

EGYPTIAN LEADERS

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Renewing leadership

The role of Egyptians and Libyans in Al-Qaeda's senior leadership

Rivalries between the Egyptian leaders in Al-Qaeda and their detractors have been simmering for years, but Osama bin Laden's death has cast fresh light on the contradiction of such nationalism within an ideology that espouses Muslim fraternity. **Guido Steinberg** reports on the potential schism and how events could develop in the future

With his ascent to the post of Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri has finally taken over an organization which he, together with his Egyptian entourage, has dominated since it was established in the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, his position is considerably weaker than that of his charismatic predecessor Osama bin Laden, who was killed in a US special forces raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on 2 May 2011. This is due to Zawahiri's personal shortcomings (the lack of personal charisma being only one) but also because he represents Al-Qaeda's Egyptian wing, which has been criticized by other parts of the organization because of their perceived group solidarity and over-representation in the organization's higher ranks.

Although the differences between national groups within Al-Qaeda have lost some importance (largely as a result of the enormous pressure drone strikes have placed on its leadership since late 2007), they may still hinder Zawahiri from effectively rebuilding Al-Qaeda and propagating its vision and agenda.

This could also be the case if Al-Qaeda's Iranian-based leaders become more active. Unconfirmed media reports in mid-May 2011 citing Pakistani intelligence and jihadist sources even suggested that its leading figure, Sayf al-Adl (an Egyptian) had succeeded Bin Laden as Al-Qaeda's interim leader.

Every indication is that Al-Qaeda will need to integrate Gulf Arabs or at least a

Yemeni into its leading circle if it wants to retain its position in the global jihadist movement, while encouraging the Gulf Arabs to keep fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan rather than joining Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen.

Opposition to Egyptian dominance

Zawahiri is a much less engaging personality than was Bin Laden, as indicated by the rather muted response from Al-Qaeda affiliate groups to the 16 June 2011 announcement that he had succeeded Bin Laden as leader of Al-Qaeda. Although he commands respect in jihadist circles, because of his role as a strategic thinker and Bin



(Far left) The upward mobility in the Al-Qaeda movement for non-Egyptians seems to have been driven by the loss of important Egyptian operatives and Al-Qaeda's inability to replace them. The most prominent loss was of Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Al-Qaeda's commander in North Waziristan and its unofficial third in command, who was killed in a US drone strike in Miramshah, North Waziristan, on 22 May 2010. (Left) Competing groups emerged after AQSL was weakened by the loss of its base in Afghanistan. The most successful of them was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Jemaat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (Unity and Jihad Group), which from 2003 fought against U.S. forces in Iraq. Zarqawi's aim was to create an alternative to the Egyptian-dominated Al-Qaeda by defining goals attractive for the Levantine Arabs. The detrimental effect of Zarqawi's policies for Al-Qaeda were somewhat mitigated by the subsequent integration of his group into the organization. In October 2004, a statement appeared on a jihadist website (seen here) in which Zarqawi swore allegiance to Bin Laden and changed the name of his organization to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Laden's long-time deputy, he is frequently criticized for his lack of charisma and rhetorical skills and has the reputation to be jealous, quarrelsome and something of a know-it-all – a characterization uncomfortably close to a stereotype of the Egyptian upper classes that is widespread in the Arab world. Zawahiri's 90-minute rebuttal in April 2008 to a series of questions posted on jihadist websites in December 2007 and January 2008 did little to quell such a depiction.

Perhaps more importantly, many jihadists may resent Zawahiri's ascent, because they are critical of traditional Egyptian dominance of Al-Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL).

Rivalries between the Egyptians and their detractors have a long history within Al-Qaeda. When the organization emerged in the mid-1990s as an alliance of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), led by Zawahiri, and the Saudi-Yemeni-dominated group led by Bin Laden, the Egyptians quickly filled the upper echelons of Al-Qaeda's hierarchy. Zawahiri became the Al-Qaeda deputy leader, Muhammad Atef (Abu Hafsa al-Masri, killed in a US airstrike on an Al-Qaeda safe house in Kabul in November 2001) was named military head of the organization, and other Egyptians, including

Atef's deputy, Sayf al-Adl, held most of the important posts in Al-Qaeda's functional committees. Without the ideological, strategic and military expertise of the Egyptian contingent, most of Al-Qaeda's operational successes since the mid-1990s would have been impossible to achieve.

Concurrently, however, Egyptian dominance of AQSL proved to be of mixed utility to the organization, as it fostered a degree of hubris. Many Egyptian jihadists viewed themselves as natural leaders in the organization, provoking resistance by several groups and individuals. Among them were many of Bin Laden's followers from the Gulf and Yemen, who criticized the excessive solidarity of the Egyptians within AQSL. Even more importantly, a younger genera-

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tion of jihadists across North Africa, Syria and Jordan argued that the narrow agenda pursued by Al-Qaeda's Egyptian and Saudi personnel was at odds with the ideal of supranational solidarity within the Muslim community, limiting the overall appeal of Al-Qaeda's ideology and message.

Egyptian influence became an especially important source of friction after the Al-Qaeda attacks on US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in August 1998, when an increasing number of young men from across the Arab world travelled to Afghanistan in order to join Bin Laden's organization. At this point, many non-Egyptians realized the discrepancy between the ideal of a supranational community, and the reality of Egyptian domination of Al-Qaeda. Internally and externally, Zawahiri and his followers had to cope with significant resistance.

Abu Musab al-Suri

The Syrian ideologist and strategist Abu Musab al-Suri was perhaps the most vocal critic of the Egyptians within AQSL. Although not a member of the organization, he was an influential strategic thinker among many jihadist groups. His opposition to the Egyptians was to some extent



A substantial part of AQSL has been based in Iran for most of the past decade and led by Egyptian national Sayf al-Adl. The image on the left is an official photo released by the FBI. The second image is taken from an Al-Qaeda video filmed in Afghanistan in January 2000 and subsequently recovered by the US military and leaked to the media in October 2006.



dictated by his origin, as most Syrian jihadists felt that the Saudis and Egyptians did not take their objectives – which concentrated on the Levant in general and Israel in particular – sufficiently seriously.

Suri was more critical of Bin Laden and his Peninsula Arabs than of Zawahiri and the Egyptians, but his conflict with the latter was especially important as Zawahiri had established himself as the strategic head of Al-Qaeda and thus competed in Suri's field of expertise. According to Suri, the Saudis and Egyptians not only dominated the organization, but adjusted Al-Qaeda's strategies to their national interests, undermining Al-Qaeda's Islamic internationalist credentials and ensuring that the group was still permeated by old-fashioned and un-Islamic parochialism. Suri demanded a comprehensive anti-Western strategy and was heavily critical of Zawahiri's focus on toppling the Egyptian regime, which he viewed as detrimental of the broader jihadist movement. According to Suri's (probably correct) interpretation, even the strategic shift of the mid-1990s – when Zawahiri

began to argue that in addition to targeting local Arab regimes, jihadists would also have to focus on the US, Israel and Russia – was only a vehicle in order to return to a local Egyptian strategy once the conditions were again ripe.

Palestinians and Jordanians

Suri's criticism of the Al-Qaeda leadership mirrored similar grievances of fellow militants from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian territories. Until several years after 2001, the impression was widespread that Al-Qaeda remained insufficiently committed to the struggle against Israel. Zawahiri was singled out by many of these militants, because of his then famous dictum that "the road to Jerusalem passes through Cairo", meaning that the jihadists would first have to topple the Mubarak regime before liberating Palestine.

Although Zawahiri had changed his attitude in the mid-1990s, most militants from Syria and its neighbouring countries did not take seriously Al-Qaeda's lip service to the fight against Israel, hampering the

organization's abilities to recruit volunteers from the Levant. Therefore, competing groups emerged after AQSL was weakened by the loss of its base in Afghanistan. The most successful of them was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's *Jamaat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* (Unity and Jihad Group), which from 2003 fought against US forces in Iraq. Zarqawi's aim was to create an alternative to the Egyptian-dominated Al-Qaeda by defining goals attractive for the Levantine Arabs.

Thus, he claimed that after the successful campaign in Iraq, the jihadists would establish an Islamic state and carry the jihad to neighbouring states and finally liberate Jerusalem. Zarqawi defined goals that helped recruit Levantine Arabs, in the process creating an alternative to the Egyptian-dominated Al-Qaeda.

The detrimental effect of Zarqawi's policies for Al-Qaeda were somewhat mitigated by the subsequent integration of his group into the organization. In October 2004, Zarqawi swore allegiance to Bin Laden and changed the name of his organization to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). This

gave Bin Laden and Zawahiri the chance to convey the impression that they were in control of a former competitor and that Al-Qaeda was an important force in the Iraqi insurgency. It quickly became clear, however, that AQSL could not control the maverick commander in Iraq. In reaction to a request by Zawahiri in July 2005 that Zarqawi cease his “total war” on the Shia population in Iraq, Zarqawi made clear that the Al-Qaeda-deputy leader had no influence whatsoever on the strategies adopted in Iraq, and only after Zarqawi was killed in June 2006 was AQSL able to solidify its control of its Iraqi branch.

The Libyans

Another group critical of Egyptian domination and Zawahiri’s strategies were some leading members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Most prominent among them was Abu Laith al-Libi (died January 2008), who commanded the remnants of the Libyan contingent in the Afghan-Pakistani border region. In 2006, reports in the Arab press indicated that Abu Laith’s dissatisfaction with Egyptian domination in AQSL was the primary driver behind his distancing from the group. In fact, he seems to have preserved older and deeper reservations towards the Egyptians and Al-Qaeda in general. The LIFG had always been staunchly nationalist, focussing solely on the fight against the regime of Muammar Ghaddafi in Libya. As a consequence, while in Afghanistan before 2001, they had built close relations with the Taliban – a nationalist jihadist movement – rather than with Al-Qaeda.

Abu Laith had also established close relations with other groups critical of Al-Qaeda, especially the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other Central Asian groups that have been, and in parts still are, highly critical of, or even hostile to, Al-Qaeda. At some point between 2004 and 2007, however, Al-Qaeda managed to mend relations with Abu Laith, who subsequently merged the remnants of the LIFG in Pakistan and Afghanistan with Al-Qaeda. The merger was a huge success for Al-Qaeda, demonstrating its willingness to appease and integrate critics into the organization.



(Left) Abu Laith was a vocal critic of Egyptian dominance of Al-Qaeda and the strategies pursued by the Egyptian contingent prior to his death in a US drone strike in North Waziristan in January 2008. (Right) Abu Yahya al-Libi is the highest-ranking member of Al-Qaeda’s senior leadership (AQSL) in its North Waziristan stronghold following the deaths of Mustafa Abu al-Yazid and Sheikh Attiyatallah. His ascent in the leadership structure demonstrated to a wider jihadist public that AQSL is willing to enable greater upward mobility in the organizational structure for non-Egyptians.



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The step was especially important because it coincided with the rise in the ranks of two other Libyans – Attiya Abu Abd al-Rahman (alias Sheikh Attiyatallah) and Abu Yahya al-Libi – heralding a new era of Egyptian-Libyan co-operation at the senior levels of Al-Qaeda’s leadership structure.

Egyptian-Libyan co-operation

AQSL has in recent years allowed greater upward mobility in the movement for non-Egyptians in general and for Libyans in particular. The main reason seems to have been the loss of important Egyptian operatives and the inability to replace them.

The most prominent loss was Mustafa Abu al-Yazid – Al-Qaeda’s commander in North Waziristan and its unofficial third in command – who was killed in a US drone strike in Miramshah, North Waziristan, on 22 May 2010. An accountant by training, Abu al-Yazid had run Al-Qaeda’s financial committee before 11 September 2001 and

had established excellent relations with Mullah Omar and the Taliban, quite unlike several of his colleagues. He is known to have criticized the plan to attack New York and Washington, DC, because he rightly assumed that the US would retaliate and topple the Taliban regime. However, Abu al-Yazid remained loyal to his superiors and became an important liaison between the Al-Qaeda leadership and the Taliban. Consequently, he was named Al-Qaeda’s leader in Afghanistan in May 2007 and filled this position until his death in 2010.

Quite strikingly, he was replaced by the Libyan Sheikh Attiyatallah, effectively ending the Egyptian monopoly on the number three post in AQSL. Attiyatallah had risen in the ranks of the organization after 2001 and had primarily become known as a religious and strategic thinker in AQSL.

Although his tenure was brief – he was killed in a US drone strike in North Waziristan on 22 August 2011 – Attiyatallah firmly established himself at the helm of the organization headquarters in North Waziristan, from where he co-ordinated Al-Qaeda’s activities in the Pakistani tribal areas and plotted attacks in Europe. German jihadists arrested in Afghanistan and Pakistan later in 2010 revealed during interrogation that Attiyatallah, rather than the publically more prominent Libyan Abu Yahya, was the operational head of Al-Qaeda during their months in Waziristan. According to the German-Afghan Ahmad Sidiqi, Abu Yahya was clearly Attiyatallah’s

Rewards for Justice



Syrian Yassin al-Suri (alias Izz al-Din Abd al-Aziz Khalil) is a senior facilitator, recruiter and financier responsible for an Al-Qaeda logistics network in Iran. A rise to prominence of Al-Qaeda's Iran-based leadership could trigger a strategic re-orientation of the group, as well as internal power struggles.

subordinate, while fellow German militant Rami Makanesi, a German-Syrian national, described the latter in his May 2011 testimony as "Al-Qaeda's leader in the region of the states of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan". According to Makanesi, who met several high-ranking Al-Qaeda and IMU members during his stay in Waziristan, Attiyatallah was the only local leader with direct access to Bin Laden and Zawahiri, a possible indication of constructive relations between the Libyan and Egyptian.

After the death of Attiyatallah (and with the current whereabouts of Zawahiri unknown), Abu Yahya is the highest-ranking member of AQSL left in its North Waziristan stronghold. According to Makanesi, Abu Yahya is "now the second boss of Khorasan [Afghanistan]. After the killing of Hafiz Sultan [Mustafa Abu al-Yazid], Attiyatallah took his position and then Libi replaced the latter".

Abu Yahya escaped from jail on Bagram airbase in July 2005 and joined Al-Qaeda in the Pashtun areas of the Afghan-Pakistan border. In the years since, he has emerged as Al-Qaeda's most senior ideologue and religious authority, heading the still functioning sharia committee in Waziristan. Abu Yahya's ascent proved to a wider jihadist public that AQSL was ready and willing to enable greater upward mobility in the organizational structure for non-Egyptians and

non-Saudis, especially because his frequent public appearances drive this point home to an increasingly internationalist jihadist public. Abu Yahya speaks to North Africans, Somalis and some Central Asians just as he addresses Iraqis and many Europeans. Due to his rising popularity, he might be the right person to open new markets for Al-Qaeda among groups that have in the past been critical of Egyptian domination. Especially important is his close relationship to Mullah Omar and the Taliban and to Uzbek groups, especially the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), in the tribal areas of Central Asia. Whether he can replace Attiyatallah as an operational leader remains to be seen.

The leadership in Iran

The ascent of the Libyans will make it easier for Zawahiri to mask the cultural differences and conflicts between the Egyptians in AQSL and their detractors, which have shaped the history of Al-Qaeda for so long. Every indication is that the Al-Qaeda leadership active in the Afghan-Pakistani border region is nationally more heterogeneous than it has ever previously been.

Nevertheless, a substantial part of AQSL has been based in Iran for most of the last decade and led by another Egyptian nation-

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al, Sayf al-Adl, who is reported to have followed Abu Hafis al-Masri as military head of the organization after the latter's death in late 2001. Sayf first came to the world's attention in 2000, when he was indicted by the US government in connection with the bombing of its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998. He was subsequently added to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) list of most wanted terrorists, with his entry consisting of an old black

and white photograph, various alternative names, including Muhammad Ibrahim Makkawi, and an offer of up to USD5 million for information on his whereabouts.

Arguably, the future of the Egyptian role in Al-Qaeda might be influenced by this group of leaders, who appear to have been allowed more leeway by their Iranian hosts from 2009 or 2010. If Sayf and his followers assume a greater role in Al-Qaeda in the future, the organization might well change its strategic course considerably, potentially reigniting traditional rivalries between the group's Egyptian and non-Egyptian leaders and supporters.

When Al-Qaeda was forced from Afghanistan in late 2001, the leadership split into two groups. While Bin Laden and Zawahiri fled to Pakistan, Sayf was responsible for the Al-Qaeda contingent who escaped to Iran. The differing itineraries appear to have mirrored a more fundamental split within AQSL over strategic direction: Sayf together with Al-Qaeda's religious head, Abu Hafis al-Muritani, and others are reported to have been critical of Al-Qaeda's decision to attack the US in 2001, realizing that the US would react by toppling the Taliban regime, thereby destroying Al-Qaeda's rear base.

This difference of opinion did not have any major influence on the organization since Sayf and most of a group of senior Al-Qaeda personnel who fled to Iran are reported to have been detained by Iranian security forces in early 2002 and held under a light form of house arrest by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Although most of these individuals (including Sayf, Abu Hafis al-Muritani and Bin Laden's son Saad) seem to remain in Iran, the IRGC appears to have eased the restrictions on their freedom of movement.

After eight years in Iranian captivity, Sayf was reportedly released and said to have returned to Pakistan. In April 2010, *The Asia Times* newspaper cited a former director of a European intelligence agency as saying that Iran had secured the release of a diplomat by freeing a number of Al-Qaeda operatives, including Sayf. This claim was reiterated in German magazine *Der Spiegel* in October 2010, which cited

Noman Benotman, a former Libyan jihadist who now works for a UK-based counter-radicalization think tank. According to Benotman: "It is almost certain that Sayf al-Adl has been released, that he is currently in the Pakistani province of North Waziristan, and is operating as Al-Qaeda's military chief."

Without concrete evidence to prove otherwise, it is quite possible that Sayf continues to reside in Iran. Nonetheless, other former detainees have joined Al-Qaeda in the Pakistani tribal areas. According to Makanesi, who described meeting an Iraqi Al-Qaeda veteran in Waziristan: "I once met an Iraqi who told me that he had been jailed in Iran for seven years. One day in early 2009 many Al-Qaeda-members arrested there were released and returned to Waziristan. These were all people with year-long experience. They are now hidden by Al-Qaeda."

Furthermore, Makanesi confirmed information that Attiyatallah was known to have lived in Iran for many years. He also claims to have met the Al-Qaeda official Yassin al-Suri (alias Izz al-Din Abd al-Aziz Khalil). According to the US Department of Justice, Yassin (a Syrian member of Al-Qaeda's Shura Council) is a senior Al-Qaeda facilitator, recruiter and financier responsible for a logistics network in Iran. According to Makanesi, he met Yassin in February 2010 and was asked to accompany him to Iran. Makanesi stated that Yassin was responsible for funneling money and recruits via Iran and that he was known to co-operate with the Iranian government.

Prospects for a new leadership

All the available evidence points to an easing of Iranian restrictions for Al-Qaeda personnel in the country in recent years. It remains to be seen, though, whether this will have influence on the leadership structure of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan where Zawahiri and Abu Yahya seem to hold the reins for the time being. If Sayf and his comrades manage to wrest greater influence and control of the inner workings of Al-Qaeda they might well change its strategic and organizational course. Judging by his opposition to the 11 September 2001 attacks and his

penchant for inclusiveness, Sayf will probably make an effort to keep a lower profile than Bin Laden and Zawahiri, and attempt to quietly rebuild the organization. Sayf would also lead a more pragmatic strategy, trying to build and strengthen alliances among insurgents in the Muslim world, while de-emphasizing Egyptian dominance in Al-Qaeda and most likely even co-operating closely with Iran.

Iranian policy is probably the biggest

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uncertainty in this regard. Not much is known about the motives of the Iranian leadership (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards) for hosting Al-Qaeda leaders for the past decade, but it might safely be assumed that they want to use them either as a bargaining chip in negotiations or as an instrument in any future conflict with the US. As tensions over the Iranian nuclear program escalate, it is conceivable that Iran will make an effort to use Al-Qaeda for its own purposes.

With the support of a state sponsor, Al-Qaeda might well reinvent itself under the leadership of Sayf in the coming years. He would still face a significant leadership challenge, however, since his detractors may point to his lengthy stay in Iran and suspicious release as evidence that he is now an agent of the Islamic Republic, which would undermine him in the eyes of Al-Qaeda's often vehemently anti-Shia supporters. Be that as it may, Al-Qaeda and its Egyptian and Libyan leaders will have to solve a problem if they want to retain at least their financial independence. With the death of Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda not only lost its char-

ismatic leader, but the only Saudi national of its senior leadership. Egyptian dominance in the leading ranks of the organization was a much reduced problem as long as Bin Laden was alive and at the helm of Al-Qaeda. That might change now, because without him Gulf financiers will probably be reluctant to provide a group dominated by Egyptians and Libyans with the necessary donations. As these have been the main source of Al-Qaeda finances since the 1980s, AQSL will have to react. If it wants to retain its access to money from the Gulf, it will have to integrate a Saudi citizen into its senior leadership and promote him as an important leader.

For the time being, the only known possible candidate is Saad Bin Laden, the late Al-Qaeda leader's 31 year-old son. Although Saad was reported to have been killed in a drone strike in Pakistan in July 2009, subsequent reports in Arab media in July 2010 quoted another of Bin Laden's sons, Umar, as saying that Iran was prepared to release around 20 members of the family, specifically mentioning Saad as one of them, suggesting his brother was still alive. Saad is reported to stay in Iran with Sayf, but has hitherto not played any prominent role in the organization. Without a Saudi national in a prominent leadership position, Al-Qaeda is not very likely to survive as the transnational organization that it has been for the past 15 years.

Most importantly, as an organization with an Egyptian face, Al-Qaeda central is likely to lose recruits from the Gulf countries to its branch in Yemen, AQAP, which has established itself as the vanguard of Al-Qaeda terrorism since 2009. As German militant Makanesi has noted, he gained the impression during his stay with Al-Qaeda in Waziristan that there was a movement of Al-Qaeda personnel away from Pakistan to Yemen. ■

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