

## Incendiary Marketing: Fanning the Flame of Branding and Brand Recognition for Terrorist Groups

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### Introduction

The rise of the Islamic state of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has overshadowed al-Qaeda and with its rise it has brought a wave of new affiliated groups and lone wolf attacks. ISIS has been able to hold and govern territory in Iraq and Syria, while also attracting and developing affiliated groups in Afghanistan, Libya, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan and elsewhere. ISIS is of course not the only group that has been able to expand its name through affiliated groups. Al-Qaeda expanded by developing groups, most notably in the Middle East (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and North Africa (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). By now it is common knowledge that ISIS once began as one of those al-Qaeda affiliated groups as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Developing these affiliates, is of great importance for the propagation and expansion of their branding. These affiliates should be seen as what they truly are: franchises. Both al-Qaeda and ISIS demonstrate the importance of these franchise affiliates, however there has been little attention focused on them in policy discussions and Counter-Terrorism (CT) operations. The survival of the franchise is dependent of not only the success of the affiliate remaining, but also the very success of the franchise itself. This is an issue that al-Qaeda has been fighting with since the inception of ISIS and it seems that the group is still combatting that now. However, in order to combat the globalized threat by al-Qaeda, ISIS or even the next group, here has to be an understanding that the franchised groups are as important as the main organization. In order to successfully combat globalized terrorism, we need to ensure that it will not be a globalized game of "Whack-a-Mole".

### Terrorist Franchising

Al-Qaeda gained global prominence after 9/11 and much more so than the almost forgotten World Trade Centre Bombing of 1993. Through this prominent attack, al-Qaeda formed branches in the Middle East and North Africa and attracted other insurgent or terrorist groups. These branches and groups pledged allegiance to soon what was described as al-Qaeda Central (AQC), which operated out of Pakistan. The difference with AQC and its affiliates was that the affiliates acted like mere franchises that had localised issues but were framed in an international level to gain prominence and materiel support. The most conspicuous group was that pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda is the Somali group al-Shabaab [1]. Al-Shabaab rose from the ashes of the Somali civil war that plagued the 1990s, much like the Taliban in Afghanistan. Despite regional efforts sanctioned by the international community, al-Shabaab remains a threat in Somalia and at a regional level. Al-Shabaab has carried out attacks in Kenya in hopes of destabilizing the regional effort to combat them.

The al-Shabaab branch may be unique by not adopting the al-Qaeda brand, but should not be excluded from the wider al-Qaeda phenomenon. Al-Qaeda has been successful with attracting and

developing its own franchises. Unfortunately, so has ISIS which was born from al-Qaeda. For example, Nigeria's Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIS once ISIS became the prominent international terrorist organization [2]. However, one of the most prominent ISIS franchised groups that formed is the Khorasan Group based in Afghanistan. Khorasan Group was formed out of disenfranchised members of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) [3]. The TTP's former communication's director Sheikh Maqbool, whose nom de guerre was Shahidullah Shahid, pledged the TTP's allegiance to the group. Apparently, this was unauthorized and the TTP was quick to denounce this sponsorship and subsequently fired him. With him went several TTP members which formed the ISIS-affiliated Khorasan movement. Shahid was killed in a drone strike in 2015, but the ISIS-affiliated Khorasan chapter continues to be a threat that both the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Other ISIS franchises have taken the spotlight from time to time in the international media, and therein lies the problem. The success of the terrorist franchise is not only dependent on the central group itself, but also of its affiliated members. If the franchises themselves emerge from the shadow of the central group, then there is a significant chance that the franchise will wish to create its own unique organization.

Stepping back, terrorist affiliates around the world sought approval from al-Qaeda in the years after 9/11 and this gave the appearance of a much wider effort. There have been two al-Qaeda groups that have endured and attracted international distinction-al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP continues to be a presence in Yemen, despite the Saudi-led operation against the Houthi rebels and AQAP. AQIM still exists and gained international repute because of the Tuareg-Islamic Extremist coalition that attempted to take over Mali in 2012 [4]. Both AQAP and AQIM have been the poster children for al-Qaeda, but both have not had the breakthrough that ISIS has been able to achieve.

### Terrorist Branding Gets Away

However, there is a point where these franchises or splinter groups reach and want to break away onto to their own path. AQI's gruesome beheading videos attracted millions of views and allowed them to control their own message [5]. When American businessman Nicholas Berg was beheaded by AQI, it was copied onto other sites and downloaded more than half a million times within 24 hours [6]. AQC leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, urged the Iraqi group to halt the production of such videos as it was seen that those videos would dissuade the greater global Islamic population from their cause.

Needless to say, the AQI leadership did not pay too much credence to al-Zawahiri's protest. ISIS was soon disenfranchised from the overall

al-Qaeda brand and ISIS organization soon formed afterwards. Since then the former AQI poster child has developed its own brand.

Another poster child of the al-Qaeda franchise is AQIM, which assisted in the rebellion that almost overtook the Malian government. It was not long until AQIM's former commander, Mokhtar Belomktar disobeyed his mandate by forming a splinter group, al-Murabitun, and started targeting international targets such as the Amenas gas facility in Algeria and hitting hotels in Mali, Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast [7]. Even al-Shabaab has demonstrated its own growing pains. Al-Shabaab carried out attacks at the Westgate Mall and the Garissa University College in Kenya and the Daallo Airlines flight 159 between Mogadishu and Djibouti [8].

The most recent case is the al-Nusra Front. When AQI broke away from al-Qaeda and shifted towards becoming ISIS as we know it now, AQC denounced the group as we know it now, AQC denounced the group and welcomed the al-Nusra Front into its arms as the official Syrian affiliate in 2013 [9]. ISIS and al-Nusra have been opponents during the Syrian Civil War ever since. In 2015, al-Qaeda ordered al-Nusra Front not to attack Western targets and to remain localised in the Syrian conflict [10]. AQC has a history of attempting to micro-manage its affiliates. In recent news, al-Nusra Front announced that it has severed links from al-Qaeda [11].

But these cases of internal fractures are not entirely new. There has been a history of splits within terrorist organizations which, then in turn, create new organizations through in-fighting between the new and the old leadership [12]. During the 1990s in Algeria, the new Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) splintered off in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. Both the Islamic Salvation Front (AIS) and FIS became targets to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). According to Watts, a similar trend can be found within the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and Fatah. The rebellion against the old can be traced back to the new members observing a shortfall in the old and rebelling to bring forth a new strategic or tactical direction. These examples are only twenty years old, but the trend still continues with AQI/ISIS and even al-Nusra Front has turned its back away from al-Qaeda [13].

For AQI, it was moving away from the typical long-winded speeches from the al-Qaeda leadership that had not meaning or bearing on a world that embraced social media and the internet. It was not until 2005 that al-Qaeda stopped delivering videotapes to al-Jazeera and other media outlets and allow them full reign for editing [14].

The issue at hand is not who aligns themselves to whom, but how we conduct CT operations. Older groups are typically unable to halt the advance of a younger group that attracts vibrant foreign fighters and an acceptance of current technology. Al-Qaeda, at the moment, is at a crossroads. The group is attempting to rebrand itself to gain the upper hand in the Battle of Ownership of the Global Jihad (as the UK's Foreign Office eloquently entitles it). AQC is doing so because its leadership are seen to be old and out of touch with the dynamic new world. Unfortunately for AQC, it may be too late.

## The Struggle with Rebranding

In a recent turn of events, AQC's leadership has embraced Osama bin Laden's son Hamza bin Laden to be a spokesman for the organization on occasion. Hamza bin Laden has made a couple of recordings since his release from Iranian house arrest. However, it is his most recent speech that is an interesting development. Although

the recording is a stereotypical, al-Qaeda recording of more than 20 minutes long, it did bear the title "We are all Osama". Despite the lack of brevity in the speech, the emotional angle of Osama's son and the entitled message of "We are all Osama" suggests that al-Qaeda may be attempting to rebrand to a younger generation [15]. One of the main criticisms of al-Qaeda, in the ISIS world, is how the group has become disenfranchised with its target audience. Few have the tolerance or attention span to decipher a 20+ minute speech, whilst a professional quality looking propaganda video from ISIS is more attractive.

AQC has not been able successfully adopt new forms of technological interaction. This being said though, AQAP attempted to garner English-speaking support through the publication of their online inspire magazine. Later on, al-Nusra released its own digital magazine [16]. But this would not meet the international prominence of the ISIS magazine, which six issues were available for sale on Amazon store [17]. ISIS has been able to adopt social media and new forms of communication much better than al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda has been seen as a group administered by elderly men that are not in touch with the 21st century.

It is doubtful that the main AQC brand become more relevant given its leadership and approach, but this does not mean that AQIM or AQAP cannot evolve into a new dominant organization. The same can be said for ISIS and its affiliates once the social media model shifts from attracting those who want to assist in protecting the self-declared caliphate to those who want to seek vengeance for the loss of the caliphate.

That being said, both al-Qaeda and ISIS have fostered terrorist franchises in other parts of the world, but their management style has been divergent. ISIS has held and governed territory in Iraq and Syria while the organization encouraged and promoted attacks through social media. Its management style has been one of outsourcing with little to no management, while al-Qaeda has attempted to control the actions of its franchises. The ISIS leadership has encouraged lone wolf attacks and not the complex 9/11 styled operations that AQC prefers. Because of this, the lone wolf terrorist activities in Europe and North America have created a sense that ISIS is more effective. Many of these attacks have been carried out by those with a history of some degree of mental illness and social isolation, such as the lone wolf attacks in Ottawa, Canada; San Bernardino, United States; and in Nice, France. ISIS is more concerned about propagating the quantity of attacks and not the overall impact. ISIS has been encouraging lone wolf attacks, while al-Qaeda has been aiming for attacks that require a higher degree of planning and organization. That being said, ISIS has conducted a complex attack in Paris in order to demonstrate that the group can conduct such an attack.

With every success conducted by ISIS, or one of its franchises, it further increases the reputation of the franchise and of the central organization. ISIS has starkly contrasted al-Qaeda as it has not attempted to micro-manage the conduct of its franchises. In fact, this is the successful element of the ISIS brand that has many analysts looking back to their copies of the "Leaderless Jihad" [18]. But the movement is not leaderless, but only immensely decentralized. In order to combat it we need to concentrate on the franchises as well as the central organization.

## Going Forward

There has been much concentration on AQC's leadership and on degrading the territory that ISIS possesses. Unfortunately, there is a key element that needs to be addressed-the franchises. The success of the

ISIS or al-Qaeda brand is dependent on the success of its franchises. Moreover, many of these groups decide that after a period of prominence can move on to form their own jihadist initiatives.

The USA and its allies have conducted a degradation campaign to disassemble AQC's leadership. Osama bin Laden was killed during a raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan but many of its leaders are still alive such as Ayman al-Zawahiri. The USA carried out a targeted killing of Anwar al Awlaki, an American Islamic cleric who was a senior al-Qaeda recruiter and motivator. This did not occur until al-Awlaki, based in Yemen, motivated capital Nidal Hasan to carry out the 2009 fort hood shooting that claimed the lives of 13 and injured an additional 32 people.

The success of the terrorist group's brand relies on its own success, but also the success of its franchises. Although there should be a concentrating to remove the central group, there should not be less of an effort to remove its franchises. In addition to this, it is also important to identify areas where such franchises might pop up. To combat these potential areas, an influx of socio-economic aid and security forces training might be required to stave of the threat of localized groups that would desire to join a globalized franchise [19]. If preventative measures are not undertaken then the next al-Qaeda or ISIS may emerge.

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