’s overall operational focus.⁶⁴⁵ Finally, this case benefits from the availability of a robust collection of AQIM’s own internal documents that provide a detailed picture of organizational friction within the affiliate group that had a clear impact on the franchise’s ability to adhere to AQC’s strategic guidance.

On the fifth anniversary of Al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks on the United States, Ayman al-Zawahiri announced that the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat

⁶⁴⁵ For example, see Eric Ouellet, Jerome Lacroix-Leclair, and Pierre Pahlavi, “The Institutionalization of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014); Stephen Harmon, “From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group Into an Al-Qa’ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region,” *Concerned Africa Scholars* 85 (2010); Ricardo Rene Laremont, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel,” *African Security* 4, no. 4 (2011); Anneli Botha, “Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism,” *ISS Monograph Series* (June 2008 2008), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.issafrica.org/uploads/MONO144FULL.PDF>. These works generally cite limited instances of AQIM attacks that could be interpreted as targeting foreign interests as evidence of a potential shift by the group towards focusing operations on targeting the “far enemy.”

(*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or GSPC) formally was joining the Al Qaeda organization in the hope that the union would be “a bone in the throats of the Americans and French Crusaders...”⁶⁴⁶ This merger promised to provide needed strategic boosts for both the north African militant group and for AQC. Plagued by dwindling popularity and effective government counterterrorism measures, the GSPC sought to revitalize its image and increase recruitment through affiliation with Al Qaeda and public adoption of its global jihadist agenda. As part of this reimagining, the GSPC took the name AQIM in January 2007, a few months after al-Zawahiri’s welcome message. AQC leaders, struggling to maintain operational relevance after being driven from their Afghan safe haven and forced to focus on survival in the face of US-led manhunts, saw an opportunity to expand their organization’s reach and appearance of potency by co-opting the GSPC’s established networks in Africa and Europe. Al Qaeda’s reputation also had been tarnished by the excesses of its first formal franchise, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and bin Laden may have calculated that acquisition of a new affiliate could help distract from the negative publicity that AQI had brought to the Al Qaeda brand.

AQIM, under the leadership of its *emir*, ‘Abd al-Malik Drukdal, dutifully revamped its propaganda operations to mirror those of AQC by increasing the sophistication and volume of its Internet-based messaging and focusing on vitriol and threats against the “far enemy,” particularly France. Analysis of AQIM’s operations, however, reveals that its self-proclaimed strategic shift towards attacking the “far enemy” was in word only. Aside from several high-profile kidnappings of European citizens, which may have been driven more by profit than by ideology,⁶⁴⁷ AQIM’s post-affiliation military operations were directed almost exclusively against local and regional targets, and AQIM disappointed AQC by failing to conduct even a single attack in Europe. AQIM adopted Al Qaeda’s preferred tactic of suicide bombing, but other AQC attempts to influence the group’s operations had little effect. Operational statistics suggest that AQIM may have responded to AQC leadership’s public admonitions by reducing the

⁶⁴⁶ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Al-Zawahiri Calls on Muslims to Wage 'War of Jihad,' Reject United Nations Resolutions," World News Connection (September 12, 2006), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/5094>. The original audio recording of this message by al-Zawahiri first appeared on *jihadist* websites on September 11, 2006.

⁶⁴⁷ See pp. 226-32.

frequency of its assaults on exclusively civilian targets.⁶⁴⁸ However, the group's attacks on local Muslim security forces, conducted against bin Laden's advice, often resulted in substantial civilian collateral damage and generated significant criticism among Muslim populations.⁶⁴⁹ Much of AQIM's operational capacity was dedicated to criminal endeavors, which further tainted its *jihadi* reputation. As they did with other reckless affiliates, AQC leaders were forced to issue statements in defense of AQIM's unpopular actions, thus risking their own credibility in order to portray an image of organizational unity and legitimacy.⁶⁵⁰

AQIM's failure to match its global jihadist rhetoric with action and to implement AQC's operational guidance could have a number of explanations, ranging from an unwillingness to reprioritize its historical dedication to fighting local regimes, to something as simple as an inability to receive reliable communications containing direction from AQC leaders. However, assessing AQIM activities as if the entire group were acting with unified purpose, in accordance with its own leadership's directives, may result in an incomplete analysis. Internal AQIM documents suggest that the franchise should be viewed as a microcosm of the broader Al Qaeda organization, with Drukdal struggling to exert control over unruly subordinate elements.⁶⁵¹ These documents indicate that Drukdal's guidance to his sub-commanders largely echoed bin Laden's, but that lack of discipline, insubordination, and competing priorities resulted in actions by AQIM's component brigades that undermined the affiliate's public statements and alienated local populations. This insight into an affiliate group's internal struggles suggests that, in order to understand the root causes of dysfunction and lack of strategic coherence across the global Al Qaeda structure, it is necessary to look not only at divergent priorities and communication problems between the core and its affiliates, but also at the broader consequences of organizational friction and indiscipline within the franchises themselves.

Given AQIM's operational track record, it may in fact be that AQC underwent the greater adaptation as a result of its formal affiliation with the North African militant

⁶⁴⁸ See pp. 224-26 and Figure 5f.

⁶⁴⁹ See pp. 234-37.

⁶⁵⁰ See pp. 234-36, also Chapter 3, pp. 127-28.

⁶⁵¹ See pp. 238-46 (section 5.6 of this chapter).

group. AQC's extension of a franchise to the GSPC was attended by a rhetorical shift, in which AQC leaders began incorporating their new franchise's particular concerns into their public statements. Prior to joining with the GSPC, AQC had given scant public attention to Islamist concerns in northern Africa and the Sahel, and the central leadership generally had ignored France, preferring to direct its propaganda and operations against other members of the "far enemy" that it perceived to be greater threats. However, after accepting the GSPC as a member of the Al Qaeda network, AQC statements routinely denounced the "apostate" regimes of northern Africa, along with their French supporters. There also is evidence that AQC developed a new interest in exploring options to conduct operations against France, likely prompted by its relationship with AQIM. Calls for the "liberation" of historically Muslim areas of Spanish territory on both the Moroccan coast and the Iberian Peninsula also became a regular theme of AQC messages. Finally, dire financial straits for the central organization drove AQC leadership to compromise their previously held principles to embrace some of AQIM's proven methods of revenue generation. As traditional, donation-based funding streams dried up and AQC was forced to rely on its affiliates for financial support, bin Laden and other senior leaders were willing to accept the reputational risk of criminal activity for the sake of raising money.

This chapter⁶⁵² begins with a review of the process by which the GSPC formally joined the Al Qaeda organization and eventually became AQIM, examining the strategic considerations that drove AQC and their eventual franchise to undertake this organizational maneuver, as well as the potential benefits and disadvantages the move brought both to the central organization and to the regional group. Next, a survey of GSPC/AQIM media operations illustrates the ways in which the group's public messaging evolved as it assumed Al Qaeda affiliate status, and how it attempted to portray a global jihadist strategic agenda, advertise its operational effectiveness, and burnish its reputation. Then, a thorough analysis of GSPC/AQIM attacks, based on GTD

⁶⁵² Methodology note: Although this case study chapter employs the same methodology and conceptual approach as the AQI/ISI/ISIS case study in Chapter 4, the structures of the two chapters are not identical. While use of identical structures would be desirable to aid in identifying parallels and drawing comparisons between the two cases, the individual characteristics of the cases (differences in available evidence, relative significance of different aspects of their relationships with AQC, etc.) did not make it feasible to structure the chapters in exactly the same way without either losing focus or creating confusion.

data, investigates the extent to which the group's targeting practices and tactics may have been influenced by affiliation with AQC or by specific instances of AQC guidance.

Relying on AQC and AQIM internal documents and correspondence, the next section looks at the interactions between AQIM and its parent organization, AQC's attempts to influence and direct its North African affiliate, and the resulting sources of frustration in the relationship. Additional examination of AQIM internal documents discovered by journalists in Mali reveals the affiliate's inner workings, demonstrating that the group—reflecting organizational challenges across the broader Al Qaeda framework—was plagued by its own problems with command and control, disharmony, and counterproductive actions by subordinate elements. The chapter's final section explores the ways in which AQC evolved after incorporating the GSPC/AQIM into Al Qaeda, and considers the question of which side of the central-affiliate relationship was most strongly influenced by the other.

5.2 The GSPC Merger with Al Qaeda

Road to Al Qaeda Affiliation: GSPC's Break from the GIA

The GSPC originated in 1998, when it broke away from the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamiste Armé*, or GIA). The GIA was formed in 1992, after the Algerian military seized control of the government, negating popular elections in which an Islamist political party, the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, or FIS) won a majority of parliamentary seats. Like many Islamist militant groups of the time, the GIA's leadership and core members were veterans of the anti-Soviet *jihād* in Afghanistan and, consequently, maintained ties with Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden, who provided early financial support to the Algerian militant organization.⁶⁵³ The GIA's leaders also leveraged their Afghan war connections, as well as an extensive North African diaspora, to establish support and recruiting networks throughout Europe, most

⁶⁵³ David H Gray and Erik Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2, no. 4 (2008): 92; William Thornberry and Jaclyn Levy, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2011), 2, accessed July 15, 2016, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110901_Thornberry_AQIM_WEB.pdf.

significantly in France, Spain, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Notably, Abu Musab al-Suri, who later would become one of Al Qaeda's leading theoreticians, helped manage the GIA newsletter, *Al-Ansar*, from London (during the early 1990s, the British capital was sometimes referred to as "Londonistan" because of the high concentration of Islamist militants who operated there quite openly).⁶⁵⁴

While the GIA's founding purpose was to combat the Algerian military government, it quickly expanded its operations to target broad swaths of Algerian society, raising funds through extortion and aggressively applying the concept of *takfir* (declaring other Muslims to be apostates) to justify targeting anyone who did not support the group.⁶⁵⁵ The GIA's frequent attacks on civilians and excessive invocation of *takfir* alienated it from many of its Algerian and international supporters. In a foreshadowing of future problems that Al Qaeda would have with unruly affiliates, by 1997 bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Suri had disassociated themselves from the GIA to avoid being tarnished by its extreme and unpopular operations.⁶⁵⁶

Recognizing that popular rejection of the GIA and its methods had stalled Islamist resistance to the Algerian government, Hassan Hattab, a GIA lieutenant, broke away from the group with about 700 followers, establishing the GSPC in September 1998. Hattab publicly repudiated the GIA's attacks against civilians and pledged to limit his new organization's operations to fighting against the regime and its security forces.⁶⁵⁷ Bin Laden may have been directly involved in encouraging Hattab to take this step,⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁴ Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 217-18; Anthony N. Celso, "Al Qaeda in the Maghreb: The 'Newest' Front in the War on Terror," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2008): 84.

⁶⁵⁵ Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group Into an Al-Qa 'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," 14; Gray and Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," 92.

⁶⁵⁶ Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 219-20; Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group Into an Al-Qa 'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," 14; Gray and Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," 92.

⁶⁵⁷ Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," 39; Lianne Kennedy Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad* (Combating Terrorism Center, 2007), 2, accessed July 17, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-gspc-newest-franchise-in-al-qaidas-global-jihad>.

⁶⁵⁸ Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," 39; Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 2.

and Hattab apparently was influenced by al-Zawahiri's previous pronouncements that the concept of *takfir* should not be applied to entire Muslim societies, but only to apostate governments.⁶⁵⁹

Whatever role Al Qaeda Central (AQC) leaders may have played in prompting the GSPC's separation from the GIA, Hattab remained focused on domestic insurgency in Algeria, neither swearing allegiance to Al Qaeda nor adopting an international jihadist agenda. Hattab was perceived by some within the GSPC as being overly passive, however, and his leadership soon was challenged by two of his more aggressive and "internationalist" subordinates, Nabil Sahrawi (a.k.a. Abu Ibrahim Mustafa) and 'Abd al-Malik Drukdal (a.k.a. Abu Musab 'Abd al-Wadud).⁶⁶⁰ Bolstered by increasing support from other GSPC members following the United States' invasion of Iraq in March 2003, these two men finally forced Hattab to step aside in August 2003, with Sahrawi replacing him as *emir* of GSPC.⁶⁶¹

Leadership Changes and Dwindling Support Push the GSPC Towards Al Qaeda

Upon seizing command of the GSPC, Sahrawi sought to more closely align the GSPC with Al Qaeda. He announced an oath of allegiance to Osama bin Laden on September 11, 2003, and continued to issue statements of solidarity with Al Qaeda until his death in a battle with Algerian security forces in June 2004.⁶⁶² Sahrawi's commitment to joining Al Qaeda's fight against the "far enemy" came with reservations, however. He prioritized *jihad* against "apostates" (i.e. local regimes) over *jihad* against "infidels" (i.e. the West and Israel), and he stipulated that he would support operations

⁶⁵⁹ Pham, "Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 243.

⁶⁶⁰ Gray and Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," 93.

⁶⁶¹ Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 220-21; Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group Into an Al-Qa 'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," 15.

⁶⁶² Gray and Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," 93; Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," 64.

outside of Algeria only if the GSPC was not overly committed at home.⁶⁶³ ‘Abd al-Malik Drukdal, an internationalist-leaning militant who succeeded Sahrawi as the GSPC’s leader, attempted to move the GSPC closer toward AQC’s vision of global *jihad*, actively courting formal affiliation with Al Qaeda.⁶⁶⁴

Aside from any ideological affinity that Drukdal had with bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, there were ample pragmatic reasons for the GSPC to seek affiliation with AQC. By 2003, the GSPC’s fortunes clearly were failing. The Algerian government, aided by the US, effectively had neutralized the threat that the GSPC and other Islamist militant groups posed to the regime’s existence.⁶⁶⁵ Suffering from lingering resentment of the GIA’s bloody activities, as well as the consequences of civilian casualties caused by some of its own operations, popular support and recruitment for the GSPC was low.⁶⁶⁶ Finally, a series of amnesty programs implemented by the Algerian authorities threatened to undermine what remained of the GSPC’s membership by coaxing militants to renounce violence.⁶⁶⁷ Even GSPC founder Hassan Hattab embraced the government’s reconciliation initiatives after he was ousted from the group’s leadership, calling in 2005 for members of the GSPC to lay down their arms.⁶⁶⁸ Merger with AQC promised to reverse the GSPC’s downward trajectory by providing a distraction from its operational shortcomings, as well as by boosting recruitment through “brand” recognition and the growing support for international *jihad* prompted by the US-led war in Iraq.⁶⁶⁹ Additionally, Drukdal may have seen formal affiliation with AQC as a way of shoring up

⁶⁶³ Daniel Lav, *The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolving Terrorist Presence in North Africa* (Middle East Media Research Institute, 2007), accessed March 12, 2016, <http://memri.org/bin/latestnews.cgi?ID=IA33207>.

⁶⁶⁴ Steinberg and Werenfels, "Between the 'Near' and the 'Far' Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 409; Lav, *The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolving Terrorist Presence in North Africa*.

⁶⁶⁵ Celso, "Al Qaeda in the Maghreb: The 'Newest' Front in the War on Terror," 93.

⁶⁶⁶ Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 2.

⁶⁶⁷ Andrew McGregor, "GSPC Leader Issues New Threat to U.S. Military Bases in North Africa," *Terrorism Focus* (May 17, 2006 2006), accessed July 15, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=770&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=239&no_cache=1#.V4nPpkuBVg0.

⁶⁶⁸ Lav, *The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolving Terrorist Presence in North Africa*.

⁶⁶⁹ Pham, "Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 245; Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 2, 6.

the security of his own position through the prestige of personal association with AQC leadership and by demonstrating that he successfully could advance the organization.⁶⁷⁰

Al Qaeda Central's Reluctance to Accept the Merger

Realization of Drukdal's aspiration to formally affiliate the GSPC with Al Qaeda was not automatic, however; AQC leaders initially were hesitant to accept Drukdal's bid for a merger. Despite AQC's practice of maintaining informal relationships with Salafist organizations around the globe, bin Laden historically was reluctant to officially incorporate regional militant groups into Al Qaeda for fear of diluting the organization's focus on the "far enemy" and hitching its reputation to the actions of groups over which AQC leadership might not have full control.⁶⁷¹ Based on the GSPC's operational history, as well as on the statements made by previous leaders Hattab and Sahrawi, bin Laden had doubts that the GSPC would be able to shift its focus sufficiently from fighting the "near enemy" to attacking the "far enemy" to bring it in line with AQC's priorities.⁶⁷² This concern was exacerbated by an incident in 2002, in which AQC leadership sent an emissary, Yemeni operative Emad 'Abd al-Wahid Ahmed Alwan, to Algeria to persuade the GSPC to globalize its operations, only to see his entreaties rebuffed by Hattab.⁶⁷³ Additionally, bin Laden may have been concerned about exposing Al Qaeda to criticism through association with some of the GSPC's unpopular attacks and methods. By 2005, AQC already was experiencing blowback as a result of controversial tactics employed by its first formal affiliate, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), such as video-taped beheadings and frequent bombings in markets and mosques that resulted in high numbers of Muslim civilian deaths.⁶⁷⁴ Despite GSPC leaders' declared goal of distancing the group from the indiscriminate violence that had caused the GIA to lose popular support, the GSPC had been linked to a number of attacks that broad segments of the North African population found objectionable, in particular the 2005 killing of Mauritanian soldiers as they were

⁶⁷⁰ Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 6.

⁶⁷¹ Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 222.

⁶⁷² Gray and Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," 94; Pham, "Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 244-45.

⁶⁷³ Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," 64.

⁶⁷⁴ See Chapter 4, pp. 137-38, 151-55.

completing morning prayers.⁶⁷⁵ Bin Laden, who typically had discouraged his fellow militants from engaging in many types of criminal activity unless absolutely necessary, may also have been leery of the GSPC's practice of financing itself largely through smuggling (in particular, the smuggling of drugs) and kidnapping for ransom.⁶⁷⁶ From a standpoint of operational practicality, AQC also questioned whether the GSPC would be able to contribute adequately to the global *jihad*, considering the toll taken by government crackdowns and amnesty programs, as well as suspicions that Algerian security services had infiltrated what remained of the GSPC's membership.⁶⁷⁷

The GSPC Addresses AQC Concerns About Formal Affiliation

Under Drukdal's leadership, the GSPC took a number of steps to address these concerns and overcome AQC leadership's reluctance to embrace official affiliation with the North African militant group. Perhaps the most impactful of these was the GSPC's deliberate effort to associate itself with and contribute to AQI's operations in Iraq. Shortly after assuming control of GSPC in 2004, Drukdal made contact with AQI's founder and leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Drukdal praised al-Zarqawi's efforts, exhorting him to target French personnel in Iraq, and the GSPC issued a number of public statements expressing solidarity with AQI, including a congratulatory message when the group executed two captured Algerian diplomats in Baghdad.⁶⁷⁸ In response to Drukdal's outreach, al-Zarqawi began mentioning him in public statements praising Al Qaeda leaders in January 2005, and he is believed to have assisted in establishing direct contact between Drukdal and Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁶⁷⁹ The GSPC also undertook to become a major facilitator of foreign fighter flow into Iraq. Its website and newsletter encouraged

⁶⁷⁵ Camille Tawil, "The Other Face of Al-Qaeda," *Al-Hayat* (2010): 43, accessed October 2010, <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-other-face-of-al-qaeda.pdf>.

⁶⁷⁶ Thornberry and Levy, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, 6.

⁶⁷⁷ Pham, "Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 244; McGregor, "GSPC Leader Issues New Threat to U.S. Military Bases in North Africa."

⁶⁷⁸ Gray and Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," 94.

⁶⁷⁹ Souad Mekhennet et al., "A Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008, 2008, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01algeria.html>.

North Africans to join the *jihad* in Iraq, and the GSPC recruited militants from across the region to attend training camps that it established in Algeria, before enabling their infiltration into Iraq.⁶⁸⁰ This pipeline for sending North African fighters into Iraq was so successful that, by 2006, 20 percent of suicide bombers in Iraq were Algerian, with another five percent coming from Morocco or Tunisia.⁶⁸¹

In addition to making common cause with al-Zarqawi and assisting in funneling fighters to join AQI in Iraq, Drukdal's organization made numerous other public gestures intended to assuage AQC leadership's fears that the GSPC would be a liability or an unreliable partner in the global *jihad*. Mirroring AQC's emphasis on using propaganda as a tool of *jihad*, the GSPC dramatically increased the number of statements it released in 2004 and 2005.⁶⁸² In the years leading up to AQC's acceptance of formal merger, the GSPC's primary messaging themes included efforts to distance itself from the violent excesses of the GIA and to portray the group as having an increasingly international focus, particularly in its dedication to attacking France in retaliation for French support to the Algerian regime.⁶⁸³ It also is no surprise that GSPC proclamations of admiration and loyalty towards Osama bin Laden peaked during the lead-up to merger.⁶⁸⁴ While the Algerian regime's amnesty programs may have cut into the GSPC's numbers by luring away more moderate members, Drukdal and the GSPC leadership council sought to counter the perception that the organization was losing its commitment to jihad by explicitly rejecting the government's offer of reconciliation and pledging to eliminate any supporters of it from the organization.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸⁰ Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 7; Gray and Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," 94.

⁶⁸¹ Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," 545.

⁶⁸² Manuel R Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," *Mediterranean Politics* 16, no. 2 (2011): 282.

⁶⁸³ Laremont, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel," 244; Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," 283; Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 2-3.

⁶⁸⁴ Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," 290.

⁶⁸⁵ Lav, *The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolving Terrorist Presence in North Africa*.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Established

Finally, in late August 2006, the GSPC released a statement declaring that, “after ongoing effort and contacts that lasted close to a year,” the organization was officially joining Al Qaeda.⁶⁸⁶ Shortly thereafter, as part of a message celebrating the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, al-Zawahiri acknowledged the merger: “Our *emir*, *mujahid* Shaykh and lion of Islam Osama bin Laden, may God protect him, has instructed me to give the good news to Muslims in general, and my brothers the *mujahidin* everywhere, that the Salafi Group for Call and Combat has joined Al Qaeda of Jihad Organization...praise is due to God for this blessed alliance, which we ask God that it will be a bone in the throats of the Americans and French Crusaders and their allies...”⁶⁸⁷ GSPC reinforced its formal affiliation with Al Qaeda in January 2007, when it announced that it was changing its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) “as an indication of the group’s vibrancy, the strength of its coalition [with bin Laden], and the sincerity of the link between the *mujahidin* in Algeria and other brothers from the Al Qaeda organization.”⁶⁸⁸

Although bin Laden and al-Zawahiri took a cautious approach toward approving the GSPC’s formal affiliation with Al Qaeda, once they had been satisfied by the lengthy vetting process and Drukdal’s extensive lobbying efforts, AQC’s senior leaders welcomed the merger with the expectation of reaping significant benefits. First, extending the Al Qaeda franchise to the Islamic Maghreb enabled the central organization to maintain the appearance of reach and influence within the global Islamist community. AQC’s operational capacity effectively had been neutralized by US-led counterterrorism operations following the 9/11 attacks, and its popularity and legitimacy within the Muslim world was under fire due to the bloody, sectarian operations of its first formal affiliate, AQI. Assimilation of the GSPC gave AQC a chance to demonstrate that it remained a vanguard of the Islamist movement, capable of attracting adherents and

⁶⁸⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁷ al-Zawahiri, "Al-Zawahiri Calls on Muslims to Wage 'War of Jihad,' Reject United Nations Resolutions."

⁶⁸⁸ Quoted in Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," 279.

extending its reach in the global *jihad*, despite being under duress.⁶⁸⁹ Second, AQC hoped to benefit from access to the European support and operational networks that the GSPC had inherited from the GIA. The GIA had successfully conducted a number of attacks on the European continent during the mid-1990s, and AQC hoped that the GSPC, with its stated commitment to fighting the “far enemy,” would be able to leverage those residual networks to raise funds and to revitalize the Al Qaeda threat to Western homelands.⁶⁹⁰

Formal affiliation with Al Qaeda gave the GSPC a needed boost, heightening its public profile and reenergizing recruitment. In the words of the GSPC’s media director at the time: “Faced with the national reconciliation process in Algeria, we’d had no choice but to stop fighting. But with the merger, we gained new authority in people’s eyes: it allowed us to project an image of ourselves as a new group.”⁶⁹¹

The merger was not free of complications for the GSPC, however. The flip side of the increased publicity and notoriety that resulted from affiliation with Al Qaeda was that the GSPC invited greater international scrutiny and pressure from counterterrorism operations.⁶⁹² Additionally, with the adoption of some Al Qaeda-style tactics (most notably suicide bombing), the GSPC was forced to expend additional propaganda energy to justify itself to domestic populations, and it exposed itself to some of the same criticisms from within the Muslim community that had been plaguing AQC and AQI.⁶⁹³ Finally, despite Drukdal’s success in pursuing integration with Al Qaeda, there was significant opposition to the move within portions of the GSPC membership, particularly

⁶⁸⁹ Tawil, "The Other Face of Al-Qaeda," 40-41; Pham, "Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 245; Celso, "Al Qaeda in the Maghreb: The 'Newest' Front in the War on Terror," 81.

⁶⁹⁰ Emily Hunt, *Islamist Terrorism in Northwestern Africa: A 'Thorn in the Neck' of the United States?* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2007), 8, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus65.pdf>; Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," 542; Celso, "Al Qaeda in the Maghreb: The 'Newest' Front in the War on Terror," 84-87; Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb: A Case Study in the Opportunism of Global Jihad," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 4 (April 2010): 14-15, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/april-2010>.

⁶⁹¹ Quoted in Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi Books, 2010), 195.

⁶⁹² Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 6.

⁶⁹³ Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," 287; Tawil, "The Other Face of Al-Qaeda," 41-43.

among older veterans of the Algerian Islamist resistance of the 1990s. Some influential members of the organization believed that allegiance to Al Qaeda and its global agenda would take focus away from the GSPC's founding purpose of overthrowing the Bouteflika regime in Algeria. Although increasing ties with AQC probably helped Drukdal solidify his status as *emir* in the near-term, challenges to his leadership remained.⁶⁹⁴ These points of friction resulting from the GSPC's affiliation with AQC would have important implications for the nature of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's future participation as a member of Al Qaeda's global movement.

5.3 The GSPC's and AQIM's Rhetorical Evolution

As mentioned in the previous section, the GSPC's deliberate effort to bring its public messaging into line with AQC's priorities, both by expressing solidarity with the Al Qaeda movement and its leadership and by articulating an internationalist jihad agenda, was a critical element in the North African organization's successful bid for formal affiliation with AQC. In the years after the GSPC merged with Al Qaeda and became known as AQIM, propaganda remained a primary tool for the group to depict itself as a potent member of the global Salafi-jihadist community with close ties to AQC leadership, to explain and justify unpopular actions to local Muslim audiences, and to obscure operational shortcomings.

Compared to many Islamist militant organizations, the GSPC was late to embrace the strategic importance of propaganda as a supplement to military activity.⁶⁹⁵ Under the leadership of founder Hassan Hattab, the GSPC issued very few public statements, a tendency that largely continued under Hattab's successor, Nabil Sahrawi, aside from some early expressions of affinity with bin Laden.⁶⁹⁶ Once the more globally-minded

⁶⁹⁴ Alex S Wilner, "Opportunity Costs or Costly Opportunities? The Arab Spring, Osama Bin Laden, and Al-Qaeda's African Affiliates," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5, no. 3-4 (2011): 52; Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," 543; Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 8; Steinberg and Werenfels, "Between the 'Near' and the 'Far' Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 412.

⁶⁹⁵ Manuel R Torres Soriano, "The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 1 (2010): 73.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 75-77; Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," 64.

Drukdal assumed his position as the GSPC *emir* in June 2004, however, the group's use of media expanded rapidly.⁶⁹⁷ The GSPC introduced its first official website, *jihad-algeria.net*, in October 2004, and in 2005 it issued 37 official communiqués, compared to 14 in 2004 and only two in 2003.⁶⁹⁸ Senior AQIM members echoed statements by AQC leaders emphasizing the significance of media operations to the Salafi-jihadist agenda: "the media wing is critical to re-acquainting the Islamic nation with *jihad*, showing them its objective, breaking the siege and media blockage around it, and refuting the falsehoods promoted by the infidels and apostates who are launching aggressive assaults on our *jihad*."⁶⁹⁹

The quality of the GSPC's production and web hosting did not keep pace initially with this jump in propaganda volume, however, and, up until the merger with AQC, the organization primarily issued primitive written statements and struggled to maintain an active website in the face of frequent hacking by security forces and online vigilantes.⁷⁰⁰ The GSPC's increasing prominence as it was pursuing affiliation with Al Qaeda helped it to attract outside technical assistance, however, and, once the merger was complete, the new AQIM was able to benefit from the expertise of Al Qaeda's *As-Sahab* media experts and the network of jihadist web forums that distributed AQ-linked material more effectively, staying ahead of government cyber countermeasures.⁷⁰¹ As AQIM improved the quality, multi-media diversity, and reliability of its public messaging, it also incorporated proven methods from other Al Qaeda affiliates, such as borrowing publishing formats from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and AQI and

⁶⁹⁷ Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," 282.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid.; Torres Soriano, "The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 77.

⁶⁹⁹ Abu Umar 'Abd al-Birr, Chairman of the GSPC Media Wing, quoted in Hanna Rogan, *Al-Qaeda's Online Media Strategies: From Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007* (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), 2007), 88, accessed July 15, 2016, https://archive.org/stream/AQOMS/AlQuedaMediaStrategy_djvu.txt.

⁷⁰⁰ Torres Soriano, "The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 77-80.

⁷⁰¹ Mathieu Guidere, "Algeria's Al-Qaida Franchise," (November 20, 2006 2006), accessed March 6, 2016, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=18380>; Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, 8; Torres Soriano, "The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 83.

adopting AQI's technique of filming attacks for use in propaganda releases.⁷⁰² This emulation of other affiliates included mimicking AQI's grisly practice of disseminating videos of its enemies being beheaded.⁷⁰³ AQIM's program to improve the effectiveness of its media operations also included more novel approaches: according to an AQIM operative detained by Mauritanian authorities in 2009, the group's media committee had concluded that the "optimum way to propagate the recruitment campaign was to post it in one of the porn websites on the Internet."⁷⁰⁴

Most critical to AQIM media activities, as a continuing demonstration of its resolve to join with its Al Qaeda compatriots in the global jihad, were public statements that emphasized an international agenda and placed Western interests at the top of the organization's target list. Prior to the period surrounding merger with Al Qaeda, the overwhelming majority of public statements focused on Algeria, with lesser treatment of prominent Islamist battlefields such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Chechnya.⁷⁰⁵ After the GSPC integrated with Al Qaeda in September 2006, however, a significantly higher proportion of the group's statements became dedicated to denouncing Western countries and Israel, along with increased criticism of governing regimes in other African countries.⁷⁰⁶

Under Drukdal, AQIM reframed the historical grievance of the GSPC and its predecessors against the Algerian regime to place greater emphasis on the culpability of the regime's Western supporters. In the months before the GSPC's merger with Al

⁷⁰² Andrew Black, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's Burgeoning Media Apparatus," *Terrorism Focus* 4, 14 (May 15, 2007 2007), accessed March 6, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4158#.Vt0alEuBVg0; Guidere, "Algeria's Al-Qaida Franchise."; Torres Soriano, "The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 79.

⁷⁰³ Hunt, *Islamist Terrorism in Northwestern Africa: A 'Thorn in the Neck' of the United States?*, 5.

⁷⁰⁴ "Al Qaeda Resorts to Porn Sites to Recruit Young Operatives," *CBS News* (April 14, 2009 2009), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/al-qaeda-resorts-to-porn-sites-to-recruit-young-operatives/>.

⁷⁰⁵ Andrew Black, "AQIM's Expanding Internationalist Agenda," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 5 (April 2008): 12-13, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/volume-1-issue-5>; Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," 283.

⁷⁰⁶ Black, "AQIM's Expanding Internationalist Agenda," 13; Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," 284.

Qaeda was formalized, Drukdal declared the Bouteflika regime to be “America’s slaves and one of Bush’s dogs,”⁷⁰⁷ and he made it clear that “France is our first enemy...Our fight against the apostates will not divert us from France and its shrewdness and evil intentions.”⁷⁰⁸ In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2008, Drukdal explained that “[AQIM] seeks to liberate the Islamic Maghreb from the sons of France and Spain and from all symbols of treason and employment for the outsiders, and protect it from the foreign greed and the crusader’s hegemony.”⁷⁰⁹

In addition to insisting upon the West’s responsibility for the sins of the Algerian and other African regimes, post-merger AQIM also began making statements indicating an expanded ambition that reached as far as European territory. AQIM communiqués regularly threaten Spain for its continued occupation of the North African coastal territories of Ceuta and Melilla, and, harkening back to the era of Moorish conquest during the Middle Ages, AQIM propaganda boasts of the group’s designs to re-take the once Muslim-controlled region of Andalusia, on the Spanish mainland.⁷¹⁰ AQIM even went so far as to name its official media outlet *Al-Andalus*.⁷¹¹

Wide-ranging and ambitious threats have been a staple of AQIM media products. Drukdal has sworn to “avenge for the honors of our sisters and daughters on France and its interests in every way we can, in every place we can, and at every time we can,⁷¹² and he warned that “[e]veryone must know that we will not hesitate in targeting [the United States] whenever we can and wherever it is on this planet.”⁷¹³ During the Libyan uprising against Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Drukdal declared that AQIM would “set

⁷⁰⁷ ‘Abd al-Malik Drukdal, "GSPC Statement," (January 1 2006), www.qmaghreb.org.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁹ "An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdal," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008, 2008, accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html>.

⁷¹⁰ Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 224; "Interview: Sheikh Abu 'Abd al-Ilah Ahmed AQIM," *Al-Andalus Media Productions* (May 3, 2009 2009), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=588>; Abu 'Abd al-Ilah Ahmed, "The Islamic Maghreb Between the Arms of the Mujahidin and the Claws of the Crusaders," *Al-Moshtaqun Illa Al-Jannah Magazine*, 5 (February 2010), accessed March 31, 2016, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/article.php?storyid=2092>.

⁷¹¹ Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," 290.

⁷¹² 'Abd al-Malik Drukdal, "France... The Mother of Evils," (June 28, 2009), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=829>.

⁷¹³ "An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdal."

[NATO] armies alight if they set foot in Libya,”⁷¹⁴ and he released a statement assuring that the group would take revenge on Israel for the “genocide and butchery” of Palestinians in Gaza.⁷¹⁵ AQIM’s threats at times have broadened to include atypical adversaries or farther-afield targets. In 2009, the group said that it would target Chinese workers and interests in North Africa in retaliation for the deaths of Chinese Uighur Muslims.⁷¹⁶ In 2010, *Al-Andalus* released a dramatic threat against the World Cup soccer tournament in South Africa: “How amazing could the match United States vs. Britain be when broadcasted live on air at a stadium packed with spectators when the sound of an explosion rumbles through the stands, the whole stadium is turned upside down, and the number of dead bodies are in their dozens and hundreds, Allah willing.”⁷¹⁷

Fantastic threats such as the ones described above received the most international publicity and prompted worldwide concern about the global threat posed by AQIM, but the organization also dedicated significant propaganda bandwidth to threats against North African and Sahelian “apostate regimes,” broadening its historical focus on Algeria to include most other countries in the region. Morocco was decried as the “Kingdom of Corruption and Despotism,”⁷¹⁸ AQIM pledged to assassinate the President of Mauritania,⁷¹⁹ and governments across the Sahel were warned that they would become targets if they cooperated with the Algerian or Western governments in counterterrorism activities.⁷²⁰ The group offered to train Islamic militants (such as Boko Haram) in

⁷¹⁴ “Libya: Al-Qaeda Urges Rebels to Establish Islamist Rule,” AKI News (October 4, 2011), accessed March 31, 2016, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=2011>.

⁷¹⁵ “E-Jihadis Urge Bin Laden to Strike in Tel Aviv and AQIM Vows Vengeance,” *CBS News* (January 6, 2009), accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/e-jihadis-urge-bin-laden-to-strike-in-tel-aviv-and-aqim-vows-vengeance/>.

⁷¹⁶ Tania Branigan, “Al-Qaida Threatens to Target Chinese Over Muslim Deaths in Urumqi,” *The Guardian*, July 14, 2009, 2009, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/14/al-qaida-threat-china-urumqi>.

⁷¹⁷ Quoted in Khaled Wassef, “Qaeda Group Threatens to Attack World Cup,” *CBS News* (April 7, 2010), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/qaeda-group-threatens-to-attack-world-cup/>.

⁷¹⁸ Dario Cristiani, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Attacks Morocco’s ‘Kingdom of Corruption and Despotism,’” *Terrorism Monitor* 11, no. 23 (December 13, 2013): 5, accessed July 15, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_011_Issue23_02.pdf.

⁷¹⁹ “Qaeda Offshoot Threatens to Kill Mauritania Leader,” *Middle East Online* (February 7, 2011), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=1718>.

⁷²⁰ Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Salafi-Jihadis in Mauritania at the Center of al-Qaeda’s Strategy,” *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 12 (March 26, 2010): 5, accessed July 15, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_PDF_02.pdf.

Nigeria,⁷²¹ and it represented itself as the defender of all of Africa's multi-ethnic, oppressed populations, promising "the liberation from all of the slaveries except from the slavery of Allah alone...and the liberation from all pre-Islamic belonging based on the racism, or the swamp of the hateful patriotism that threw us to the infidel colonist...melting into the one nation concept as Allah ordered."⁷²²

An important feature of AQIM's post-merger media operations was a determined effort to reinforce publicly the organization's loyalty to, and close connection with, Al Qaeda Central. This often took the form of straightforward declarations of fealty to Al Qaeda leaders and their guidance. In a 2007 video release entitled "We Are Coming," Drukdal addressed bin Laden: "I wanted...to set your mind at rest on the state of your men and soldiers...we are anxiously waiting for your guidance and your recommendations for the next phase...take any of us as long as we live, unite whoever you want and isolate whoever you want, and throw us wherever you want, God willing, you will only find obedience, dear *emir*."⁷²³ In his 2008 interview with the New York Times, Drukdal emphasized that "[w]e care about staying in contact with our brothers in Afghanistan or Iraq or any other *jihad* side...[w]e and Al Qaeda are one body...our general goals are the same goals of Al Qaeda the mother."⁷²⁴ Following bin Laden's death at the hands of the US military in May 2011, AQIM clearly communicated that it was undeterred in its allegiance to AQC. In multiple media releases following bin Laden's demise, the group's leaders assured the Salafi-jihadist community that "we are

⁷²¹ 'Abd a'Abd al-Malik Drukdal, "Genocide of the Muslims in Nigeria New Episode of the Continuous Crusade," (February 5, 2010 2010), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=1252>.

⁷²² "Boshra to Our Delivered Nation: The Code of Delivered Africa," Al-Andalus Media Productions (May 2, 2013), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=2210>.

⁷²³ 'Abd al-Malik Drukdal, "We Are Coming," GSPC Media Communications Committee (January 8, 2007), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/site-institute-1-8-07-gspc-emir-wadud-video-speech-we-are-coming.html>.

⁷²⁴ "An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdal." New York Times, July 1, 2008.

moving steadfastly on [bin Laden's] path,"⁷²⁵ and they announced their allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri as bin Laden's successor.⁷²⁶

Another of AQIM's techniques for demonstrating a united front with AQC was to echo the parent organization's own public statements. For example, one day after bin Laden released a statement condemning the 2009 Israeli offensive in Gaza, Drukdal issued an audio message entitled "Gaza: Between the Hammer of Jews and Crusaders and the Anvil of Apostates," in which he denounced the "crimes of bombardment and extermination to which your brothers and kinfolk in the Gaza Strip are being subjected," and declared that "we are coming with God's help to smash the barriers of treason which stand between us and you."⁷²⁷ Two months after AQIM fighters in Niger took hostage five French mining company employees in 2010, Drukdal reprised demands that bin Laden had made towards the French government a few weeks earlier: "should you wish for your captured citizens to be safe, then you must hasten to withdraw your soldiers from Afghanistan, in accordance with a specific timetable that you formally declare."⁷²⁸ In this case, Drukdal went farther with his assertion of AQIM's full integration with AQC, stipulating that "all future negotiations involving this case can only be carried out by our Shaykh Osama bin Laden, may Allah protect him, in accordance with his conditions."⁷²⁹ Further advancing the narrative of shared concerns with AQC, AQIM published a

⁷²⁵ "Condolences and Congratulations to the Ummah for Its Loss of Our Sheikh Usama bin Laden," Al-Andalus Media Productions (May 7, 2011), accessed July 16, 2016, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghrab-e28094-e2809csolace-and-congratulation-for-the-ummah-on-its-loss-of-our-shaykh-usc481mah-bin-lc481dene2809d-en.pdf.

⁷²⁶ Abu 'Ubayda Yousef Al-'Annabi, "AQIM Swears Allegiance To New Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri," Al-Andalus Media Productions (July 8, 2011), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.memrijtm.org/aqim-swears-allegiance-to-new-al-qaeda-leader-ayman-al-zawahiri.html>.

⁷²⁷ 'Abd al-Malik Drukdal, "Gaza: Between the Hammer of Jews and Crusaders and the Anvil of Apostates," (January 16, 2009): 3, accessed July 16, 2016, <http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10066/4620/AQM20090115.pdf?sequence=5>; "AQIM Chief Urges Attacks On U.S., Israeli Interests In North Africa," CBS News (January 16, 2009), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/aqim-chief-urges-attacks-on-us-israeli-interests-in-north-africa/>.

⁷²⁸ 'Abd al-Malik Drukdal, "The Demands of the Mujahideen for the Release of the French Hostages," (November 18, 2010), accessed March 6, 2016, <http://www.azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/abc5ab-mue1b9a3ab-abd-al-wadc5abd-any-negotiations-for-french-hostages-must-be-conducted-with-bin-lc481den-himself.pdf>.

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

statement in 2010 directed towards the Iranian regime, insisting that it release the members of bin Laden's family that it had held under house arrest since they had fled Afghanistan in 2001.⁷³⁰ In response to a query about AQIM's coordination with Islamist Arab Spring political movements during a 2013 "virtual town hall" question and answer session, an organization spokesman referred back to statements by Ayman al Zawahiri: "The message of our shaykh...is clear...we cooperate in liberation of the Muslim lands and implementation of the *Shariah*, and retrieving sovereignty on our resources, and achieving justice over the land."⁷³¹

Sensitive to charges that the GSPC's merger with Al Qaeda was in name only, and that AQIM in truth remained a local organization, acting independently of the broader Al Qaeda movement, AQIM took pains in its media releases to dispel such perceptions. In a 2009 *Al-Andalus* interview, Sheik Abu 'Abd al-Ilah Ahmed, president of the AQIM Political Committee, dismissed these allegations as "bullshit denied by reality and logic," arguing that "an honest observer of the Jihadist journey since the GSPC accession [to Al Qaeda]...sees without a doubt a substantial change [in strategy]."⁷³² Abu 'Abd al-Ilah went on to dispute suggestions that AQIM was at odds with AQC senior leadership: "we challenge those who claim that [bin Laden] is not satisfied with our policy to report a single word that proves the truth of their claims."⁷³³ In other *Al-Andalus* releases, AQIM leadership asserted that it "certainly" was in contact with Ayman al-Zawahiri, that it "aspire[d] to achieve [contact]...with all the branches of Qaedat Al-Jihad in the world," and that its activities were "in line with the policy of our respected Emirate in Afghanistan."⁷³⁴

⁷³⁰ "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to the Rulers of Iran: Release the People of Sheikh," *Al-Andalus Media Productions* (March 17, 2010), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=1307>.

⁷³¹ "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Online Forum, 15 April 2013," *Al-Andalus Media Productions* (April 15, 2013: 18, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://worldanalysis.net>).

⁷³² "Interview: Sheikh Abu 'Abd al-Ilah Ahmed AQIM."

⁷³³ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁴ "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Online Forum, 15 April 2013," 1, 5, 8.

5.4 GSPC and AQIM Operational Patterns

5.4.1 Targeting and Attack Methods

After its merger with Al Qaeda in 2006, AQIM put considerable effort into marketing itself as an Al Qaeda affiliate that had adopted fully the priorities and strategy expressed by bin Laden and other AQC leaders. A comprehensive review of AQIM's operations, however, reveals that the organization's actions did not match its rhetoric. Despite AQIM's claims that it was prioritizing operations against the Western backers of the "apostate regimes" in north Africa and the Sahel, post-merger attacks against Western targets remained a tiny percentage of the militant group's overall activities (see Figure 5b), and AQIM has yet to mount a successful attack in Europe (see Figure 5c). AQIM did broaden the scope of the pre-merger GSPC's regional operations to include attacks in a greater number of North African and Sahelian countries, but the group continued to direct the overwhelming majority of its operations against Algerian targets.

While AQIM largely failed to deliver on its promises to shift targeting priority to the "far enemy," it did embrace some tactical methods that may reflect AQC's influence, most notably a significant increase in its use of explosives and suicide bombings. AQIM also expanded the GSPC's practice of kidnapping. The group made limited attempts to use hostages as leverage to gain political or military concessions, but kidnapping-for-ransom more frequently joined contraband smuggling as one of AQIM's primary sources of revenue. Finally, although most AQIM operations did not synch with the group's rhetoric or with AQC's priorities, there is some statistical evidence that AQIM was at least somewhat responsive to bin Laden's 2007 caution to Al Qaeda affiliates that they should avoid "mistakes," such as the killing of noncombatant Muslims.⁷³⁵

Targeting Patterns

The GSPC's merger with AQC and its subsequent rebranding as AQIM had little effect on the organization's operational tempo, over time. After breaking away from the GIA in September 1998, the first attack confirmed to be the work of the GSPC occurred on June 6, 1999, when militants killed four shepherds in the Bouria province of

⁷³⁵ Data on AQIM attacks used for this study is compiled from the "Global Terrorism Database."

Algeria.⁷³⁶ Over the next seven years leading up to the announcement of the GSPC's integration into Al Qaeda in September 2006, 125 attacks were reliably attributed to the GSPC, for an average of 1.44 attacks per month. The GSPC's first operational act following its formal affiliation with Al Qaeda came on September 29, 2006, also in Algeria's Bouira province, when it detonated a bomb along a railroad, derailing a freight train.⁷³⁷ Over the next seven years, the GSPC/AQIM conducted 134 confirmed attacks, for a monthly average of 1.56. As Figure 5a illustrates, the highest density of attacks occurred during the roughly two years before and after the merger with AQC, with the group's violent activity peaking in February 2007, the month after the GSPC changed its name to AQIM. While Drukdal clearly sought to demonstrate his organization's potency during its courtship with AQC leadership and then reinforce its newfound notoriety as an official Al Qaeda affiliate through more frequent attacks, the group ultimately was unable to sustain its operational pace in the face of government counterterrorism measures, and, from mid-2008 onward, AQIM attacks became relatively infrequent.⁷³⁸

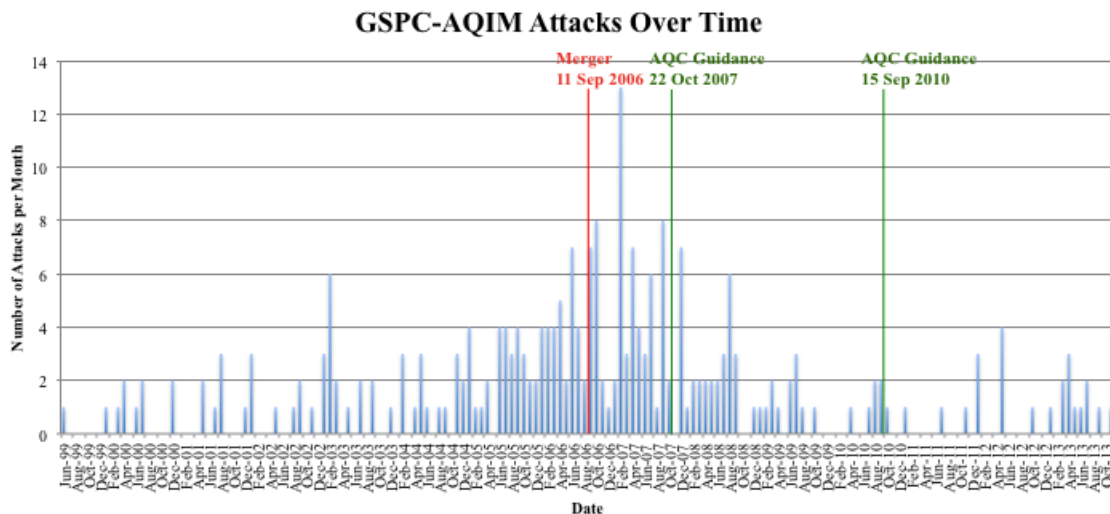


Figure 5a (Source: *Global Terrorism Database, 2015*)

⁷³⁶ "Algeria: Seven People Killed By Islamists," *Agence France Presse*, June 8, 1999.

⁷³⁷ "Explosive Derails Train and 2 Officers Killed in Algerian Attacks," *Associated Press* (September 30, 2006), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.algeria.com/forums/politics-politique/15030-algeria-hit-surge-guerrilla-violence-20.html>.

⁷³⁸ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.2 for discussion of the operational assessment methodology and database selection.

A more significant metric for evaluating the GSPC/AQIM's claimed strategic transition from a locally focused militant group to a globally oriented Al Qaeda affiliate is the targeting pattern revealed in the organization's attacks. As described in the previous section, post-merger AQIM repeatedly insisted that, in alignment with its new parent organization, its first priority was on attacking the "far enemy." In contrast to its rhetoric, however, AQIM's operations differed only slightly from the pre-merger GSPC's in terms of both target nationality and attack location. Of the GSPC's confirmed pre-merger attacks, 92 percent were directed against Algerian targets, with only about seven percent of attacks targeting Western nationalities (see Figure 5b). Post-merger AQIM's targeting patterns did broaden somewhat, but the vast majority of attacks (81 percent) still targeted Algerian people or institutions, while most target diversification was towards other regional African nationalities (eight percent of total attacks). Despite the internationalist tone of its propaganda, only 11 percent of AQIM's attacks through early 2014 were against Western targets.

<i>GSPC/AQIM Attacks by Target Nationality</i>				
	Pre-Merger		Post-Merger	
Nationality	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded
Algeria	116 (92%)	309 / 242	109 (81%)	316 / 681
United States	-	-	1 (1%)	1 (0 US) / 9
Austria	-	-	1 (1%)	0 / 0
Canada	1 (1%)	1 / 2	2 (1%)	12 / 15
Chad	-	-	1 (1%)	3 / 4
European	6 (5%)	1 / 4	-	-
France	-	-	8 (6%)	6 / 15
Germany	1 (1%)	0 / 2	-	-
Mali	-	-	4 (3%)	8 / 8
Mauritania	1 (1%)	18 / 20	3 (2%)	12 / 4
International	-	-	1 (1%)	10 / 0
Nigeria	-	-	1 (1%)	1 / 0
Russia	-	-	1 (1%)	4 / 5
Switzerland	-	-	1 (1%)	1 / 0
Tunisia	-	-	1 (1%)	0 / 0
Total	125	328 / 270	134	374 / 741

Figure 5b (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

Over the course of more than seven years operating under the banner of Al Qaeda prior to 2014, AQIM only launched eight attacks (six percent of total) against French interests, demonstrating an operational pattern significantly at odds with Drukdal's

pronouncement that “France is our first enemy.”⁷³⁹ Even though Drukdal had promised that “we will not hesitate in targeting [the United States] whenever we can and wherever it is on this planet,”⁷⁴⁰ AQIM managed only a single attack against an American target, injuring one American and eight other foreigners in a roadside bombing executed against a bus owned by the oil company Brown & Root-Condor (the only fatality caused by this attack was an Algerian driver).⁷⁴¹ Entirely absent from AQIM’s résumé of attacks were ones against several international targets that it specifically had threatened, such as Chinese business interests and the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. While AQIM expanded the geographic scope of its operations to a broader swath of North Africa and the Sahel, 85 percent of its post-merger attacks still occurred within the borders of Algeria (see Figure 5c). In light of AQC’s hopes that formal affiliation with the GSPC would give the Al Qaeda organization operational reach into Europe, AQIM’s complete failure to execute any attacks on the north side of the Mediterranean is a notable shortfall in achieving the merger’s anticipated strategic potential.

<i>GSPC/AQIM Attacks By Country Location</i>		
Country	Pre-Merger	Post-Merger
Algeria	123 (98%)	114 (85%)
Libya	-	1 (1%)
Mali	1 (1%)	7 (5%)
Mauritania	1 (1%)	4 (3%)
Niger	-	5 (4%)
Nigeria	-	1 (1%)
Tunisia	-	2 (1%)
Total	125	134

Figure 5c (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

Adoption of Al Qaeda’s Suicide Bombing Tactics

One operational aspect that did change significantly after the GSPC affiliated with Al Qaeda was the group’s preferred method of attack. Post-merger AQIM employed

⁷³⁹ Drukdal, "GSPC Statement."

⁷⁴⁰ "An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdal."

⁷⁴¹ Craig S. Smith, "Qaeda-Linked Group Claims Algerian Attack," *New York Times*, December 13, 2006, accessed July 16, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/13/world/africa/13algeria.html?_r=0.

bombing/explosive tactics, particularly suicide bombings, much more frequently than had the pre-merger GSPC. The pre-merger GSPC employed traditional armed assault or assassination tactics (using firearms, rocket-propelled grenades, etc.) 55 percent of the time, with attacks by bombing/explosives comprising only 34 percent of total operations (see Figure 5d). In contrast, post-merger AQIM used bombing/explosive tactics in 57 percent of its attacks, while employing armed assault/assassination methods only 25 percent of the time.

<i>GSPC/AQIM Attacks by Attack Type</i>				
Attack Type	Pre-Merger w/AQ		Post-Merger w/AQ	
	No. of Attacks (Suicide)	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks (Suicide)	Killed / Wounded
Armed Assault	58 (0)	217 / 118	25 (0)	51 / 39
Assassination	12 (0)	10 / 3	8 (0)	8 / 1
Bombing/Explosion	42 (0)	92 / 148	77 (19)	279 / 698
Facilities/Infrastructure Attack	1 (0)	0 / 0	-	-
Hostage Taking (Kidnapping)	10 (0)	0 / 5	19 (0)	29 / 1
Unknown	2 (0)	4 / 1	5 (0)	7 / 2
Total	125 (0)	328 / 270	134 (19)	374 / 741

Figure 5d (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

AQIM's use of suicide attacks provides an even starker contrast between pre- and post-merger attack methods. Before merging with Al Qaeda, the GSPC is not known to have conducted a single deliberate suicide attack. After affiliating with Al Qaeda, however, AQIM conducted nineteen suicide attacks, all of which were suicide bombings (see Figure 5d). AQIM's adoption of bombings, especially as part of suicide attacks, likely was influenced by the high value that AQC leaders placed on spectacular attacks and "martyrdom operations," as well as by emulation of AQI's signature tactic and lessons learned by militants returning from the Iraqi battlefield. It also is possible, however, that AQIM's increased use of these attack methods were a consequence of the success that government counterterrorism operations and amnesty programs had on reducing the numbers of experienced militants within AQIM. Relying on explosives provided a way to achieve dramatic effects with fewer fighters, and suicide bombings enabled the group to leverage the eagerness of idealistic, yet poorly trained, recruits while

reducing the risk of death or capture to the more senior members critical to planning and overseeing operations.⁷⁴²

AQIM's adoption of bombing as its primary *modus operandi* generated a significant increase in casualties. The number of AQIM's victims (killed and wounded) resulting from this method of attack alone exceeded by two-thirds the total number of casualties caused by all categories of attack by the pre-merger GSPC. Many of these increased casualties came from the civilian population. During 2007, for example (the first full year of post-merger AQIM operations), civilian casualties attributed to terrorist activity roughly doubled over the previous two years.⁷⁴³ The indiscriminate nature of bombing attacks and greater numbers of casualties, which affected Algerian or other Muslim nationalities almost exclusively, alienated much of the popular base to which AQIM's leaders hoped to appeal.⁷⁴⁴

Mirroring AQC's frequent public relations challenges, AQIM was forced to use its media wing to justify its actions and to refute charges that it was attacking illegitimate targets and murdering innocents. After killing 30 Algerians and injuring 200 in an April 11, 2007, bombing against government offices in Algiers, AQIM claimed (inaccurately) that it had attacked the "Interpol headquarters" of the "Crusaders."⁷⁴⁵ During his 2008 interview with the New York Times, Drukdal addressed criticism of bomb attacks in December 2007 against the United Nations office in Algiers and against the Algerian Supreme Court Building, during which many of the nearly 200 casualties were university students who had been riding in a passing bus.⁷⁴⁶ Drukdal put a spin on the attacks'

⁷⁴² Anneli Botha, "Suicide Attacks in Algeria: Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," *ARI* (December 9, 2008), accessed July 15, 2016, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/!ut/p/c4/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3jjYB8fnxBnR19TE2e_kEAjX28jAwjAUF-QV-kIAMjKiro!/?WCM_PORTLET=PC_7_3SLLLT CAM54CNTQ2AQ3000000000000_WCM&WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/elcano/Elcano_in/Zonas_in/ARI100-2008.

⁷⁴³ "2007 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Algeria," US State Department (March 11, 2008), accessed May 7, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100592.htm>.

⁷⁴⁴ Tawil, "The Other Face of Al-Qaeda," 42-43; "Al Libi Issues New Book In Defense of AQIM Fighters," *CBS News* (October 15, 2008), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/al-libi-issues-new-book-in-defense-of-aqim-fighters/>.

⁷⁴⁵ Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 223.

⁷⁴⁶ Katrin Bennhold and Craig S. Smith, "Twin Bombs Kill Dozens in Algiers," *New York Times*, December 12, 2007, accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/12/world/africa/12algiers.html>.

outcomes, pointing out that “[i]f we really wanted to strike the civilians, we could have reaped hundreds in one strike by targeting the markets and the transportation and the public gatherings...we make sure as much as we can in our attacks that no Muslim gets hurt...But the truth is that more than 95 percent of the injured are associated with the U.N. headquarters and are from the crusaders and from the police and guards, eventually with a civilian dress. Those are not all civilians.”⁷⁴⁷ In August 2008, AQIM attacked a bus owned by a Canadian engineering firm, killing twelve local construction workers (and wounding an additional thirty-one) who were on their way to work at a water filtration plant.⁷⁴⁸ Despite the fact that all of the victims were Algerian, AQIM released a statement claiming that the militants “made sure that the passengers on the protected bus were Canadian citizens...it is not, as the apostates claim, that we are targeting our brothers, Muslim workers. We are choosing our targets carefully and we are always careful with [Muslims’] blood. We do not target the innocent.”⁷⁴⁹ In 2009, AQIM released a 42-page document providing justifications for targeting civilian merchants deemed to be “collaborators” for supplying the Algerian military.⁷⁵⁰ The question of civilian casualties continued to be a problem for AQIM. In a 2013 virtual town hall meeting, an *Al-Andalus* spokesman responded to a Twitter question about “the killing of unarmed civilians” by asserting, “We don’t target unarmed civilians if they weren’t combatants, but...do we blame whom his home was demolished over the heads of his women and children from revenge and just retaliation?”⁷⁵¹

AQIM Responsiveness to AQC’s Publicly Released Operational Guidance

Despite the fact that post-merger AQIM’s declared intention to shift its targeting to the “far enemy” appears to have been more in word than in deed, and despite the

⁷⁴⁷ "An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukhal."

⁷⁴⁸ Steven Erlanger, "Blasts Kill 12 and Damage a Military Compound in Algeria," *New York Times*, August 20, 2008, accessed May 7, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/21/world/africa/21algeria.html?_r=0.

⁷⁴⁹ Quoted in Botha, "Suicide Attacks in Algeria: Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," 6.

⁷⁵⁰ "AQIM Issues Document to Legitimize Attacks On Army Suppliers," CBS News (February 13, 2009), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/aqim-issues-document-to-legitimize-attacks-on-army-suppliers/>.

⁷⁵¹ "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Online Forum, 15 April 2013," 13-14.

increase in collateral damage to Muslim civilians that attended AQIM's more frequent use of bombing tactics following its affiliation with Al Qaeda, analysis of attack data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) suggests that Al Qaeda's Maghrebian branch may have been responsive to AQC leadership's publicly disseminated guidance in one aspect of target selection: attacks against exclusively civilian targets. The pre-merger GSPC attacks against targets in the GTD's Private Citizens & Property category accounted for 21 percent of its total operations, but the percentage of attacks against this target category fell by nearly half, to 11 percent, in the period following formal affiliation with AQC (see Figure 5e).

<i>GSPC/AQIM Attacks by Target Type</i>				
Target Type	Pre-Merger		Post-Merger	
	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks	Killed / Wounded
Business	8 (6%)	8 / 5	8 (6%)	29 / 25
Government (Diplomatic)	-	-	4 (3%)	10 / 6
Government (General)	7 (5%)	4 / 2	9 (7%)	111 / 340
Journalists & Media	-	-	1 (1%)	2 / 0
Military	33 (26%)	167 / 149	37 (28%)	107 / 225
NGO	-	-	1 (1%)	2 / 0
Police	32 (26%)	65 / 62	43 (32%)	78 / 123
Private Citizens & Property	26 (21%)	72 / 31	15 (11%)	27 / 2
Terrorists/Non-State Militia	5 (4%)	7 / 3	3 (2%)	4 / 1
Tourists	7 (6%)	1 / 6	3 (2%)	1 / 0
Transportation	1 (1%)	2 / 1	6 (4%)	2 / 12
Unknown	2 (2%)	1 / 0	-	-
Utilities	4 (3%)	1 / 11	4 (3%)	1 / 7
Total	125	328 / 270	134	374 / 741

Figure 5e (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

<i>GSPC/AQIM Attacks by Target Type, Before and After AQC Guidance Statements</i>						
Target Type	Prior to 1st AQC Guidance (22 Oct 2007)		Between 1st and 2nd AQC Guidance (15 Sep 2010)		After 2nd AQC Guidance	
	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded	No. of Attacks (%)	Killed / Wounded
Business	2 (3%)	4 / 6	3 (7%)	22 / 18	3 (12%)	3 / 1
Government (Diplomatic)	-	-	3 (6%)	10 / 3	1 (4%)	0 / 3
Government (General)	5 (8%)	43 / 235	2 (4%)	67 / 101	2 (8%)	1 / 4
Journalists & Media	-	-	-	-	1 (4%)	2 / 0
Military	12 (20%)	63 / 129	18 (38%)	36 / 75	7 (28%)	8 / 21
NGO	-	-	-	-	1 (4%)	2 / 0
Police	25 (41%)	32 / 53	12 (25%)	43 / 61	6 (24%)	3 / 9
Private Citizens & Property	10 (16%)	16 / 2	3 (6%)	4 / 0	2 (8%)	7 / 0
Terrorists/Non- State Militia	1 (2%)	1 / 0	1 (2%)	3 / 0	1 (4%)	0 / 1
Tourists	-	-	3 (6%)	1 / 0	-	-
Transportation	4 (7%)	2 / 12	1 (2%)	0 / 0	1 (4%)	0 / 0
Utilities	2 (3%)	0 / 0	2 (4%)	1 / 7	-	-
Total	61	161 / 437	48	187 / 265	25	26 / 39

Figure 5f (Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2015)

Unpacking the data further, it turns out that this reduction in the deliberate targeting of civilians took place mostly after bin Laden's October 2007 message, during which he acknowledged that *mujahidin* had made "mistakes" (i.e. killed too many fellow Muslims), and insisted that Al Qaeda members should reject actions that violated Sharia.⁷⁵² After bin Laden released this message, AQIM's frequency of attacks against Private Citizens & Property dropped precipitously (see Figure 5f). Whereas the GSPC/AQIM conducted ten attacks against this category of target during the roughly one year between the official merger and bin Laden's statement, the group conducted only five total attacks against this category in the more than six years after bin Laden's message, during which al-Zawahiri released multiple statements reinforcing bin Laden's charge to the *mujahidin*. These trends are notable, but it is difficult to draw a causal relationship between the apparent change in AQIM's targeting practices and bin Laden's

⁷⁵² Osama bin Laden, "A Message to Our People in Iraq," World News Connection, National Technical Information Service (October 23, 2007), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4656>.

public guidance. The reduced number of attacks against exclusively civilian targets also could have been a result of affiliate- or *katiba*-level concerns with negative publicity, improved relations with local populations, or even a lack of operational capacity or opportunity.

5.4.2 Kidnapping and Smuggling: Jihad or Profit-Driven Criminality?

Perhaps the most internationally recognized aspect of both the GSPC's and AQIM's operations has been the organization's penchant for kidnapping. In contrast to the group's attack patterns discussed above, which focused overwhelmingly on Algerian and other African targets, GSPC/AQIM directed a comparatively high percentage of their hostage-taking operations toward Europeans. While the group sometimes used European hostages as leverage in political negotiations, the disproportionate focus on abducting Europeans also no doubt was influenced by the outsize ransoms that European governments proved willing to pay for their citizens' safe return. As will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter, AQIM's hostage-taking practices also have been a central issue in the group's post-merger relationship with AQC. During the early days of its affiliation with AQC, AQIM's frequent kidnappings were a source of frustration for Al Qaeda senior leaders, particularly when they risked negative publicity or seemed to be intended more for financial gain than as a means to force political concessions. As international counterterrorism measures, combined with bin Laden's waning wealth, constrained AQC's once-formidable ability to fund global Islamic militancy, AQIM became one of Al Qaeda's most wealthy branches, thanks largely to the lucrativeness of its kidnapping-for-ransom operations. Consequently, bin Laden and his lieutenants set aside their doubts about the prudence of hostage taking and embraced the tactic as a promising solution for gathering revenue.

The GSPC, relatively obscure during the first years of its existence, caught the West's attention during February and March of 2003, when it took hostage thirty-two European tourists during a series of six kidnappings in the southern Algerian desert. Seventeen of the 32 hostages (which included 16 from Germany, 10 from Austria, four from Switzerland, one from the Netherlands, and one from Sweden), were freed in May 2003 during a raid by the Algerian military, while the surviving 14 were released in

August of that year after European governments reportedly paid a ransom of five million euros. One of the hostages, a middle-aged German woman, died of heat stroke during her captivity.⁷⁵³

The pre-merger GSPC conducted a total of 21 verified kidnapping operations, taking a total of 58 hostages. Other than during the aforementioned two-month period in 2003, all targeted Algerian civilians or security force members, resulting in the abduction of twenty-six Algerians.⁷⁵⁴ In contrast to the well-publicized kidnappings of Westerners and the close international attention paid to the fates of the hostages, inconsistent reporting and limited publicity characterized the local hostage-takings. Consequently, it is difficult to determine reliably how many of these Algerian abductees were released, and under what circumstances.⁷⁵⁵ In sum, kidnappings targeting Europeans accounted for 29 percent (6 of 21) of pre-merger operations of this type, with Europeans making up fifty-five percent (32 of 58) of pre-merger hostages taken.

After formally affiliating with Al Qaeda, the GSPC/AQIM conducted a total of 20 kidnapping operations prior to 2014, taking 50 total hostages.⁷⁵⁶ Of these operations, 45 percent (9 of 20) specifically targeted Europeans, resulting in a hostage nationality distribution of 40 percent (20 of 50) European, 35 percent (15 of 50) Algerian, and 35

⁷⁵³ Richard Bernstein, "17 Tourists Abducted in Sahara Are Freed in Army Raid," *New York Times*, May 15, 2003, 2003, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/15/world/17-tourists-abducted-in-sahara-are-freed-in-army-raid.html>; Richard Bernstein, "Militants Release 14 European Tourists in Mali," *New York Times*, August 19, 2003, 2003, accessed April 17, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/19/world/militants-release-14-european-tourists-in-mali.html>; Rukmini Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror," *New York Times*, July 29, 2014, 2014, accessed July 15, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html?_r=0.

⁷⁵⁴ The total numbers of attacks and abductees in this section include incidents categorized primarily as "Hostage Taking (Kidnapping)" in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), but also attacks in which the GTD lists "Hostage Taking (Kidnapping)" as a secondary characteristic; e.g. an "Armed Assault" that also resulted in abduction. The incident totals shown in Figure 5d include only the incidents in which "Hostage Taking (Kidnapping)" was the primary type of attack, according to the GTD.

⁷⁵⁵ The casualty totals for "Hostage Taking (Kidnapping)" shown in Figure 5d include not only those known to have been harmed in captivity, but also include individuals who were killed or wounded in the course of a hostage-taking operation, but who were not actually abducted themselves. Therefore, since the fate of many local hostages is unknown, this figure derived from the Global Terrorism Database does not necessarily present a complete view of hostage mortality.

⁷⁵⁶ See note 106.

percent (15 of 50) other African nationalities. Notably, 60 percent (9 of 15) of all types of attacks directed by AQIM against non-African targets were hostage-taking events. It would seem, therefore, that AQIM's preferred way of making good on its threats against the "far enemy" was to prey upon European citizens travelling in the under-governed spaces of the Sahara in order to take hostages (bearing in mind, as discussed previously, that these "far enemy"-focused attacks represented only a small portion of AQIM's overall operations).

To a limited extent, AQIM attempted to make return of Western hostages contingent on political concessions. As discussed previously, AQIM initially demanded that France withdraw its forces from Afghanistan as a condition for the release of five French mine company employees abducted in Niger in 2010. A more common AQIM stipulation has been the freeing of its fighters imprisoned by regional governments in exchange for European hostages. No Western governments have made major foreign policy concessions in order to free captives, but there is evidence that they have sought to persuade African governments to accede to AQIM demands for the release of incarcerated militants.⁷⁵⁷ It is unclear how many AQIM fighters have been released from prison as a result of hostage negotiations, but, in describing the steps taken by European governments to secure the release of their citizens, one official from Burkina Faso remarked, "You would not believe the pressure that the West brings to bear on African countries."⁷⁵⁸

AQIM has been more successful in capitalizing on the financial opportunities presented by its kidnapping operations; some estimates place its total revenue from ransom payments to be as high as 200 million dollars.⁷⁵⁹ Negotiations normally are shrouded in secrecy, and governments and corporations typically deny having made ransom payments, but a 2014 investigation by the New York Times concluded that,

⁷⁵⁷ Anne Giudicelli, "France: A New Hard Line on Kidnappings?," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 4 (April 2013): 19-21, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CTCSentinel-Vol6Iss4.pdf>; Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror."

⁷⁵⁸ Quoted in Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror."

⁷⁵⁹ Abdelmalek Alaoui, "The Secret of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Inc.: A Resilient (And Highly Illegal) Business Model," *Forbes* (December 16 2013), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2013/12/16/the-secret-of-al-qaeda-in-islamic-maghreb-inc-a-resilient-and-highly-illegal-business-model/#66ef31712b96>.

between 2008 and the end of 2013, AQIM received 91.5 million dollars from European sources, alone (this is in addition to any payments they may have received in return for their numerous African hostages).⁷⁶⁰ In order to maximize its money-making potential through greater volume, the organization developed schemes to outsource kidnappings. It offered local tribes and criminal gangs up to \$100,000 per prisoner for captured Westerners, accepting the increased risk of holding the hostages in the hopes that its notoriety as an Al Qaeda affiliate would enable it to extract higher ransoms.⁷⁶¹ While AQIM has shown a willingness to kill hostages as retaliation for rescue attempts or to create a sense of urgency when it perceives that its demands are being ignored (it has killed 9 of 20 European prisoners taken since its merger with Al Qaeda),⁷⁶² the group seems inclined to keep its most valuable captives alive. Following prisoners' release, stories emerged of militants procuring specialized medicine for ill hostages, administering IVs, and even placing a cold compress on the head of one abductee who was feeling faint in the harsh desert environment.⁷⁶³

Considering that AQIM rarely demanded—and apparently never secured—significant political concessions in return for releasing its hostages, yet was quick to accept lucrative ransom payments, it may be more appropriate to view AQIM's kidnap-for-ransom operations within the context of the group's broader criminal money-making activities.⁷⁶⁴ Since its founding, illicit activity to generate revenue has been central to the

⁷⁶⁰ Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror."

⁷⁶¹ David Lewis and Adama Kiarra, "Special Report: In the Land of 'Gangster-Jihadists'," *Reuters* (October 25 2012), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-crisis-crime-idUSBRE89O07Y20121025>; Franklin Charles Graham IV, "Abductions, Kidnappings and Killings in the Sahel and Sahara," *Review of African Political Economy* 38, no. 130 (2011): 600.

⁷⁶² Robert Marquand, "France Declares War Against Al Qaeda After Hostage Killed," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 27, 2010, 2010, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2010/0727/France-declares-war-against-Al-Qaeda-after-hostage-killed>; Abdoulaye Massalatchi, "Freed French Hostages Leave Niger After Three Years in Sahara," (October 30, 2013 2013), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-niger-hostages-idUKBRE99T07920131030>.

⁷⁶³ Rukmini Callimachi, "Anatomy of an Abduction," *New York Times*, July 29, 2014, 2014, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/militant-kidnapping-video.html>; Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror."

⁷⁶⁴ Mohamedou Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould, "The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *GCSP Policy Paper No. 15* Geneva Centre for Security Policy (May 2011): 3, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/129338/GCSP%20Policy%20Paper%2015.pdf>; Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," 548-49.

GSPC/AQIM's sustainment. In addition to kidnapping for ransom, smuggling contraband across the Sahara and onward to Europe has been a mainstay, netting the organization an estimated 100 million dollars by 2013.⁷⁶⁵ Trafficking in cigarettes, narcotics, and illegal migrants comprised a significant portion of AQIM's overall operations, to the point where it became inextricably tied to the group's reputation.⁷⁶⁶ Despite AQIM's propaganda efforts to distinguish itself as a *mujahidin* vanguard solely committed to Al Qaeda's Salafi-jihadist objectives, many North and West Africans stopped differentiating between AQIM fighters and the tribal bandits with which they associated.⁷⁶⁷ One of the GSPC's and AQIM's most well-known founding leaders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, even became popularly known as "Mr. Marlboro," due to the emphasis that his AQIM *katiba* placed on participating in the black market cigarette trade.⁷⁶⁸

AQIM's foray into narcotics trafficking was particularly controversial, both within the militant group and among its supporters and fellow Al Qaeda adherents. AQIM's deep participation in drug smuggling networks received widespread publicity in October 2009, when a Boeing 727 that had arrived from South America loaded with ten tons of cocaine crashed in Mali; evidently, the drugs were intended for onward movement and distribution by AQIM and its tribal allies.⁷⁶⁹ In 2010, AQIM held a planning summit in Guinea-Bissau with the Colombian Cali Cartel, during which the two groups coordinated arrangements for trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan movement of cocaine

⁷⁶⁵ Alaoui, "The Secret of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Inc.: A Resilient (And Highly Illegal) Business Model."

⁷⁶⁶ Andrew McGregor, "Will Al Qaeda Survive the Loss of its Leadership?," *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 24 (June 17 2010), accessed July 16, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36514&no_cache=1#.Vx2gnEuBVg0; Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group Into an Al-Qa 'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," 19.

⁷⁶⁷ Lewis and Kiarra, "Special Report: In the Land of 'Gangster-Jihadists'."

⁷⁶⁸ Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group Into an Al-Qa 'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," 19.

⁷⁶⁹ Kathleen Caulderwood, "Drugs and Money in the Sahara: How the Global Cocaine Trade is Funding North African Jihad," *International Business Times* (June 5 2015), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.com/drugs-money-sahara-how-global-cocaine-trade-funding-north-african-jihad-1953419>; Laremont, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel," 251.

shipments.⁷⁷⁰ Although drug smuggling reaped millions of dollars for AQIM, it was a source of friction within the organization. Mokhtar Belmokhtar reportedly pioneered AQIM's involvement in narcotics trafficking over the objections of Drukdal, who felt that it was an inappropriate source of revenue that could damage the organization's image. This disagreement may have contributed to the eventual schism within AQIM in 2012, when Belmokhtar and some of his followers seceded to form an independent group.⁷⁷¹

As Drukdal had feared, AQIM received criticism from within the Muslim community for its suspected participation in the drug trade due to the "un-Islamic" nature of the activity and the unsavory character of the Latin American cartels with which they became associated. In order to mitigate this public relations vulnerability, AQIM sought to distance itself from the drug trade in public statements. When challenged on the topic in an online forum, an *Al-Andalus* spokesman responded with frustration and evasiveness, asking, "Do the *mujahidin* need to whitewash themselves from such accusations...?" and indignantly quoting an Arabic poem: "Nothing can be right in the minds if the daylight needs to be proven."⁷⁷² Notwithstanding the harm to its reputation, contraband smuggling played an important role in making AQIM perhaps the most financially secure of all the Al Qaeda franchises. As will be discussed later in this chapter, even AQC leadership became willing to set aside reservations about the prudence of relying on common criminal activities to generate revenue, as international counterterrorism pressure made Al Qaeda's normal donation-based fundraising activities more difficult, and the central organization looked to AQIM and other affiliates for financial support.

5.5 Al Qaeda Central Leadership's Frustrations with AQIM

The preceding sections illustrated the gap between AQIM's rhetoric and its actions. During and after the process of formally affiliating with Al Qaeda, the group

⁷⁷⁰ Ould, "The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 3; Alaoui, "The Secret of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Inc.: A Resilient (And Highly Illegal) Business Model."

⁷⁷¹ Alaoui, "The Secret of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Inc.: A Resilient (And Highly Illegal) Business Model."

⁷⁷² "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Online Forum, 15 April 2013."

used propaganda to portray itself as a committed member of the global Salafi-jihadist movement, fully subscribed to bin Laden's and al-Zawahiri's stated strategy of prioritizing attacks against the "far enemy." As discussed above, however, a comprehensive assessment of AQIM's actual operations shows that the organization's purported post-merger strategic shift was largely nominal, resulting in some degree of regionalization across north Africa and the Sahel, but a very limited number of attacks against Western interests, and no operations whatsoever off the African continent.

Examination of AQC and AQIM internal documents and correspondence, captured during counterterrorism operations or discovered by journalists, provides insight into the interaction between AQC and its North African affiliate. These documents reveal the ways in which AQC leadership wished to influence and control AQIM. In addition to providing the Maghrebian group with the same "general policy" and media guidelines that it sought to impose upon all of its regional affiliates,⁷⁷³ bin Laden and his lieutenants also attempted to direct AQIM on a wide range of topics, including its target selection, hostage negotiations, external relations, and internal organizational dynamics. In reality, AQC's designs seldom reached fruition in AQIM's actions, demonstrating that the central organization exercised little practical control over its affiliate. This lack of synchronization between AQC and AQIM likely stemmed from a combination of factors, such as communications difficulties, AQIM's reluctance to deviate from its historical fight against local authorities, and AQIM's own intra-organizational challenges.

5.5.1 Communication Difficulties

Aggressive international counterterrorism measures from late-2001 onwards significantly degraded the timeliness and reliability of communication among different elements of the Al Qaeda network. As AQIM's Shura Council lamented in a 2012 communiqué to one of the southern *katibas*:

⁷⁷³ "Gist of Conversation Oct 11," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Gist%20of%20conversation%20Oct%2011.pdf>); "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000019-HT (May 2010), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-from-ubl-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-4-original-language-2>.

The great obstacles between us and the central leadership are not unknown to you. They are far greater than any obstacles imaginable with the closer, local leadership that borders you. For example, since we vowed our allegiance up until this very day, we have only gotten a few messages from our *emirs* in Khorasan, the two shaykhs, bin Laden (God rest his soul) and Ayman (God preserve him)...All this, despite our multiple letters to them for them to deal with us effectively in managing *jihad* here.⁷⁷⁴

Letters among bin Laden and his closest lieutenants highlighted the frustrations of providing timely guidance to the affiliates. For example, in June 2010 Atiyah wrote to bin Laden that “[t]he brothers in Algeria are definitely waiting for an answer,”⁷⁷⁵ to which bin Laden replied two months later that “we unfortunately could not open” a message from Drukdal, but that he would “make every effort to answer the important questions in the list, with the permission of Allah.”⁷⁷⁶ It is impossible to know what percentage of the secret communications between AQC and AQIM reached their intended destinations, but, in light of these described communication difficulties, the possibility exists that AQIM’s frequent non-compliance with AQC guidance was at least partially due to this common pitfall of clandestine organizations.

5.5.2 AQIM’s Failure to Adhere to AQC Targeting Guidance

As detailed in Chapter 3, AQC guidance to its affiliates consistently emphasized the need for discretion in target selection and caution in carrying out military operations. Bin Laden felt that “[t]he focus must be on actions that contribute to the intent of bleeding the American enemy. As for actions that do not contribute to the intent of bleeding the great enemy, many of them dilute our efforts and take from our energy.”⁷⁷⁷

⁷⁷⁴ "Al-Qaida Papers: A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department," Associated Press (October 3, 2012): 8, accessed July 17, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>.

⁷⁷⁵ "Letter from Mahmud to Bin Laden, 19 June 2010," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 421 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD) (accessed July 16, 2016, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf).

⁷⁷⁶ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 425 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD) (accessed July 16, 2016, http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf).

⁷⁷⁷ "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4," 22-23.

He complained that, “after the war expanded and the *Mujahidin* spread out into many regions, some of the brothers became totally absorbed in fighting our local enemies,” and he stressed that “no Muslims [should] fall victim except when it is absolutely necessary.”⁷⁷⁸ He explained that failure to exercise caution in carrying out attacks “impacted the sympathy of the nation’s crowds towards the *Mujahidin*” and “would lead us to winning several battles while losing the war at the end.”⁷⁷⁹

The documents captured in May 2011 during the US military’s raid on bin Laden’s home in Abbottabad, Pakistan, contain at least two examples of targeting guidance that bin Laden intended to be communicated specifically to AQIM. In an undated and unsigned message (likely written by bin Laden after July 2009), AQC general manager Atiyah ‘Abd al-Rahman is instructed to

write a letter to our brothers in the Islamic Maghreb to inform them...to consider themselves as the army of the Muslims in the Islamic Maghreb whose job it is to uproot the obnoxious tree by concentrating on its American trunk, and to avoid being occupied with the local security forces...By fighting the local enemy we don’t get the result that we deployed for...⁷⁸⁰

In another message addressed to Atiyah in early 2011, bin Laden stressed the need for the “brothers [in] Algeria” to understand that, in order to encourage security service members to be “unallied” with apostate regimes during the upheavals of the Arab Spring,

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁸⁰ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20Addressed%20to%20Atiyah.pdf>). While this document was undated and unsigned, it appears very likely to have been written by bin Laden sometime after July 2009. Attiya Abd’ al-Rahman, as one of AQC’s primary operations officers, was a frequent recipient of correspondence from bin Laden, who relied on Attiya to disseminate and execute his guidance. This letter closely resembles in tone and content other, signed letters written by bin Laden to Attiya. Additionally, the message includes the sentence “I hope that you will inform us about the leakage of the news covering the martyrdom of our son Sa’ad.” Osama bin Laden’s son, Sa’ad bin Laden, is believed to have been killed by a missile strike in Pakistan sometime during the first half of 2009, and his likely death was reported in late-July 2009. Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Officials Say a Son of bin Laden May Be Dead," *New York Times*, July 23, 2009, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/24/world/asia/24pstan.html>.

“operations by us against the army and police should stop in all areas.”⁷⁸¹ Bin Laden’s guidance to AQIM added that the group should “work on breaking the power of our main enemy by attacking the American embassies in the African countries, such as Sierra Leone, Togo, and mainly to attack the American oil companies. [AQIM] also need to give their attention to extend specific training to carry external operations...”⁷⁸² In 2008, Al-Zawahiri sent a message to AQIM requesting assistance in targeting Danish interests following the publication of a cartoon mocking the prophet Muhammad in a Copenhagen newspaper.⁷⁸³

AQIM’s operational track record shows that the group largely failed to comply with AQC’s targeting guidance. Counter to bin Laden’s repeated admonitions, roughly 60 percent of AQIM’s attacks were directed against the police or military in Muslim countries, a pattern that remained fairly constant from its merger with Al Qaeda onward (see Figure 5f). Although AQIM did reduce over time the number of attacks launched against exclusively private civilian targets, its attacks against government objectives resulted in substantial collateral damage within the civilian population, and virtually all of the killed soldiers and police were fellow Muslims. These AQIM operations generated significant opprobrium from within the Islamic community, with blame directed not just at the North African Al Qaeda affiliate, but also toward its parent organization.⁷⁸⁴

High-civilian casualty attacks conducted by AQIM in the name of Al Qaeda put AQC leaders in the position of needing to justify their affiliate’s actions. Fearing public relations blowback, the central organization could not afford to allow the perception that one of its subordinate units was systematically conducting impermissible assaults on their co-religionists. Al-Zawahiri devoted a large portion of a 2008 online forum released by *As-Sahab* to responding to accusations that AQIM was guilty of killing “innocents” *en*

⁷⁸¹ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (5, accessed July 16, 2016,

<https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud.pdf>. Shaykh Mahmud was an alias sometimes used by Atiyya Abd’ al-Rahman. While unsigned, this letter also contains reference to “my son Sa’ad,” as well as containing other content and tone to suggest strongly that bin Laden was the author. The letter explicitly references the events of the so-called Arab Spring, placing the date of authorship sometime during early 2011.

⁷⁸² "Letter Addressed to Atiyah."

⁷⁸³ Mekhennet et al., "A Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda."

⁷⁸⁴ Tawil, "The Other Face of Al-Qaeda," 42-43.

masse. He employed a variety of defensive arguments, including denial of government and media reports of civilian casualties; insistence that any civilian casualties that occurred either were unintentional or were the result of *al-Tatarrus* (taking of human shields by the enemy); or victim-blaming by asserting that “the *mujahidin* have warned repeatedly the Muslims...that they must keep away from the places where these enemies gather.”⁷⁸⁵ Abu Yahya al-Libi contributed a 35-page pamphlet supporting the righteousness of AQIM operations and asserting that AQIM’s critics were simply trying to damage the image of Maghrebian jihadists.⁷⁸⁶

AQIM also failed to deliver in response to bin Laden’s guidance to focus on American targets and on conducting operations in Western countries.⁷⁸⁷ The group’s only attack on an American target occurred just three months after formal Al Qaeda affiliation, when it bombed a bus owned by the American oil company Brown & Root-Condor.⁷⁸⁸ Neither bin Laden’s specific encouragement to attack the American embassies in Sierra Leone and Togo, nor al-Zawahiri’s request for attacks against Danish interests, ever reached fruition, either because AQIM never received the instructions, or because they were unable or unwilling to execute the operations.

AQIM’s inability to conduct attacks in Europe undoubtedly was a source of great disappointment for AQC leadership, considering that the GSPC’s inheritance of the GIA’s European networks was a major selling point in its bid to become a formal Al Qaeda affiliate. Public information about purportedly AQIM-linked networks on the continent is limited, but their apparent impotence likely is due to a combination of several factors. European governments claim to have had success at disrupting terrorist plots, and law enforcement agencies have arrested a number of militants on charges of

⁷⁸⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Al-Zawahiri Answers Questions by Al-Qaida Critics, Criticizes Al-Qaradawi, Hamas," World News Connection, National Technical Information Service (April 2 2008), accessed October 25, 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4675>.

⁷⁸⁶ "Al Libi Issues New Book In Defense of AQIM Fighters."

⁷⁸⁷ "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," 1. Bin Laden instructed Attiyya to tell AQIM to “give their attention...to external operations.” In a separate letter written to Atiyya, bin Laden clarified that “when I used the term ‘external work,’ I meant...the work inside western countries.” "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 3," Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000015-HT (October 21, 2010), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-from-ubl-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-3-original-language-2>.

⁷⁸⁸ Smith, "Qaeda-Linked Group Claims Algerian Attack."

conspiring with AQIM.⁷⁸⁹ Additionally, AQIM's historic targeting patterns, as described earlier in this chapter, suggest that, propaganda notwithstanding, the group has not prioritized military operations outside of northern and western Africa. It also is possible that the European support infrastructure enjoyed by the GIA did not remain fully intact through the organizational schism and leadership turnover of the GSPC's early days.⁷⁹⁰ Finally, the European networks may never truly have been as robust as advertised, instead serving the GSPC/AQIM's messaging strategy (and increasing its attractiveness to AQC) by providing an illusion of greater reach and capability than the regional group actually possessed. Whatever the explanation, AQIM leadership seems to have become sensitive to perceptions stemming from their organization's lack of military operations in the West, particularly given their frequent public vows to take revenge on European countries. AQIM spokesmen fielded questions about the group's lack of expeditionary attacks against the "far enemy" during multiple *Al-Andalus* online forums, vaguely threatening that "you will see what happens," while simultaneously making excuses and lowering expectations by complaining of tactical difficulties and pointing out that "war is stages and it has its circumstances, and the *mujahidin* are between preparation and fighting..."⁷⁹¹

5.6 Affiliate-Internal Organizational Challenges

In early 2013, journalists discovered several AQIM internal documents that had been left behind by the group's fighters as they were fleeing the French forces that drove them from their short-lived occupation of Timbuktu, Mali, after AQIM had joined Tuareg tribal separatists and other Islamist groups in a 2012 rebellion against the Malian

⁷⁸⁹ Elaine Sciolino, "Spain Arrests 8 It Says Aided a Qaeda-Linked Cell," *New York Times*, June 11, 2008, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/11/world/europe/11qaeda.html?scp=2&sq=al-qaeda+in+the+islamic+maghreb&st=nyt>; Adam Sage, "Nuclear Engineer from CERN Lab Arrested for Al-Qaeda Links," *The Times*, October 10, 2009, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/europe/article2601141.ece>.

⁷⁹⁰ Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," 549.

⁷⁹¹ "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Online Forum, 15 April 2013," 3, 14, 21-22; "Interview: Sheikh Abu 'Abd al-Ilah Ahmed AQIM."

government.⁷⁹² These papers provide a glimpse into the inner workings of an Al Qaeda affiliate, revealing an organization plagued by internal dissent, indiscipline, and counterproductive behavior by subordinate elements. In this sense, AQIM may be seen as a microcosm of the broader Al Qaeda structure, with a central leadership struggling to exert control and maintain unity of purpose with uncooperative component units. The AQIM papers show Drukdal dispensing advice to his subordinates that echoed bin Laden's counsel to his affiliates, as well as airing many of the same frustrations that AQC leaders expressed about their franchises.⁷⁹³ This insight into Drukdal's experiences while attempting to guide AQIM suggests that, in at least some cases, the lack of synchronization between AQC and its affiliates may be explained as much by disharmony within the franchise groups themselves as by differing strategic priorities between the central leadership and their affiliate counterparts.

As detailed in Chapter 3, bin Laden sought to provide his subordinate leaders with a wide range of strategic and practical advice. He counseled Al Qaeda affiliates to avoid alienation of Muslim populations by taking pains to prevent civilian casualties,⁷⁹⁴ by minimizing conflict with Muslim security forces,⁷⁹⁵ and by using discretion and moderation when applying *Shariah* to areas under their control.⁷⁹⁶ He encouraged the franchises to make common cause with local tribes and oppressed groups,⁷⁹⁷ and he pled for unity both within his affiliate groups and between Al Qaeda franchises and other local Islamist organizations.⁷⁹⁸ Bin Laden also advised caution in establishing Islamic

⁷⁹² Rukmini Callimachi, "In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left Behind a Manifesto," Associated Press (February 14, 2013), accessed July 17, 2016, <http://www.ap.org/Content/AP-In-The-News/2013/In-Timbuktu-al-Qaida-left-behind-a-manifesto>; Rukmini Callimachi, "Rise of al-Qaida Sahara Terrorist," Associated Press (May 28, 2013), accessed July 17, 2016, <http://www.ap.org/Content/AP-In-The-News/2013/AP-Exclusive-Rise-of-al-Qaida-Sahara-terrorist>; Pascale Combelles Siegel, "AQIM's Playbook in Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 3 (March 2013), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/CTCSentinel-Vol6Iss3.pdf>.

⁷⁹³ See Chapter 2, section 2.3.2 for examples and discussion over frustration with group membership, and see Chapter 3, sections 3.2 through 3.5 for description of the body of AQC's strategic guidance to its affiliates, much of which Drukdal echoes in his writings to his sub-commanders within AQIM.

⁷⁹⁴ See Chapter 3, p. 102-5.

⁷⁹⁵ See Chapter 3, pp 72-74.

⁷⁹⁶ See Chapter 3, pp. 93-95.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁸ See Chapter 3, pp. 90-92.

emirates, warning that premature declaration of an Islamic state before the *mujahidin* had adequate strength and popular support would be doomed to failure due to foreign intervention and rejection by local populations.⁷⁹⁹ In order to prevent Western interference in local Islamist uprisings, bin Laden recommended to his affiliates that their operatives should conceal their ties to Al Qaeda when pursuing local objectives that were not focused on targeting the “far enemy.”⁸⁰⁰ Bin Laden also repeatedly stressed the need to conduct operations designed to achieve maximum strategic impact against the “far enemy.”⁸⁰¹ Finally, he sought to enforce organizational discipline by demanding that subordinate groups coordinate media activities and provide regular operational updates to AQC leadership.⁸⁰² In correspondence to his subordinate leaders recovered from abandoned AQIM headquarters in Timbuktu, Drukdal echoes many of bin Laden’s themes. These documents suggest that, despite Drukdal’s complaints of scarce communication from “our *emirs* in Khorasan,”⁸⁰³ he either had been exposed to much of bin Laden’s advice, or he was remarkably in tune with AQC leadership’s ways of thinking. Just as Al Qaeda’s senior leaders continually were frustrated by their franchises’ apparent disregard for guidance from the central organization, Drukdal expressed dismay at the counterproductive actions of AQIM’s Sahelian *katibas* and the insubordinate, disruptive behavior of lower-level commanders.

5.6.1 Intra- and Inter-Militant Group Unity

Internal friction plagued the GSPC/AQIM ever since its split from the GIA in 1998. The GSPC’s early years saw a series of leadership turnovers, culminating in Drukdal’s accession as *emir* of the organization in 2004.⁸⁰⁴ Drukdal’s decision to formally affiliate with Al Qaeda was met with discontent by some group members, who feared that the merger would distract from its focus on overthrowing the Algerian regime.⁸⁰⁵ In later years, as counterterrorism pressure on AQIM elements in northern

⁷⁹⁹ See Chapter 3, pp. 70-71.

⁸⁰⁰ See Chapter 3, pp. 75-77.

⁸⁰¹ See Chapter 3, pp. 107-9.

⁸⁰² See Chapter 3, pp. 120-23.

⁸⁰³ "Al-Qaida Papers: A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department," 8.

⁸⁰⁴ Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 220-21.

⁸⁰⁵ Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," 543.

Algeria resulted in increased influence for the *katibas* operating in the southern Sahara and Sahel, Drukdal struggled to exert control over powerful sub-commanders such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid, who in turn competed with each other for dominance in the southern region.⁸⁰⁶ AQIM's lack of internal harmony did not escape the notice of Al Qaeda's central leadership. Senior AQC officials discussed "prepar[ing] an article about pacifying the renegades, to be sent to Algeria,"⁸⁰⁷ and bin Laden remarked in a 2010 letter that "if disagreement is not resolved via friendly and calm reflection, it will be just like what happened with our brothers in the Islamic Maghreb."⁸⁰⁸

The Timbuktu papers provide a glimpse of just how disruptive were the internal divisions within AQIM. In a letter addressed in October 2012 from the AQIM Shura Council to the leaders of the Masked Brigade (the *katiba* led by Belmokhtar, who also was known by his *nom de guerre*, Khaled Abu Abbas), AQIM leaders vented their frustrations regarding Belmokhtar's insubordinate actions. The letter commented on Belmokhtar's wish to secede from AQIM and establish his *katiba* as an independent Al Qaeda affiliate, arguing that "[b]esides being unrealistic, this idea would have destructive effects for the entity of the organization and would tear it apart. Accepting it would lead to only God knows what sedition and strife."⁸⁰⁹ The document goes on to discuss the failure of attempts by AQIM leadership to promote unity within the organization, again placing the blame on Belmokhtar: "We are not exaggerating when we say that our brother Khaled has been and continues to be the biggest obstacle preventing the unification of the *mujahidin* in the Sahara."⁸¹⁰ Belmokhtar did, in fact, declare his *katiba*'s break from AQIM in December 2012, but AQC never recognized his group as an independent affiliate.⁸¹¹

⁸⁰⁶ Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?," *Carnegie Papers* (June 2010 2010): 9-10, accessed July 15, 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_qaeda_sahel.pdf; Filiu, "Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb: A Case Study in the Opportunism of Global Jihad," 15.

⁸⁰⁷ "Gist of Conversation Oct 11."

⁸⁰⁸ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud and Shaykh Abu Yahya (from bin Laden, 04 December 2010)," (accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud%20and%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Yahya.pdf>).

⁸⁰⁹ "Al-Qaida Papers: A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department," 8.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸¹¹ Rida Lyammouri, "Northern Mali: Armed Groups, State Failure, and Terrorism," *Homeland Security Policy Institute Issue Brief* 20 (May 30, 2013): 7, accessed July 16, 2016,

Drukdal also fretted over his subordinates' failures to make allies throughout the region. In Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, AQIM cadres passed up opportunities to forge constructive partnerships with fellow Salafist groups and with tribal insurgents, preferring instead to associate with smugglers and other criminal elements.⁸¹² Adding to AQIM's difficulty in creating alliances with militants in western Africa were perceptions that the Arab-dominated group treated black Africans unfairly and with disdain.⁸¹³ Again, the AQIM documents discovered in Timbuktu shed light on how the fighters in AQIM's subsidiary units were acting out of concert with Drukdal's vision for the organization. In a highly critical letter to AQIM sub-commanders in the Sahara, Drukdal stressed that "we must adopt the logic of putting aside rivalries and avoiding a policy of provocation or making enemies or agitating enemies. We should make sure to win allies, be flexible in dealing with the realities and compromise..."⁸¹⁴ Reviewing actions by his *katibas* that he perceived to be undermining AQIM's attempts to establish a territorial foothold in northern Mali in 2012, Drukdal wrote that "[t]he decision to go to war against the Azawad Liberation Movement, after becoming close and almost completing a deal with them, which we thought would be positive, is a major mistake."⁸¹⁵ Instead, Drukdal counseled, "a wise policy in this stage is not to push people away and make sure to integrate everybody, to integrate good people, decent people, notables, people with qualifications in every town."⁸¹⁶

https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/IssueBrief_20_HSPI.pdf. Of note, Drukdal released a message in 2016 announcing that Belmokhtar's breakaway group, al-Murabitun, had reunited with AQIM. This reconciliation likely was a response to increased competition in the regional jihadist space caused by the rise of an Islamic State presence in northern Africa. Andrew Lebovich, "The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 1 (2016): 22-24, <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CTC-SENTINEL-Vol9Iss12.pdf>.

⁸¹² Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?," 8-9.

⁸¹³ Lindsey Hilsum, "Inside Gao Where Arab Jihadis Took Bloody Sharia Retribution on Mali's Black Africans," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2013, accessed July 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/02/mali-jihadis-sharia-black-africans>; Thornberry and Levy, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, 7.

⁸¹⁴ "Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," Associated Press (mid- 2012): 7, accessed July 17, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>. This is signed by Drukdal, but is undated. Based on event references in the letter, however, it appears to have been written sometime between June 2012 and January 2013, most likely during the summer or early fall of 2012. See also Callimachi, "In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left Behind a Manifesto."

⁸¹⁵ "Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," 8.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Frustrated with his inability to control the *katibas*' operations in the Sahel, Drukdal emulated AQC's standard practice of using propaganda to justify or distract from the undisciplined actions of his subordinate units. Belying the dissatisfaction he expressed in secret correspondence to his sub-commanders, Drukdal released public statements insisting on the purity of AQIM's motives in Mali, their singular focus on defending Muslims against the "far enemy," and their dedication to protecting oppressed Africans of all races. Seeking to provide top-cover for his unruly *katibas*, Drukdal followed his own advice to avoid making enemies and to reach out to possible allies in *Al-Andalus* media releases:

I wish to reassure that Al Qaeda organization...won't pose a threat to Mali or the neighboring countries and the Africans, as France is lying and claiming, since the *mujahidin* have a clear goal, which is defending their religion and the interest of their *ummah* by targeting the Zio-crusader alliance...so the leaders of these countries shouldn't be dragged to war that isn't their war...I wish to clarify that the battle...is not only to defend the interest of the Muslims, but rather is to defend the oppressed and weak all over the world.⁸¹⁷

5.6.2 Attack Targeting, Hostage Negotiations, and Organizational Discipline

The Timbuktu papers, while offering only a limited snapshot of AQIM leadership's communication with its *katibas*, nevertheless provide evidence of serious disconnects between the guidance Drukdal and the Shura Council issued and the ways in which subordinate units executed their operations and adhered to administrative requirements. The same centrifugal organizational dynamics that engendered rivalry among the *katibas* and impeded alliance building with other regional militant groups may also partly explain why operations conducted in AQIM's name so often were out of synch both with AQC guidelines and with AQIM rhetoric. In their letter to Belmokhtar's Masked Brigade, AQIM's Shura Council expressed exasperation about the *katiba*'s unambitious targeting:

⁸¹⁷ 'Abd al-Malik Drukdal, "Invasion of Mali...A French Proxy War," *Al-Andalus Media Productions* (December 2012), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/print.php?storyid=2191>. See also "Boshra to Our Delivered Nation: The Code of Delivered Africa."

Any observer of armed action in the Sahara will notice clearly the failure of the Masked Brigade to carry out spectacular attacks, despite the region's vast possibilities... Moreover, you have received multiple directives and instructions from the Emirate of the organization urging you to carry out these attacks. Despite all that, your brigade did not achieve a single spectacular operation targeting the crusader alliance. So we don't know who to attribute this fiasco to...⁸¹⁸

AQIM's senior leaders also railed against lost opportunities resulting from the Masked Brigade's mishandling of negotiations for Western hostages. Citing in particular the 2008 capture of two Canadian United Nations officials, the Shura Council asked,

[W]ho handled this important abduction poorly? Was it the organization's Emirate, who tried to pressure the crusader alliance to lighten its footprint on our brothers in Afghanistan and, among other goals, free imprisoned brothers and obtain a ransom...or does it come from unilateral behavior, along the lines of brother Abu Abbas, which produced a blatant inadequacy: trading the weightiest case (Canadian diplomats!!) for the most meager price (700,000 euros)!!⁸¹⁹

AQIM's internal correspondence makes clear that the frustrations bin Laden routinely expressed to his lieutenants regarding what he saw as the affiliates' careless media activities and haphazard reporting to the central headquarters also pertained at the franchise level. In dramatic terms, AQIM leaders decried Belmokhtar's "astounding" dealings with the press, complaining that "the bitter truth, which we can barely swallow, is that Abu Abbas aired our laundry publicly and spilled secrets of *jihad*...If not for God's grace, he would have splashed out secrets to the whole world and the heavens above."⁸²⁰ The Shura Council sarcastically contrasted Belmokhtar's publicity-seeking with his sparse updates to superiors, challenging him to explain "[w]hy do you only turn on your phone with the Emirate when you need it, while your communication with some media is almost never ending!"⁸²¹ Drukdal conveyed similar annoyance in his letter to AQIM elements operating in Mali, pointing out that "with all the reasons [for going to war with the Azawad Liberation Movement] our brothers gave via their statements

⁸¹⁸ "Al-Qaida Papers: A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department," 5-6.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

through the media...we have not until now received any clarification from you, despite how perilous the operation was!!”⁸²²

5.6.3 Governing Territory

The most strategically nuanced portions of the Timbuktu papers contain Drukdal’s advice to his operatives in Mali regarding the ways in which they were attempting to govern the areas in the north of the country that briefly were under their control. Drukdal’s reasoning on this topic closely reflects the arguments contained throughout bin Laden’s personal correspondence. Emphasizing the fragility of AQIM’s gains, Drukdal reminded his subordinate leaders that

[w]e must not go too far or take risks in our decisions or imagine that this project is a stable Islamic state. It is too early for that, God knows...It is very important that we view our Islamic project in Azawad as a small newborn, with many phases ahead of it that it must pass through to grow and mature...So is it wise that we start now to lay burdens on it that will inevitably prevent it from standing on its own two feet and perhaps even smother it?!!⁸²³

Drukdal believed that his southern *katibas* were operating in ways that were undermining the long-term prospects of AQIM activity in the region, so he wrote to them “a very important note about some of the events that happened with you recently and which we see as wrong policies which do not serve our Islamic project in the region which you and us should solve as soon as possible.”⁸²⁴ As discussed above, Drukdal criticized his subordinates’ decision to fight against the tribal Azawad Liberation Movement, which fragmented the anti-government militant coalition in the area.⁸²⁵ Assessing that the Islamists lacked the strength to repel a foreign intervention (and foreshadowing the French-led offensive that drove the militants out of Mali in January 2013), Drukdal appealed to his sub-commanders to avoid provocation by downplaying their connection to Al Qaeda and its global jihadist agenda, explaining that

⁸²² "Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," 8.

⁸²³ Ibid., 3, 7.

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

for foreign policies, you must adopt mature and moderate rhetoric that reassures and calms. To do so, you must avoid any statements that are provocative to neighboring countries and avoid repeated threats. Better for you to be silent and pretend to be a ‘domestic’ movement that has its own causes and concerns. There is no call for you to show that we have an expansionary, *jihadi*, Al Qaeda or any other sort of project.⁸²⁶

Drukdal also was concerned that his fighters in Mali would alienate the local Muslim population through overzealous enforcement of *Shariah*, indicating that

[o]ne of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed with which you applied *Shariah*, not taking into consideration the gradual evolution that should be applied in an environment that is ignorant of religion, and a people which hasn’t applied *Shariah* in centuries...So in the first stage, we should have focused on preparing the terrain to apply *Shariah*, to spread *dawa* (proselytizing), and to talk and preach to people in order to convince them and educate them.⁸²⁷

In particular, Drukdal criticized his subordinates’ destruction of the locals’ traditional shrines and the severe, abrupt way in which they implemented the *hudud* (Islamic code of punishment) on the populations they were attempting to govern.⁸²⁸ Explaining the pitfalls of the *katibas*’ short-sighted approach, he cited bin Laden: “And the Shaykh, may God have mercy on him, is right. The reform we are calling for is not going to happen from one night to the other. Going gradually is a rule from God that every reformer should take into account.”⁸²⁹ In addition to embracing bin Laden’s strategic counsel, Drukdal also may have been influenced on this topic by two letters he received from AQAP leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi during the spring and summer of 2012, shortly after AQIM elements had seized portions of northern Mali (these letters also were discovered among the Timbuktu documents). Al-Wuhayshi advised Drukdal based on AQAP’s recent experience at attempting to hold and govern territory in Yemen, recommending that AQIM “be kind to [the people] and make room for compassion and for leniency. Try to win them over through the conveniences of life and by taking care of

⁸²⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸²⁸ Ibid.

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 8.

their daily needs... You have to take a gradual approach with them when it comes to their religious practices. You can't beat people for drinking alcohol when they don't even know the basics of how to pray."⁸³⁰

5.7 AQIM's Influence on AQC

Considering the limited extent to which AQC leadership was able to guide AQIM's operational direction, a more significant outcome of the franchising process may have been the central organization's adaptations to accommodate its affiliate. AQC adopted new areas of rhetorical and operational focus in order to reinforce the perception of unified objectives across the Al Qaeda network and to capitalize on new operational opportunities presented by AQIM's regional access. As AQC faced financial hardship and became more reliant on AQIM for funding support, bin Laden and other senior leaders relaxed some of their guidelines to embrace AQIM's effective, yet controversial, revenue generation methods.

5.7.1 Rhetorical and Operational Focus

AQC leadership adjusted their practices to bring the central organization more in line with its north African affiliate by increasing their rhetorical and operational focus on the GSPC/AQIM's specific concerns, particularly the group's animus toward French and Spanish influence in the region. By co-opting their affiliate's existing priorities, the Al Qaeda core—beset as it was by international counterterrorism efforts—was able to expand its global reach (or at least create the perception of greater global reach), while advancing the narrative that Al Qaeda was a unified and synchronized movement.

The Islamic Maghreb had not been a high-priority region for AQC in the years leading up to the merger with the GSPC. Out of 14 jihadist battlefronts named by bin Laden in his 1996 *fatwa*, only three were in Africa, with none outside of the eastern Horn

⁸³⁰ Nasser al-Wuhayshi, "Al-Qaida Papers: First Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb," Associated Press (May 21, 2012), accessed July 31, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>. See also Nasser al-Wuhayshi, "Al-Qaida Papers: Second Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb," Associated Press (August 6, 2012), accessed July 31, 2016, <http://hosted.ap.org/interactives/2012/al-qaida/?START=al-qaida-papers#>.

of Africa.⁸³¹ France, which Drukdal labeled in 2006 as the GSPC's "first enemy" due to its colonial legacy in North Africa and its continuing support for "apostate" regimes in the region, had not been a focus of AQC propaganda or threats, possibly because of the country's refusal to participate in the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq.⁸³² AQC attention toward Spain, another of the GSPC/AQIM's pledged enemies, had centered on criticism of that nation's support to the US-led war in Iraq, rather than its occupation of historically Muslim territory in southern Europe and northern Africa.⁸³³

Beginning with Zawahiri's 2006 announcement that the GSPC's merger with Al Qaeda would be "a bone in the throats of the Americans and French Crusaders and their allies," AQC regularly incorporated GSPC/AQIM priorities into its own public messaging efforts, though it normally framed its statements in terms of how North African regional issues were tied to the "far enemy." Zawahiri issued multiple statements calling for attacks against "the sons of France and Spain in the Islamic Maghreb;" for the "liberation" of the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan coast; and, more aspirationally, for the restoration of the historically Muslim-dominated region of Andalusia, in southern Spain.⁸³⁴ Bin Laden sought to reinforce AQC's propaganda integration with AQIM by instructing Al Qaeda's central media wing, *As-Sahab*, to "focus on the translation of the jihadist literature into French and other languages of our brothers in Africa."⁸³⁵

⁸³¹ Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?," 3.

⁸³² "Chirac Blasts U.S.-Led Invasion of Iraq," Associated Press (January 5, 2007), accessed July 14, 2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/05/AR2007010500438.html>.

⁸³³ Reuven Paz, "A Message to the Spanish People: The Neglected Threat by Qa'idat al-Jihad," Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (March 19, 2004), accessed July 14, 2016, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1101005/posts>.

⁸³⁴ Nazim Fethi and Said Jameh, "Zawahiri's Call for Fighting French and Spanish Desperate Attempt to Rally Support," *Magharebia* (September 24, 2007), accessed February 4, 2014, http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2007/09/24/feature-01; Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 224-26; Celso, "Al Qaeda in the Maghreb: The 'Newest' Front in the War on Terror," 86-87.

⁸³⁵ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud, 26 September 2010 (from bin Laden)," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (1, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud%2026%20September%202010.pdf>).

A particularly notable development in AQC strategy, attendant to its franchising of the GSPC/AQIM, was an increased emphasis on targeting French interests. Public statements and private correspondence both reveal that AQC leadership sought to capitalize on the access that the GSPC/AQIM had to French citizens living or travelling in north Africa. Although France had refused to join the so-called “coalition of the willing” in supporting the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, it had contributed forces to operations in Afghanistan since November 2001. Thus, while France largely had been overlooked by AQC when AQI was its only active affiliate and jihadist activity was focused on Iraq, the opportunities presented by merger with the GSPC/AQIM made France an attractive strategic target, as its interests in Africa became among the most accessible of any “far enemy” country. The newfound importance that AQC leadership placed on targeting the French was illustrated by the contents of bin Laden’s library; the materials recovered by US Special Operations Forces during their raid in Abbottabad included a large number of reference materials on France, almost all of which were published after the GSPC had joined Al Qaeda.⁸³⁶

The most well-publicized and well-documented case of AQC becoming directly involved in AQIM activities to target the French was during the negotiations over the five French citizens that AQIM took hostage in Niger in September 2010. Shortly after the kidnapping, bin Laden sent word through his lieutenants that AQIM should demand French withdrawal from Afghanistan as a condition for the prisoners’ release.⁸³⁷ He then issued a message addressed to the French people, explaining that “what happened with the capture of your experts in Niger...is a response to the oppression you impose upon our Muslim *ummah*...So the path to protect your security is to stop all your misdeeds and their effects on our *ummah*, and the most important thing is your withdrawal from Bush’s sinister war in Afghanistan...”⁸³⁸ Following bin Laden’s statement, Drukdal issued his

⁸³⁶ "Bin Laden's Bookshelf," U.S. Office of the Director of National Defense (accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/resources/bin-laden-bookshelf>). This website is where the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) releases documents captured during the Abbottabad raid that have been declassified. While the contents of the documents that remain classified are unknown, it is noteworthy that, in the ODNI’s organization system, “Materials Regarding France” is the only country-specific category (containing nineteen total documents).

⁸³⁷ "Gist of Conversation Oct 11."

⁸³⁸ Osama bin Laden, "To...The French People," (October 27, 2010), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu:8080/dspace/handle/10066/7277>.

message echoing bin Laden's demands and stipulating that all negotiations over the hostages be conducted directly with bin Laden.⁸³⁹

After French authorities categorically rejected the Al Qaeda demands to withdraw from Afghanistan, bin Laden released another message in January 2011 appealing to the French citizenry: "O' people of France, your president's refusal to leave Afghanistan is a result of his subordination to America. And this refusal is a green light to kill your prisoners immediately in order to get rid of the consequences of your case, but we won't do it on the time he assigns."⁸⁴⁰ Bin Laden's threat to kill the hostages was a bluff, however, and, with the pragmatism described earlier in this chapter, AQIM officially changed its demand in March 2011 to a 90 million euro ransom. All five French hostages eventually were released, likely after the payment of an undisclosed amount to the militant group.⁸⁴¹ Neither AQC nor AQIM ever managed to secure political accommodations from France, and most hostage situations were resolved after ransom payments. Nevertheless, AQIM's kidnappings of French personnel provided AQC with prime opportunities to score propaganda points by messaging to the world that Al Qaeda was a coordinated, widespread, and potent organization. Bin Laden had plans to continue pressuring the French in order to exploit the opportunities afforded by AQIM's affiliation, writing to Atiyah shortly before his death in spring 2011: "Please follow up on the file of targeting the French..."⁸⁴²

5.7.2 Kidnapping-for-Ransom and Other Criminal Activity

An additional area in which it seems clear that AQC has been influenced significantly by its north African affiliate is in the use of criminal activity, such as kidnapping-for-ransom and drug smuggling, as a means of financing the organization's

⁸³⁹ Drukdal, "The Demands of the Mujahideen for the Release of the French Hostages."

⁸⁴⁰ Osama bin Laden, "Usama Bin Laden: Message to the French People," (January 22, 2011), accessed July 16, 2016, <http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu:8080/dspace/handle/10066/7279>.

⁸⁴¹ Shaul Shay, "The Kidnapping of French Hostages in Niger (September 2010) and the Death of Bin Laden," *ICT Articles* (August 1, 2011), accessed July 15, 2016, [https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1106/The%20kidnapping%20of%20French%20hostages%20in%20Niger%20\(September%202010\)%20%20and%20the%20death%20of%20Bin%20Laden](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1106/The%20kidnapping%20of%20French%20hostages%20in%20Niger%20(September%202010)%20%20and%20the%20death%20of%20Bin%20Laden;); Giudicelli, "France: A New Hard Line on Kidnappings?."; Massalatchi, "Freed French Hostages Leave Niger After Three Years in Sahara."

⁸⁴² "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud."

operations. Concerned with preserving Al Qaeda's reputation and religious legitimacy, AQC leaders cautioned regional militant groups to avoid actions that could make them look bad in the eyes of the people, and they counseled against using Islamically-prohibited sources of revenue, such as robbery and drug-trafficking, even for the purposes of advancing *jihad*. Asked specifically about this issue in 2006 correspondence from militants in Gaza, Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman responded that "theft or robbery...and funds gotten from trafficking in wine, drugs, and the like...can [not be] accepted," except in cases of "exigency".⁸⁴³ Furthermore, AQC leaders distrusted the partners with whom they would have to work if they became involved in the drug trade, and believed that such activities would make them more vulnerable to detection and apprehension.⁸⁴⁴ Kidnapping was not a tactic that AQC leaders emphasized during the group's early years, and, if presented with hostages from countries comprising the "far enemy," they preferred to use them to negotiate for strategic concessions.⁸⁴⁵

Growing financial difficulties drove the AQC leadership to compromise its early principles by accepting the use of criminal activity to fund operations. In 2001, the central organization was taking in an estimated \$30 million annually, primarily in the form of donations from wealthy Gulf benefactors transferred through couriers, Islamic charitable organizations, or other money-changing operations.⁸⁴⁶ These resources, along with bin Laden's personal wealth, enabled AQC to provide funding broadly across the Salafi-jihadist enterprise, and the promise of financial support was a major attraction to regional militant groups considering formal affiliation with Al Qaeda. As late as 2007,

⁸⁴³ "Jaysh al-Islam's Questions to `Atiyatullah al-Libi " Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000008-HT (October 24 - November 22, 2006 2006), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/jaysh-al-islams-questions-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-original-language-2>.

⁸⁴⁴ David E. Kaplan, Bay Fang, and Soni Sangwan, "Paying for Terror," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 5, 2005, 46.

⁸⁴⁵ "Gist of Conversation Oct 11."; "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud, 26 September 2010 (from bin Laden)."; Ouellet, Lacroix-Leclair, and Pahlavi, "The Institutionalization of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 660; "Cash-Strapped Al Qaeda Turns to Kidnapping," Associated Press (June 20, 2011), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cash-strapped-al-qaeda-turns-to-kidnapping/>.

⁸⁴⁶ "Cash-Strapped Al Qaeda Turns to Kidnapping."

bin Laden was writing confidently to his subordinates to inform them of donations he had received and to give instructions for their disbursement.⁸⁴⁷

AQC's traditional means of revenue became severely constrained over time, however, as counterterrorism operations increased the physical isolation of the AQC leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan; international sanctions and other financial enforcement measures reduced the mechanisms through which AQC could receive funds; and bin Laden's personal fortune became exhausted.⁸⁴⁸ By the end of 2009, at the latest, AQC was in a significant financial bind. Complaints about inadequate budgets became a common feature of the group's internal correspondence,⁸⁴⁹ and bin Laden asked his general manager, Atiyah 'Abd al-Rahman, to "please report to me in detail about the financial situation on your side and about your vision and plans to improve it."⁸⁵⁰

At this point, AQC appears to have become reliant on its affiliates to provide the bulk of operational funding. In the same 2010 letter to Atiyah, bin Laden suggested that he "[h]int to the brothers in the Islamic Maghreb that they provide [Yunis al-Mauritani, AQC's director of external operations for Africa and west Asia] with the financial support that he might need in the next six months, to the tune of approximately 200,000 euros."⁸⁵¹ In a message to "Shaykh Yunis" at about the same time (probably early 2010), bin Laden wrote: "With regard to financing the operations... Take into consideration that the situation of the brothers in the Islamic Maghreb is not bad. Also, note that if the brothers in Somalia develop some of their departments, they will be [able] to fund themselves well and finance the external operations."⁸⁵² AQC's financial straits were

⁸⁴⁷ "Letter to Abu 'Abdallah al-Hajj," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (December 17, 2007), accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Abdallah%20al-Hajj.pdf>.

⁸⁴⁸ Shay, "The Kidnapping of French Hostages in Niger (September 2010) and the Death of Bin Laden."; Kaplan, Fang, and Sangwan, "Paying for Terror," 47; McGregor, "Will Al Qaeda Survive the Loss of its Leadership?."

⁸⁴⁹ Greg Miller, "Bin Laden Document Trove Reveals Strain on Al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, July 1, 2011, 2011, accessed May 1, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/bin-laden-document-trove-reveals-strain-on-al-qaeda/2011/07/01/AGdj0GuH_story.html.

⁸⁵⁰ "Letter from UBL to `Atiyatullah al-Libi 4."

⁸⁵¹ Ibid.

⁸⁵² "Letter to Shaykh Yunis from Bin Laden," U.S. Department of Justice, Government Exhibit 433 10-CR-019(S-4)(RJD) (accessed July 16, 2016,

only exacerbated by bin Laden's death in May 2011, due to the loss of his fund-raising networks and popularity among donors.⁸⁵³

Faced with the requirement to solicit financial contributions from their affiliates—and from AQIM, in particular—AQC senior leadership was forced to become less selective about the methods by which their franchises gained revenue. While there is no evidence that AQC leaders formally reneged on their opposition to drug trafficking, they implicitly accepted the practice by seeking financing from AQIM, whose smuggling activities were well publicized. In the case of kidnapping-for-ransom, AQC followed the example of its most affluent affiliate and endorsed the tactic as a proven method of raising funds. In a 2010 message, bin Laden instructed Atiyah to form an operational group to focus on capturing and ransoming diplomats.⁸⁵⁴ In a separate letter later the same year, bin Laden issued guidance for hostage negotiations across the Al Qaeda enterprise. While he preferred leveraging hostages to gain political concessions, he allowed that, if the circumstances warranted, “negotiations would be established for a ransom.”⁸⁵⁵ Bin Laden continued his pragmatic approach to dealing with prisoners, writing to Atiyah in April 2011 that both AQIM and al-Shabaab should be cautious with the European prisoners they were holding at the time, exchanging them for money—rather than killing them—if the militants' political demands were not met, due to the possible public reaction against murdering citizens of European countries that were supporting the Arab Spring uprisings in northern Africa.⁸⁵⁶

AQC leaders came to view the revenue gained from hostage ransoming as critical to the group's survival. After his general manager, Atiyah, informed him that the Afghan government had begun paying a \$5 million ransom for the return of an Afghan diplomat

http://kronosadvisory.com/Abid.Naseer.Trial_Abbottabad.Documents_Exhibits.403.404.405.420t_hru433.pdf.

⁸⁵³ William Maclean, "Analysis: Loss of Bin Laden Adds to Al Qaeda Money Woes," *Reuters* (May 20, 2011), accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-binladen-qaeda-financing-idUSTRE74J3J220110520>.

⁸⁵⁴ Miller, "Bin Laden Document Trove Reveals Strain on Al-Qaeda."

⁸⁵⁵ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud, 26 September 2010 (from bin Laden)."

⁸⁵⁶ "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah al-Libi 2,'" Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Program, SOCOM-2012-0000010-HT (April 26, 2011 2011), accessed July 15, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-from-ubl-to-atiyatullah-al-libi-2-original-language-2>.

captured by Al Qaeda fighters in 2008,⁸⁵⁷ bin Laden wrote back: “It would be nice if you increase and develop your knowledge in dealing with finances to allow us to continue working with it for the longest time possible... This money that Allah granted the *mujahidin* might be income for the next five or six years.”⁸⁵⁸ Nasser al-Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP who al-Zawahiri named as the deputy head of Al Qaeda in 2013, wrote in a 2012 letter of advice to his fellow militants that “[k]idnapping hostages is an easy spoil, which I may describe as a profitable trade and a precious treasure,” pointing out that half of AQAP’s budget came from ransoms.⁸⁵⁹ Given the centrality of this revenue source after donation-based funding streams had dwindled, AQC leaders had every reason to be open-minded about the income-generation methods at which its affiliates had become proficient.

5.8 Conclusion

This case study chapter has provided useful insight to support this thesis’ examination of organizational function, strategic coherence, and reciprocal influences across the Al Qaeda organization, with important insights gleaned through application of all three of this study’s unique methodological and conceptual approaches described in Chapter 1. The case of AQIM particularly illustrates the disconnect between rhetoric and operations that plagues the Al Qaeda network. The North African affiliate operated a prolific and sophisticated media operation that diligently echoed AQC’s messaging themes, but its military operations largely failed to capitalize on promising potential for operations to target the “far enemy,” instead focusing on local targets, against AQC’s advice, that resulted in alienation among the Muslim civilian population. This case provided a particularly valuable view of internal dysfunction and preference divergence among factions within the group. Despite AQIM *emir* Drukdal’s apparent alignment with AQC leaders’ strategic perspectives, organizational friction and strategic disconnect within the group resulted in counterproductive actions and diluted from focus on AQC’s

⁸⁵⁷ "Letter from Mahmud to Bin Laden, 19 June 2010," 5-6.

⁸⁵⁸ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Bin Laden, 07 August 2010," 8.

⁸⁵⁹ al-Wuhayshi, "Al-Qaida Papers: Second Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb."; Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror."

and Drukdal's globally-oriented priorities. Finally, AQC's shift to a strategic focus on attacking French interests, an AQIM priority, as well as the central leadership's relaxation of their ethical stances to accept AQIM's penchant for kidnapping-for-ransom and other lucrative criminal activities, demonstrated not only AQC leaders' willingness to accommodate their affiliates' concerns, but also suggested a pragmatic tendency that could be triggered by the reciprocal influences that existed in a core-affiliate relationship.

The GSPC's merger with Al Qaeda and subsequent rebranding as AQIM revitalized the struggling North African Islamist group. It also provided a needed boost to AQC at a time when the central organization's organic operational capacity was all but destroyed, and its reputation was suffering from the brutality of AQI, its first formal affiliate. The union was not without complications, however. AQC and its new franchise both attempted to portray the merger as a seamless expansion of a coordinated, global jihadist front, but this image did not match reality. In fact, the organizational friction and strategic disconnect between AQC and its North African affiliate, as well as within AQIM itself, presented challenges for the Al Qaeda organization. In order to accommodate its franchise and preserve the appearance of a cohesive and synchronized network, AQC adapted and compromised in a number of ways.

This chapter's survey of both AQIM's rhetorical evolution and its operational patterns revealed a significant discrepancy between the group's words and its actions. AQIM diligently expanded its media operations, echoed AQC's aggressive, globally-oriented jihadist message, and took pains to promote its solidarity with the central organization and other affiliates. Despite its propaganda claims, however, AQIM fell short in its promises to focus its energies on fighting the "far enemy." Analysis of the GSPC's and AQIM's target selection and attack methods revealed few differences in operational patterns before and after affiliation with Al Qaeda, exposing a divide between AQIM's public statements and its actions. Attacks against Western interests were minimal, AQIM's operations remained limited to north and west Africa, and the group seemed to prioritize profitable criminal activity over advancing AQC's strategic agenda. While there is some statistical evidence that AQIM may have reduced the frequency of its deliberate attacks on civilian targets in response to AQC guidance, it ignored the central

leadership's advice by attacking security forces in ways that resulted in significant Muslim casualties, generating much public criticism.

Examination of Al Qaeda documents and internal correspondence provided new insight into AQC's attempts to control its franchise and illuminated areas of frustration for the core leadership resulting from communication difficulties, unheeded advice, and divergent priorities. Most significantly, unpopular attacks by AQIM that caused large numbers of Muslim casualties forced AQC to mobilize its media apparatus and risk its own public image to justify its franchise's actions, and the promise of opening a new front in Europe through AQIM's continental networks disappointingly failed to materialize. AQIM's own internal documents reveal, however, that the group's subordinate *katibas* were no more reliable at following 'Abd al-Malik Drukdal's orders than AQIM, as a whole, was at adhering to directives from AQC leadership. This suggests that the apparent lack of synchronization across the Al Qaeda movement may be explained as much by the challenges of controlling disparate tactical-level elements as by intractable strategic differences between the central organization and its franchises.

Finally, this chapter demonstrated the ways in which AQC was influenced by its incorporation of the GSPC/AQIM as an affiliate. The central organization adjusted its rhetorical themes to highlight AQIM's region-specific concerns, and it expended reputational capital to defend many of AQIM's unpopular actions. With characteristic pragmatism, AQC leaders modified their operational priorities in (mostly failed) attempts to capitalize on AQIM's unique access to certain targets, and they relaxed their principled positions against *mujahidin* involvement in criminal activity in order to embrace AQIM's proven revenue-generation methods. Despite the frustration caused by AQIM's inability to match its propaganda with action and live up to the AQC leadership's standards of unity and discipline, the central organization remained essentially at the mercy of its affiliate, preferring to accommodate AQIM's shortcomings rather than forego the opportunity to portray itself as an active and unified organization, with worldwide momentum and operational reach.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1 Research Approach and Background

This thesis set out to assess organizational function and strategic coherence across the Al Qaeda organization during its prime franchising era, between 2004 and 2014, with a particular focus on the reciprocal influences at work between the central organization and its franchises. In order to enable a new interpretation of a much-debated topic, this study employed several methodological and conceptual approaches unique within the literature. First, this investigation examined a substantial body of recently released and heretofore underutilized primary sources, consisting largely of Al Qaeda's internal documents and correspondence captured on the battlefield. Access to these confidential communications helped to overcome a fundamental challenge of studying clandestine, illicit organizations by penetrating the veil of secrecy that naturally attends their internal workings. Exploitation of these sources yielded fresh insight into the command relationships and organizational practices across the Al Qaeda network, and it illuminated the central leadership's vision for the organization, the strategic guidance they issued to the franchises, and the regional groups' responses. Second, this study employed analysis of the affiliates' complete operational histories using data from the Global Terrorism Database, a methodological corrective to the tendency within the literature to assess the regional groups' operational trends by drawing conclusions from limited samples or isolated instances of highly-publicized attacks. This enabled comprehensive and objective assessment of the franchises' military activities to evaluate empirically their areas of strategic focus and their degrees of compliance with AQC leaders' guidance. Third, this thesis traced the interplay between AQC and its franchises, with a particular focus on characterizing the ways in which the parent organization adjusted its policies and methods in response to the affiliates' interests and actions. This helped to narrow the analysis gap left by previous studies' tendencies to fixate on the ways in which the franchising process affected the regional groups, overlooking reciprocal influences that impacted the parent organization. These novel approaches, complemented by surveys of public statements by AQC and the franchises and reinforced by case studies, enabled this thesis to present a comparatively high-confidence new assessment of the nature of the

command relationships between AQC and its affiliates, of the extent to which components of the Al Qaeda network have acted in strategic alignment, and of reciprocal influences between the center and the regions.

AQC adopted its strategy of extending the Al Qaeda “franchise” to regional Islamist militant groups as a means of revitalizing its self-appointed role as vanguard of the Salafi-jihadist movement, after the original organization lost its Afghan safe haven and freedom of action due to United States-led military action following the 9/11 attacks. In so doing, the central leadership caught a tiger by the tail, to borrow an old saying: once AQC leaders had grabbed ahold, they could not afford to let go. The parent organization was reliant on the regional affiliates for restored global relevance, which also meant that AQC’s reputation and standing were at the mercy of the affiliates’ actions. Bin Laden and his lieutenants attempted to direct the franchises according to a clear-cut strategic framework; however, on the whole, the regional groups’ actions were out of alignment with AQC’s guidance, often generating criticism from across the *ummah* that undermined the credibility of the Al Qaeda brand. Over nearly a decade, beginning with the establishment of AQI in December 2004, AQC leadership saw its overarching goal of fighting the “far enemy” to remove Western influence from the Muslim world essentially preempted, as it continuously adjusted to manage the consequences of the affiliates’ strategically divergent actions. Unwilling to risk appearing powerless over their franchises, AQC defended them publicly, even while privately expressing dismay over, and futilely trying to control, the regional groups’ counterproductive activities. Finally, in the face of extreme reputational harm due to ISIS’ excessive violence and overt insubordination by its leadership, Zawahiri was forced to disavow AQC’s first regional affiliate in February 2014, thereby implicitly acknowledging the limits of the central leadership’s influence and ending the “golden age” of AQC’s franchising project.

6.2 Findings

The fundamental debate among scholars that emerged after AQC began extending its franchise to regional groups centered around the question of how the Al Qaeda network should be characterized organizationally and operationally, particularly regarding the role of the central command vis-à-vis the affiliates. Most readings of this

issue have fallen into one of two schools of thought:⁸⁶⁰ 1) Al Qaeda remained an essentially cohesive and “leader-led”⁸⁶¹ organization, with the central leadership actively steering the affiliates; or 2) AQC’s influence and control has tended to be overstated, and by this time period was limited to providing inspiration for elements of a diffuse “leaderless *jihad*” or “Al Qaeda social movement.”⁸⁶² This thesis concludes that neither of these explanations is entirely accurate, but each provides a measure of insight to understand the true organizational and strategic dynamics of the Al Qaeda organization. Newly available Al Qaeda internal documents make clear that, in alignment with Hoffman, Bergen, Riedel, and other proponents of the first school of thought, its leaders envisioned a hierarchical organization, in which the central command reserved the prerogative to direct the affiliates, and it issued extensive orders and strategic guidance to the regional groups. Correspondence between AQC leaders and the affiliates suggests that the franchise *emirs* at least conceptually accepted their subordinate roles, with AQ/ISI/ISIS leadership being likely exceptions. However, aside from adoption of AQC’s anti-“far enemy” rhetorical themes in their public messaging, the affiliates almost universally failed to abide by the central organization’s strategic guidance, placing the central organization’s *de facto* influence and control over its franchises closer to Sageman, Burke, Gerges, and other adherents to the second school’s description of a marginalized central leadership with little direct influence over its affiliates.

Differing strategic visions and communication difficulties across the Al Qaeda network may explain these patterns of non-compliance, as Byman and Mendelsohn argue.⁸⁶³ However, a closer look at the affiliate groups, supported by important commentary contained in correspondence among Al Qaeda officials, reveals that organizational friction, incompetence, and preference divergence internal to the franchises likely contributed more significantly to the regional groups’ deviation from

⁸⁶⁰ See Chapter 1, section 1.5.5. for discussion of these dominant schools of thought and their proponents.

⁸⁶¹ Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares, “Al-Qaeda’s Continued Core Strategy and Disquieting Leader-Led Trajectory,” *ARI 37/2013*, Real Instituto Elcano (10 September 2013), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/169414/ARI372013-Hoffman-Reinares-Al-Qaeda-strategy-leader-led-trajectory.pdf>

⁸⁶² Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 125-33

⁸⁶³ See Chapter 1, section 1.5.6, and Chapter 2, sections 2.3 and 2.3.1.

AQC's strategic framework.⁸⁶⁴ Consequently, rather than leading the Al Qaeda network along a coherent strategic trajectory, AQC found itself continually reacting to its own subordinate groups, adjusting its own policies and approaches to accommodate the franchises or to mitigate damage caused by their unruly behaviors.⁸⁶⁵

6.2.1 Command Relationships and Strategic Guidance

This thesis' investigation of Al Qaeda's internal correspondence revealed that, in the minds of AQC senior leaders and at least many of the affiliate *emirs*, Al Qaeda was indeed a hierarchical organization, with a clear senior-subordinate delineation between the center and the regions. Bin Laden even accepted the Western-coined term "Central Al Qaeda," believing that it appropriately described the original core's position within the broader Al Qaeda network. As outlined in Chapter 2, he saw it as the central leadership's responsibility to guide and support the regional affiliates, and he urged AQC officials to be proactive in identifying ways that the parent organization could assist its franchises. Bin Laden and his lieutenants sought to manage the network by disseminating a steady stream of orders and advice to the regions, covering everything from broad strategic policy, to instructions regarding personnel and financial decisions, to suggestions for growing crops. AQC leaders also expected to be consulted by the affiliate commanders on significant decisions, and they demanded regular situation reports from the field. Correspondence between the affiliates and AQC demonstrates that the regional *emirs* generally were deferential to AQC leaders, often soliciting their guidance and even delaying actions while they awaited the central leadership's responses. AQI/ISI/ISIS provided an unsurprising exception to this willing adherence to an interactive senior-subordinate relationship. The available documentary record shows no instances of the Iraqi affiliate's leaders reaching out to AQC for approval or guidance, but AQC's internal documents contain numerous expressions of frustration at AQI/ISI/ISIS' sparse communication and lack of responsiveness to the central command.

Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other AQC senior leaders placed great importance on the need for disciplined adherence to a strategic framework to enable achievement of Al

⁸⁶⁴ Chapter 2, section 2.3.2.

⁸⁶⁵ See the conclusion to Chapter 3 (section 3.6) for discussion of this finding.

Qaeda's ultimate objectives of freeing the Muslim world of infidel influence and restoring the Caliphate. Through broad policy issuances and tailored, franchise-specific instructions, the central leadership diligently sought to achieve strategic conformity across the Al Qaeda network. Bin Laden even directed his staff to develop a training curriculum for Al Qaeda members that would include instruction in the organization's "general policy."

Chapter 3 of this study surveyed the extensive body of strategic guidance that AQC issued to the affiliates, leveraging access to the new collection of Al Qaeda's internal documents to compile a more comprehensive and detailed accounting of AQC's guidance than was previously available in the literature. For the purposes of this investigation, AQC's strategic guidance was grouped into four categories: campaign guidance, diplomatic guidance, targeting and conduct guidance, and media guidance. AQC's campaign guidance contained the fundamental priorities and steps that should be taken to achieve the organization's ultimate objectives, stressing focus on the "far enemy," the need to prosecute *jihad* in deliberate stages to set conditions before declaration of an emirate, and avoiding conflict with local security forces or opening other "side fronts." AQC's diplomatic guidance complemented its campaign framework by advising the affiliates to avoid conflict with other Sunni militant groups, with the Shia and other religious sects, and with tribes and local civilian populations upon which the regional franchises relied for support and sanctuary. Targeting and conduct guidance underpinned the other elements of AQC's strategic framework by establishing parameters for the affiliates' military operations in order to protect the reputation of the *mujahidin* and to align the affiliates' tactical actions with strategic objectives. Finally, reflecting AQC leaders' belief that "half of [Al Qaeda's] battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media,"⁸⁶⁶ the central leadership frequently counseled the franchises on their media operations, stressing synchronization of messaging themes with strategic objectives and careful calibration of content, tone, and timing to appeal to the sympathies of the *ummah*.

⁸⁶⁶ Al-Zawahiri, "Letter to Zarqawi," 10.

6.2.2 Patterns of Affiliate Non-Compliance and Possible Causes

Chapter 3, leveraging new insight from this thesis' multi-method approach, provides a comprehensive assessment of compliance across the affiliate network with each of AQC's many areas of guidance. Although the regional affiliates' media operations consistently included expressions of obedience to the central leadership's orders, and of solidarity with the parent organization's "far enemy"-centric strategic approach, objective analysis of the franchises' actions reveals that the regional groups did not match their words with deeds. With few exceptions, the affiliates uniformly violated each tenet of AQC's strategic guidance, belying both AQC's and the franchises' propaganda, and challenging the first scholarly school of thought referenced above which holds that AQC effectively directed its global network of affiliates.

The franchises' most fundamental breach of AQC's strategic guidance was their failure to focus operations against the "far enemy." This thesis' comprehensive examination of attacks conducted by the affiliate groups, using information contained in the Global Terrorism Database, reveals that, between 2004 and 2014, only a single attack against a Western country's territory can be attributed reliably to an Al Qaeda franchise, and only 0.03 percent of affiliate attacks in Middle Eastern or African countries primarily targeted Western nationalities or interests. Even more notable, these attacks, which caused 19,824 total casualties, resulted in only 14 Americans killed and 23 wounded, a poor track record of tactical success against what bin Laden prioritized as the "head of the snake" of global infidelity.⁸⁶⁷

AQC leaders' cautioned the affiliate groups against opening "side fronts" and becoming entangled in conflict with local security forces, but the franchises' operational records show clear departure from this guidance. Forty-two percent of the affiliates' military activities targeted local military and police, representing a slight increase in these "near enemy"-related attacks, compared to the regional groups' operations before they joined Al Qaeda.⁸⁶⁸ This parochial targeting focus distracted from operations against the "far enemy," but it also imperiled the affiliates' security by prompting retaliation by local

⁸⁶⁷ See Chapter 3, section 3.4.1 for discussion and data.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid.

regimes, and it undermined the franchises' popular support by alienating the Muslim communities from which the security forces drew their ranks.

The affiliates also departed from AQC's strategic guidelines by impatiently establishing "emirates" without first ensuring that they possessed the capacity to defend the occupied territory or to provide for and earn the support of the populations they sought to govern. Their hasty attempts to form Islamist pseudo-states, ignoring AQC leaders' careful explanations of the "stages" required to set the conditions to ensure an emirate's success, diluted strategic focus on the "far enemy," created resentment among their Muslim constituents, and invited the humiliation of defeat.⁸⁶⁹ Flaws in the affiliates' strategic campaigns were exacerbated by their failures to heed AQC's diplomatic guidance, which was intended to help build popular support, to create allies, and to avoid sources of conflict that could derail strategic objectives and sap lives and resources.⁸⁷⁰

The most critical element of AQC's targeting and conduct guidance, tied closely to the diplomatic guidance discussed above due to its impact on popular sympathy for the Al Qaeda network, emphasized the need for the affiliates to avoid operations that spilled the blood of innocent Muslims. In this area, the franchises overwhelmingly failed to meet AQC's intent. Prior to affiliation with Al Qaeda, attacks primarily targeting private citizens and property accounted for 24 percent of the regional groups' operations. After union with Al Qaeda, the overall percentage of attacks against this category of target increased to 26 percent. These operations generated disproportionately high casualty levels, accounting for 32 percent of all deaths and injuries caused by affiliate attacks (1,636 killed and 4,754 wounded), more than twice the total resulting from any other category of attack.⁸⁷¹ These operations merged in the public perception with the large numbers of Muslim civilian casualties resulting from collateral damage during affiliate

⁸⁶⁹ See Chapter 3, section 3.2.1, for overall analysis. For case study discussion, see Chapter 4, sections 4.4, 4.5, and 4.10.2 (ISI) and Chapter 5, section 5.6.3 (AQIM).

⁸⁷⁰ See Chapter 3, section 3.3, as well as case study discussion in sections 4.4, 4.5, 4.10.2, and 5.6.3. AQC's diplomatic guidance closely complemented its campaign guidance, so success or failure in one typically would be accompanied by similar outcomes in the other.

⁸⁷¹ See Chapter 3, section 3.4 for discussion of AQC's targeting and conduct guidance, assessment of the affiliates' aggregate operational patterns, and AQC's continual efforts to manage and mitigate damage resulting from the affiliates' counterproductive actions.

attacks on local security forces, creating a major reputation and legitimacy problem for the franchises, and, by association, AQC. The widespread condemnation from across the *ummah* stemming from the affiliates' undisciplined targeting practices undermined AQC leaders' wish for Al Qaeda to be seen as the *jihadi* vanguard of the Muslim community, and was just as impactful at hindering achievement of AQC's strategic agenda as were the franchises' inabilities to take the fight to the "far enemy."

Finally, although the franchises communicated commitment to AQC leadership and the parent organization's strategic priorities in their public messaging, the central leadership frequently was disappointed by indiscipline in the affiliates' media operations.⁸⁷² AQC leaders disseminated extensive advice on optimizing the impact of propaganda activities, but the regional groups persisted in diluting their strategic effect and alienating audiences through unfocused messaging themes, insensitive content, and clumsy timing. Ineffective media operations, particularly ones that offended Al Qaeda's desired constituency within the Muslim community or failed to address adequately the growing criticism of the affiliates' activities, risked the credibility and acceptance in the eyes of the *ummah* that AQC leadership believed was necessary for achievement of its strategic goals.

This analysis offers several possible explanations for the patterns of affiliate non-compliance with AQC's guidance upon which this thesis has shed new light, including preference divergence, communication challenges, and franchise-level dysfunction. Preference divergence, or differing strategic visions, between affiliate *emirs* and the central leadership certainly have contributed to some actions by the franchises that departed from AQC's strategic framework. For example, multiple public statements by AQI/ISI/ISIS leaders clearly articulated that group's intent to prosecute its sectarian campaign against the Shia, notwithstanding AQC leadership's persistent attempts to dissuade the Iraqi franchise from pursuing that particular "side front."⁸⁷³ The question of whether AQAP should escalate operations against the Saleh regime in Yemen and declare an emirate was a topic of debate that played out in multiple letters between AQAP *emir* Nasser al-Wuhayshi and AQC senior leaders, with Wuhayshi ultimately rejecting AQC

⁸⁷² See Chapter 3, section 3.5.

⁸⁷³ See Chapter 4, sections 4.2 and 4.3

leaders' repeated arguments that the conditions in Yemen were not right for establishing an emirate.⁸⁷⁴ Although the franchise leaders typically sought AQC's approval for major decisions, as discussed above, it is possible that their deferential words concealed a greater unwillingness to subordinate their local agendas to AQC's globally-focused strategic priorities.

Communication challenges inherent to clandestine, illicit, and dispersed organizations also may have played a role in limiting the responsiveness of the regional franchises to AQC's directives.⁸⁷⁵ Both the central leadership and affiliate leaders frequently lamented the difficulties and delays of conveying messages between the center and the regions, stemming from corrupted computer files, captured or unreliable couriers, and the risk of government surveillance. This organizational obstacle undoubtedly contributed to a lack of synchronization across the Al Qaeda network by preventing or delaying delivery of messages containing AQC's instructions or the franchises' responses (and it is possible that affiliate leaders could use these challenges as an excuse to feign ignorance of AQC orders), but it is insufficient to explain the extent of non-compliance with AQC's guidance that characterized each affiliates' activities. AQC used its public statements to reiterate the most essential items of strategic guidance, such as requirements to prioritize operations against the "far enemy" and to avoid causing Muslim casualties. Difficulties successfully conveying secret correspondence would be most impactful for granular pieces of sensitive guidance, such as specific operational details. Affiliate non-compliance extended near-universally to the broad elements of the central leadership's strategic framework, however, not only to minutiae, and the documentary record makes clear that enough traffic successfully passed between AQC and the affiliates that the franchise *emirs* understood at least the general outlines of AQC's guidance.

This study's close examination of the internal workings of the affiliates provides a compelling possible explanation for strategic disconnect between AQC and its franchises. The regional groups, which may be viewed as microcosms of the broader Al Qaeda

⁸⁷⁴ See Chapter 3, section 3.2.1, particularly pp. 81-86.

⁸⁷⁵ See Chapter 2, section 2.3.1 for assessment of this issue at the global network level, as well as Chapter 5, section 5.5.1 for AQIM case discussion.

organization, suffered from unreliable or incompetent personnel, internal preference divergence, and other organizational friction that impeded their own abilities to operate with unity of effort and strategic coherence.⁸⁷⁶ Internal correspondence suggests that the franchise *emirs*, who maintained the closest ties to the central leadership and had been instrumental in the process of Al Qaeda affiliation, generally embraced AQC leaders' strategic priorities and accepted their authority (again, with AQI/ISI/ISIS leaders providing a notable exception). However, the affiliate leaders relied on the lower-level members of their groups to conduct operations according to their own directives. If sub-commanders or rank-and-file were unable or unwilling to execute the *emirs'* orders, then, even if the franchise leaders were themselves in full agreement with AQC's strategic framework, the natural consequence would be the appearance of affiliate-level non-compliance with AQC's guidance.

AQC and affiliate leaders routinely bemoaned the character flaws and incompetence of lower-ranking militants in their internal correspondence. Unreliability or lack of capability among junior leaders and foot soldiers would present challenges to an affiliate's ability to operate in accordance with AQC's strategic objectives, especially considering that attacking well-protected Western interests, conducting carefully planned operations to minimize collateral damage, and resisting the impulse to act on sectarian or tribal grievances would require greater sophistication and discipline than would the regional groups' habitual attacks on civilians and poorly-trained local security forces.

The affiliates also were plagued by friction and strategic disconnect between the franchise *emirs* and their sub-commanders. These divergent preferences typically involved disagreement over how to prioritize global vs. local *jihadi* agendas, or subordinate leaders' reluctance to set aside factional rivalries. For example, Al-Shabaab was torn by significant, often violent internal strife, with nationalist-leaning elements challenging the authority of the globally-oriented *emir*, Godane.⁸⁷⁷ AQIM internal documents found after the group's failed occupation of northern Mali in 2012 reveal that the North African affiliate's *emir*, Drukdal, struggled with disobedience by lower-level

⁸⁷⁶ See Chapter 2, section 2.3.2, along with strong illustrative cases from ISI (Chapter 4, section 4.7) and AQIM (Chapter 5, section 5.6).

⁸⁷⁷ See Chapter 2, section 2.3.2 (p. 64).

commanders.⁸⁷⁸ Echoing typical AQC guidance, he chastised his subordinates for their heavy-handed treatment of locals and their unwillingness to avoid conflict with tribal groups. Intra-group indiscipline and preference divergence even plagued AQI/ISI/ISIS leaders, who saw some of their limited attempts to build alliances with other Sunni insurgent groups sabotaged by subordinate leaders who were unwilling to set aside local grievances.⁸⁷⁹ Under these circumstances, hampered as they were by rebellious subordinates and by the need to balance competing agendas to maintain unity within their own organizations, it is not surprising that the franchise *emirs* were unable to deliver on many of AQC's aspirational, globally-oriented priorities.

6.2.3 AQC Reactions and Adaptations Due to Franchising

A significant finding of this thesis, distinct within the literature on Al Qaeda, is that, on balance, AQC's strategic approach, policies, and actions were more greatly impacted by the franchising process than were those of the regional groups that merged with Al Qaeda. This investigation has shown that, propaganda notwithstanding, the franchises' actions after union with AQC did not reflect substantive changes to their locally-focused strategic orientations or to their typical operational practices. With few exceptions, the affiliates did roughly the opposite of what the central leadership counseled them to do, exasperating AQC leaders. AQC's franchising strategy helped to restore its global profile and its relevance and leadership within the Salafi-jihadist community, but it also left the parent organization captive to the consequences of actions by affiliates over which it had little control.

AQC leaders found themselves in a reactive mode, continuously adjusting the central organization's policies, actions, and rhetoric to accommodate and defend the franchises, while also seeking to protect AQC's own standing and legitimacy in the eyes of the *ummah* when the affiliates' actions garnered criticism. Some of these adjustments were opportunistic, such as leveraging AQIM's access in North and West Africa to increase operational and propagandistic focus on previously low-priority "far enemy"

⁸⁷⁸ See Chapter 5, section 5.6 for this revealing case of affiliate-level internal dysfunction and preference divergence, supported by a strong documentary record of the franchises' confidential correspondence.

⁸⁷⁹ See Chapter 4, section 4.7.

countries, such as France and Spain, or compromising AQC's ethical stances to embrace the affiliates' habitual kidnapping-for-ransom and other criminal practices that offered means to ease the central organization's faltering financial situation.⁸⁸⁰

Most momentously, AQC's strategic agenda was overwhelmed by the urgent need to mitigate the effects of unpopular actions by its franchises. Applying lessons gleaned from their experiences at attempting to manage the affiliates, the central leadership continuously refined their guidance, issued both publicly and in secret correspondence, to steer the regional groups away from counterproductive activities that distracted from strategic focus and incurred reputational harm.⁸⁸¹ When necessary, AQC leaders circumvented their subordinate commanders to intervene in affiliates' affairs to resolve conflicts with other groups that threatened the franchises' security and diverted their focus from AQC's strategic priorities.⁸⁸²

Frustrated by their inability to guide the affiliates according to AQC's strategic framework, and facing significant criticism from across the Muslim community over the franchises' unpopular actions, the central leadership adapted its public messaging approach to compensate for the strategic disconnect between the center and the regions, employing a two-pronged stratagem.⁸⁸³ First, AQC leaders publicly defended their affiliates to protect Al Qaeda's image as a potent, unified, and global *jihadi* organization under the firm control of the central command. Second, and concurrently, AQC leaders used their media releases to deflect criticism by disassociating the parent organization

⁸⁸⁰ See Chapter 3, section 3.4.1, as well as Chapter 5, section 5.7, for examination of AQIM's strong influence over the central organization in these areas.

⁸⁸¹ Chapter 3 assesses AQC's reactive efforts to control affiliate behavior and to mitigate damage done by patterns of affiliate non-compliance in each of the four examined categories of strategic guidance: campaign, diplomatic, targeting and conduct, and media. Chapter 4 (section 4.10), considers the significant influence that AQC's troubled relationship with its first affiliate, AQI/ISI/ISIS, had on the central organization's public messaging strategy, its management methods, and the development of strategic guidance with which AQC leaders sought to apply lessons-learned to steer the entire network of affiliates.

⁸⁸² See Chapter 4, section 4.6.2 for discussion of efforts by AQC senior leaders to intervene in affiliate affairs in attempts to foster unity between the ISI and other Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq.

⁸⁸³ See Chapter 4, section 4.10.1 for analysis of the origins and impacts of this significant adaptation by the central organization to mitigate disadvantageous consequences of its franchising strategy and to attempt to retain control of its strategic agenda. See also Chapter 3, section 3.5.1.

from the affiliates' most objectionable actions, while stopping short of disparaging the franchise groups. AQC leaders walked this rhetorical tightrope until ISIS' excessive brutality and overt insubordination created such reputational risk for the parent organization that Zawahiri chose to disavow Al Qaeda's first regional franchise, thus implicitly acknowledging the limits of the central organization's strategic influence and its control over Al Qaeda's global network.

6.3 Suggestions for Additional Research

This thesis project has provided new insight into long-standing debates about the nature of the Al Qaeda organization, but important questions remain, which would benefit from further research. Much has been written about Al Qaeda already, but the following suggested areas for additional study could provide useful insight by building on the new baseline of understanding this thesis has presented regarding the organizational function and strategic coherence across the Al Qaeda network.

One straightforward area of inquiry would be to use the same methodology and sources employed in this study to conduct similar analyses on the other two levels of the standard Al Qaeda network categorization described in Chapter 1: Al Qaeda associated groups, and Al Qaeda-inspired individuals. The purpose of this investigation would be to separate propaganda and assumptions from reality to refine understanding of the organizational dynamics and influences that have pertained to AQC's relationship with the broader universe of Salafi-jihadist groups and actors, thus completing the mapping of the so-called Al Qaeda movement and providing insight into the characteristics of diffuse, ideology-centric networks, more generally. The findings, methodology, and conceptual approach of this study also could inform research on other current or future violent extremist organizations or other non-state actors, particularly ones with a "franchise" structure, such as ISIS and its regional *wilayats* (provinces).

Another valuable area of research would be an assessment of the "far enemy's" perceptions of and responses to the Al Qaeda organization, in light of the updated understanding of the network described in this thesis. Did the U.S. and its Western allies misperceive the organizational strength, strategic coherence, or threat posed by the Al Qaeda network? What role did years of vigilance and aggressive operations by

international security services play in disrupting AQC's strategic agenda, compared to the role of organizational friction in the parent organization's relationships with the regional affiliate groups and dysfunction within the franchises, themselves? A review of outcomes of Western actions towards the Al Qaeda network during its prime franchising era would inform policy and resource allocation decisions for future counter-violent extremist campaigns.

Finally, a natural next step for research into organizational dynamics and strategy across the Al Qaeda network would be to extend to the present day the research questions and analytical approach that have guided this thesis project. This study would assess the ways in which Zawahiri adjusted AQC's command and control methods and strategic guidance as a result of the schism with ISIS and in response to the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and it would evaluate the state of the Al Qaeda network today. The research would examine the organizational factors that induced some Al Qaeda associates and individual members of affiliate groups to switch their allegiances to ISIS, while the formal regional affiliates remained loyal to an arguably diminished AQC. The investigation also might expand to an appraisal of the efficacy of AQC's overall strategy over time, examining not only the extent of strategic conformity and reciprocal influences across the Al Qaeda network, but also considering the larger, and most fundamental, question of whether AQC's strategic approach ultimately carries the potential to achieve its strategic goals.

6.4 Final Remarks

This thesis, employing new primary source evidence and unique methodological and conceptual approaches to fill gaps in the literature, has offered a new interpretation of the organizational and strategic dynamics of the Al Qaeda network during its critical franchising period between 2004 and 2014, before public schism with ISIS undermined AQC's carefully cultivated illusion of a cohesive and strategically unified global *jihadi* vanguard. As an historical study, this thesis has resolved with a comparatively high degree of confidence critical points of contention in the scholarly debate over how Al Qaeda during this period should be characterized. In so doing, it has established an updated baseline of understanding to inform additional research of importance both to the

field of terrorism studies and to international security decision-making. Although, as this thesis has shown, the intimidating image of a multi-headed Al Qaeda with global reach that inspired widespread consternation for many years after 9/11 was largely a mirage, the organization survives. As long as Al Qaeda or other groups that may share its methods or ambitions persist, research to gain a clearer and deeper comprehension of violent extremist organizations will remain essential.

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