Where next for Al Qaeda?
by Rear Admiral Chris Parry CBE

Statement of intent
What does the death of Osama bin Laden mean for Al Qaeda? This paper looks at likely successors to bin Laden’s throne and argues that, in the absence of a strong, charismatic leader, we may well see the emergence of disparate Al Qaeda groups throughout the world, responding to their own leadership and regional circumstances. It will become even more vital to monitor money flows throughout the world.
Introduction
Much of the speculation in the wake of the announcement and confirmation of the death of Osama bin Laden has dealt with who is likely to succeed him at the head of the Al Qaeda (AQ) ‘franchise’ conglomerate. In the absence of an immediate declaration in favour of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the AQ ideologue and bin Laden surrogate, it is still not clear who will emerge. It is worth remembering that allegiance to AQ’s authority was exclusively concentrated in the person of bin Laden and it will not be easy to recreate a similar focus of loyalty, subordination and commitment. Although a capable organiser and recruiter, with a track record of imprisonment and fanaticism back to his teens, Al-Zawahiri is known to lack the operational credentials, authority and personal magnetism of bin Laden.

Consequently, it seems likely that the circumstances of bin Laden’s death will temporarily – or even permanently – damage the AQ ideology and slow the momentum that has been the main inspiration for Islamist terrorism over the past decade or so. Any new leader would need time and opportunity to forge a compelling messianic vision and heroic identity, as well as authority and character to demand allegiance and enforce discipline. However, it is reasonable to speculate at this stage whether AQ will survive as a cult based on bin Laden’s legacy, as a revived force under a new figurehead or will be sustainable in its own right, either as a coherent entity or as a loose affiliation of outsourced and franchised elements.

Bin Laden’s legacy
In reality, bin Laden had for some time been a distant, detached, almost mythic figure, with many authorities in the Islamic and wider world writing him off as dead already. It had long been evident that, for operational purposes and as a result of events in the Middle East and North Africa, AQ had been rapidly losing traction, reputation and influence as a dynamic, world-wide brand. Early details about the circumstances under which bin Laden was living and communicating with those inspired by his example and message confirmed how de-centralised and semi-detached the vast majority of AQ cells and operatives had become in relation to their so-called ‘leader’. The exigencies of having to deny intelligence about his whereabouts seem to have severely limited his desire and degraded his ability, as the nominal ‘CEO’ of AQ, to orchestrate or routinely control the activities of a global enterprise.

Indeed, bin Laden’s enforced reclusiveness since 2002, along with that of his senior team, has probably significantly retarded the development of the AQ programme as envisaged by its creators before the 9/11 attacks - a loose, but coherent and disciplined affiliation of militant Islamist groups under AQ strategic leadership. Although AQ established a powerful branch in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), together with other franchises in Iraq, North Africa (Islamic Maghreb) and subsidiaries in Yemen and possibly Somalia, it is clear that the exercise of strategic leadership has been severely constrained, through necessity and counter-terrorist efforts, to one of providing simply the core ideological glue (manhaj), ‘brand’ association and indirect resourcing.

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Franchise operations

Consequently, AQ’s franchises have grown and thrived as its centre has withered. All have primarily attacked Western interests in their individual geographic areas, even though Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has tried to extend its operations to the US with its attempt to exploit cargo planes and toner cartridges in the latter part of 2010. Similarly, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) captured 7 employees (including 5 French people) from the French company, AREVA, in Niger, although it is not certain whether this was a top-down or local initiative, or whether AQIM even authorised the activity.

At the same time as AQ’s former hierarchy has come under pressure and been neutralised, it would appear that the regional franchises, while retaining nominal allegiance to the cause, have created their own networks of influence, funding and patronage, largely based on personal, family or tribal connections. These more diverse relationships would appear to have replaced or supplemented traditional personal relationships based on shared combat experience, hardships or training. Four South Korean tourists and their local guide were killed in Yemen by an AQAP suicide bomber, who had apparently received his training in Somalia; the restaurant bomb in Marrakesh in Morocco seems to have been the work of AQIM, using explosives familiar from other AQ-associated attacks. Indeed, AQ cells in Yemen and the Horn of Africa would appear to be operating more or less independently. The historic legacy suggests that these AQ affiliates are likely to continue to operate on the basis of ‘business as usual’.

This process of fragmentation is likely to intensify as long as an interregnum exists in the AQ core leadership and local AQ elements are left to their own devices. In the short term, AQ is likely to present a less cohesive and more locally textured aspect. The pathology of recent terrorist movements suggests that there will be a degree of internal tension and disagreement, coupled with competitive efforts to gain and sustain relevance and support, possibly leading to a succession and primacy struggle, both between elements of the AQ network and between individual personalities. This is likely to involve the calculated use of expressive terrorist violence and a ruthless scramble, within Koranic principles, for followers, allegiances and resources, both online and in the real world.

It is worth bearing in mind that the experience of the past 60 years or so is that terrorist organisations and movements tend to have an effective half-life, during which their appeal to their constituency and capacity to do harm decays at a steady rate. This decay can occur because the original context within which the terrorist entity arose ceases to be relevant, the original generation of activists passes or the movement is changed by its experience and events. Groups and organisations can ‘morph’ into criminal organisations, like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), or they can simply fade away, giving way to younger, more assertive or more modern groups. They can, of course, simply become irrelevant through changes in political and economic circumstances, or be eliminated by security elements, especially if they are parasitic elements within one country.

In AQ’s case, the organisation has existed for some 24 years and shown itself to be capable of adaptation according to geographic context and changing circumstances and able to develop a transnational footprint. With the loss of bin Laden, it is facing its first generational shift and it remains to be seen whether the Old Guard at the centre retains its influence or the younger, modernist elements in the affiliates prevail in the struggle for power. The demographics and direction of travel of the Arab world would seem to suggest that the latter, while perhaps deferring to their elders in principle will be increasingly likely to go their own way in practice.

The likelihood is that, in the absence of a charismatic leader, the various geographically-based elements of AQ will continue to assert themselves and,
while retaining the name and prestige associated with the AQ brand, will increasingly become independent operational and ‘business’ units. These will draw on grievances, perceptions of injustice and inequality and poor governance in particular regions or countries and will increasingly be shaped and incentivised by their local circumstances. Violence will primarily be perpetrated against foreigners and foreign businesses in the local area, but with occasional attempts to demonstrate capability to impact on the international stage.

It seems feasible that these local and regional AQ elements could embed themselves deeper within their societies, possible taking on some of the social support, criminal and protection racket activities associated with organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. They could also possibly act more overtly as the proxies for states seeking to de-stabilise potential or undeclared opponents and competitors, especially in struggles for regional dominance, particularly in the Gulf and South Asia.

The most important trend leading into the future is that the AQ ‘franchise’ is likely to lose its ‘brand’ exclusivity and that other entrepreneurial jihadist groups will challenge its perceptual and actual primacy. Bin Laden, as with any other charismatic founder, gave the AQ brand authority and credibility among those supporting a range of grievances and issues. As such, it will be necessary to remain alert to the likelihood that more diverse terrorist and criminal groups and organisations will seek to arrogate to themselves the prestige, tactics and resources associated with AQ. It should not be forgotten that the IRA in Northern Ireland splintered into and spawned various offshoots – the Provisional IRA, the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA – none of which retained more than nodding allegiance to the core movement. Some moved to open confrontation and conflict with it. However, it is entirely plausible that, given past behaviours, the remnants of the original AQ hierarchy will seek to assert their primacy and authority by staging terrorist spectacles that will impact on the global consciousness and cause severe loss of life and property. The very real danger for the international community is that the various elements of AQ, both at the core and among the franchises, will compete to establish their credibility, attract resources and support, and seek leadership and ownership of the brand, through escalating, competitive levels of terrorist violence, as witnessed in Iraq. Opposition to the forces and aspirations awakened by the ‘Arab Spring’ and in response to the explicit rejection by Muslims of the idea of a ‘Caliphate’ would seem to offer pretexts, together with the continuing rule of so-called ‘apostate’ states in the Gulf.

Implications

The AQ model and franchise is threatened with marginalisation by centrifugal forces (the loss of authority by the core and the vacuum in strategic leadership) and centripetal tendencies (the alternative path to the future offered by the ‘Arab Spring’). In these circumstances, in addition to retaliatory attacks to avenge the death of bin Laden, it will be tempting for AQ to attempt to regain influence and authority by employing demonstrative violence against prestige targets that would attract support and draw approval from Arab and wider Islamic opinion. However, the AQ brand was severely tarnished by its killing of fellow Muslims in Iraq and its absence in the popular movements in the Middle East and North Africa indicates AQ’s irrelevance in the short term. Taken together, this would tend to suggest that the US, Israel, Europe and India need to be especially vigilant in the short term, along with foreign enterprises and expatriates in Islamic countries. In the medium term, as we have seen above, a more defined threat to both liberalising and traditional Arab states may emerge, especially if the material benefits of freedom and reform do not materialise.

Given the complexities and uncertainties in the Islamic world, it also means that constant vigilance will be required to ensure that resources and systems remain in place to track and map possible terrorist behaviours, networks and individuals and to provide adequate indicators and warnings of terrorist activity. It is evident
in these circumstances that the policy, processes and tactics currently used to
deter and defeat terrorist acts and activities need to be reinforced, including
international and national efforts to suppress regional affiliates and to maintain
security arrangements in civil societies. The issue of Pakistan as a terrorist refuge
will also need to be resolved. There can be no immediate ‘peace dividend’.
In parallel, the fleeting opportunity should not be missed to detoxify and de-
romanticise the underlying AQ brand ideology and narrative. In particular, this
process could usefully de-couple AQ from the societal change under way in the
Middle East and North Africa. It would dove-tail neatly with the staged withdrawal
of Western military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, more meaningful strategic
engagement with the Islamic and unambiguous support for the legitimate
aspirations of citizens across the Muslim world.

Most importantly, the critical lessons that need to be drawn from the rise of AQ to
prominence ahead of the 9/11 attacks are that behaviours, statements and actions
need to be assessed in relation to vulnerabilities, rather than overt threats, and that
so-called ‘weak signals’ have to be properly evaluated as indicating a significant
cumulative, joined-up risk. Similarly, intelligence alone is not enough to deter
and defeat determined terrorists, able to lever the vulnerabilities of open societies
at will. Here, imagination and agile thinking, together with a more sophisticated
understanding of human networks, the personalities within them and the
operation of patronage, will be vital in maintaining both visibility and grip on what
is likely to become a more diverse, amorphous threat. This aspect is especially
important as AQ franchise units continue to operate wholly or semi-autonomously;
it will be vital to understand the local contexts in which they act and the resources
that sustain them, together with the connections, contacts and tribal conditions
that allow them to survive. It will be particularly important to track money flows,
as succession crises and major realignments in terrorist and criminal organisations
tend to result in the exposure of individuals involved in scrambles to secure both
institutional and personal financial resources.

About the author
Rear Admiral Chris Parry CBE, spent 35 years in the Royal Navy as a Seaman and
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Maritime Warfare Centre and HMS FEARLESS. Along with regular operational tours
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Award from the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators.

From 2001, as a Commodore, he was Director Operational Capability in the
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Task Group. As a Rear Admiral from 2005, he formed the Development, Concepts
and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) and spent 3 years as its Director General. Here, he led
and supervised the complete revision of all Armed Forces’ thinking and operation
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Nowadays, he works as a non-executive director, consultant, writer and lecturer,
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