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The al Qaeda Franchise Model: An Alternative

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This article stems from a series of posts I recently wrote at [al Sahwa](#), and is intended to offer an alternative to the commonly accepted “franchise” model that is frequently discussed in reference to al Qaeda (AQ) on a global scale. Just a few examples of the widespread use of the word “franchise” are available [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). My intent is not to provide an operational framework or design for AQ subordinates at the operational or tactical levels; instead, my aim is to supplant “franchise” with “conglomerate” as the most representative business model for the relationship between AQ and its affiliate groups.

First, let’s look at the definitions of both franchise and conglomerate (from [dictionary.com](#)):

Franchise - the right or license granted by a company to an individual or group to market its products or services in a specific territory.

Conglomerate - a corporation consisting of a number of subsidiary companies or divisions in a variety of unrelated industries, usually as a result of merger or acquisition.

At first glance, franchise seems like a good fit. But, let’s first analyze both models in a business format and then move on to analyzing al Qaeda. Business models are beneficial for widespread use for two reasons: 1) they are easily palatable for the general public and 2) there is an extensive body of research available. The first point is extremely important because public perception and understanding is vital to any operation outside a nation’s homogenous borders. A wide body of research is important because, if accurately portrayed, it will provide key insight into methods for countering the AQ threat. Following the analysis portion, I will offer several recommendations for countering the global perception of AQ.

Franchise

A prospective small business owner in Small Town, USA decides he wants to invest in a fast food franchise. He then analyzes what he feels this small town is missing, and takes a look at a website like <http://www.franchiseopportunities.com> to see what opportunities in fast food exist. The businessman eventually decides upon my favorite sub shop, Jimmy John’s. The businessman buys into the franchise and starts setting up shop in the small town. The new Jimmy John’s becomes just another Jimmy John’s, carrying the same name and packaging, selling the same food, etc. If this small town has a specific style of sub that is popular in that region (like a Po

Boy in Louisiana or a Cuban in Florida), the new Jimmy John's would not be able to capitalize on that popularity and sell Po Boys or Cuban subs. They are restricted to make and sell what is approved by Jimmy John's corporate headquarters. Another key consideration is that the sub shop is a Jimmy John's before the doors open on the first day. It's not often that you see a mom & pop shop open up and then later buy into Jimmy John's or Subway to become a franchise.

Conglomerate

In a business conglomerate, a major corporation buys a smaller company to gain a foothold in a specific industry in an effort to diversify. The major parent corporation then likely will provide one or more personnel to the smaller company's board of directors to provide strategic guidance. Otherwise, the smaller company is (typically) left to its own devices. If the smaller company attempts to employ a new business tactic or push a round of optimization, they can draw upon the larger company for subject matter experts on whatever task they are undertaking or having issues with. The major corporation offers guidance, knowledge, trainers, etc. in an effort to enable the success of the smaller company. Each subordinate company maintains its own leadership structure with only a few key personnel reporting up to the larger corporation, and largely guides itself through day-to-day operations. Lastly, it is important to highlight that the smaller companies of a conglomeration were usually in business before they became a part of the larger corporation. This is an important aspect to remember as we look at al Qaeda.

al Qaeda Context

Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahideen (HSM), better known to Western audiences as al Shabab, of Somalia is a fine example for this discussion. After splintering from the Islamic Courts Union in 2006, the group has grown steadily. Starting at first as purely a national insurgency against Ethiopian forces, HSM later moved on to targeting the Transitional Federal Government and rival militias like Hizb ul Islam. In June 2008, HSM leadership published its first communiqué that began with greetings to al Qaeda Central Leadership (AQCL). This is the first known signal that HSM had aligned with AQ and moved into the ranks of global jihad. Although to be approved to carry the AQ banner, HSM must have made previous overtures toward AQCL that they were prepared to elevate their attacks to a regional and/or international level. What makes HSM more like a subordinate company in a conglomerate than an AQ franchise?

- HSM was in business before aligning under AQ, which likely did not occur until June 2008.
- HSM maintains its own leadership and goals while simultaneously supporting AQCL's overall global ambitions. For background on HSM's movement into the ranks of transnational jihadism, click [here](#) and [here](#).
- AQCL reportedly provides operational and planning subject matter experts to HSM. The emerging tactics and media capabilities of the organization also lend credence to a [foreign training cadre](#) in Somalia.
- Despite the subject matter experts on the ground and other forms of support like communiqués from Abu Yahya al Libi and Ayman al Zawahiri, HSM is largely left to its own devices for how it will prosecute their front of the war.

- Just as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb(AQIM) is in the business of kidnappings (see [here](#) and [here](#) for two examples) to support the anti-West AQ agenda, and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) attempted the [Christmas Day bombing](#), HSM utilizes attacks on [free speech](#) in Europe to prosecute their style of global jihad against the West. Different methods for unique organizations that are all still prosecuting the greater AQ campaign.

Some may argue that this difference is largely a case of semantics, but these semantics help drive our conceptual understanding of al Qaeda, and it is vital that we accurately portray our enemy in order to attack them as efficiently and effectively as possible. For this reason, I feel it is important to challenge the commonly accepted framework of al Qaeda and its subordinate terrorist groups. If this were a franchise, the tactics and methods between all groups mentioned in bullet five would all be the same. Instead, they represent the capabilities and strengths of each group. In essence, each group is producing their own regional “Po Boys”, and not operating from a headquarters-specified menu.

There is recent open source reporting that Hamas and its offshoots have made efforts to align themselves under al Qaeda. The [article](#), citing a not-yet-published study from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says that Hamas and affiliated offshoots are being snubbed by al Qaeda for failing to prove that their intentions extend beyond the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. If true, this helps fortify my assessment that AQ and subordinate groups are more like a conglomerate than franchise. In a business sense, this situation is akin to a major corporation conducting an assessment of a potential takeover target and determining that the smaller company is not a viable “fit” with the company’s long-term business plan. In the case of AQ, a key facet of their long-term agenda is to wage war against the West, principally the United States. Subordinate terror groups are merely tasked with prosecuting AQCL’s long-term interests within their own set of capabilities and unique strengths. In the case of HSM, they have a large Somali diaspora spread throughout Europe and North America that they can draw upon. AQAP had a Nigerian national who traveled to Yemen and seemingly offered himself up for a suicide attack. Each attack by a subordinate organization against a Western target benefits not only that organization; it serves to strengthen the overall AQ conglomerate through additional media attention that benefits recruiting and financial support. Recent attacks against the West came from AQ in the Caucasus, who were the [likely perpetrators](#) of an attack against a Russian police station in Dagestan; HSM, who was likely responsible for the [attempted assassination](#) of Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard; and AQAP, who has already admitted being behind the attempted [Christmas day bombing](#) of an international flight headed to the United States.

Looking back at the definition of a conglomerate that I provided near the top of this post, let us simply remove the words “unrelated industries” and replace them with the word “regions”. When re-examining both definitions, conglomerate with the replaced words, which one now seems to be the best fit for AQ? Al Qaeda as a franchise with a set playbook (i.e. menu) of attack methods, capabilities and goals, or a conglomerate made up of subordinate terrorist groups that prosecute their own brand of terrorism at home and against the West within each group’s unique set of strengths and capabilities?

I'll finish this portion with thoughts on the recent suicide attack on the CIA in Khost, Afghanistan. Three separate elements claimed to have prosecuted the successful attack on 30 December; but only the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) had the story and the video evidence to support the claim. In a franchise-modeled AQ, one would typically expect to see one message from the entire organization following a successful attack. This, obviously, was not the case and is important to consider as I transition to targeting (or in many cases, countering) the global AQ entity.

Targeting

As we've seen over the course of eight years, AQ gets an "A" for resiliency. Combating the organization has proven far more difficult than probably originally anticipated after 9/11. Continued attempts to lump all subordinate groups into one homogenous entity are counter-productive to long-term efforts; it makes US and/or UN efforts and operations in one Theater appear futile because the overall organization still appears strong to the global audience. In essence, successful efforts in one Theater are immediately overshadowed in the eyes of the global audience by an attack executed by another group in a different Theater or region. "Sure they picked up a bunch of terrorists in Iraq, but the Afghan Taliban did this, and HSM did *that*." In this final section I will offer lethal and non-lethal concepts for targeting a conglomerate-modeled AQ that, I believe, will benefit our endeavors globally.

Lethal

Using my tweaked definition for conglomerate, where I replaced "unrelated industries" with "regions", a conglomerate model allows for a better conceptual strategic targeting framework. In a franchise model, victory will only come through the defeat of the corporate headquarters. Individual franchisees will board the doors if their higher HQ goes under; you won't see an independent Jimmy John's if corporate HQ fails. In a conglomerate model, the higher headquarters can be targeted through its smaller companies.

Most importantly, a conglomerate model better incorporates national and regional dynamics in play and accepts that there are no "cookie-cutter" solutions to problem sets. These dynamics help tailor national (or international) responses to combating these subordinate terror groups. US support to both Ethiopia and the Somali TFG, and direct support to the Yemeni government, are great examples of national and regional dynamics affecting targeting. Though Ethiopia failed in their AMISOM mission, their prevailing role in East Africa cannot be ignored. In Yemen, the West has chosen to provide support primarily to the Yemeni government, and not outwardly support Saudi incursions south of the border.

Depending on the scope, a conglomerate model suggests it is more important to target intermediaries and subordinate terror group leadership. AQ Central Leadership becomes less important in this model. I am not advocating that we stop our search for those at the pinnacle of AQ, instead I advocate placing personalities like Hakimullah Mehsud, Sheikh Ahmed Abdi Godane and Abu Saleh al Somali (EKIA 8DEC08) on an equal tier. Personalities like Abu Saleh al Somali are especially important; they not only serve in a "senior conglomerate" staff role, but

also serve as a critical node between HSM and AQ Central Leadership. These critical nodes are vital to successfully targeting the seams of a conglomerate.

A conglomerate model will help intelligence analysts identify terror groups attempting to align under AQCL earlier. Multiple groups have stepped up attacks outside their borders. AQAP was nearly successful in their attempted airline attack; AQIM continues to target and kidnap Western tourists across the Sahel; HSM conducts attacks in bordering nations Ethiopia and Kenya, and is considered a potential threat to the FIFA World Cup this summer in South Africa. Hamas was snubbed because they were not “continental” enough in their terror undertakings. Another group in another region will again attempt to align by taking their fight regional or more. This “escalation” could potentially serve as an early indicator (or key milestone for fledgling salafi-jihadist groups) for the intelligence community to provide additional analytical effort.

Non-Lethal

Starting with the entire context of current conflict, the term “GWOT” is not only incorrect, it is counter-productive. I believe such a gross over-generalization of this current conflict draws from a conceptual misunderstanding of AQ as a franchise-style organization. A conglomerate model allows Western and Host Nation governments to more effectively prosecute a longer-term information operations campaign by reducing our threshold for success, much in the same way AQ elements have executed so well. Success in one region against one conglomerate subordinate becomes just that, success. By removing the global context, we remove the argument of AQ as an unstoppable movement. This provides us with a great opportunity to marginalize AQCL. The emphasis is placed on subordinate groups with their own problems, issues, complaints, etc. These central problems become the focal point. Along those lines, I am a staunch advocate of removing the “AQ” prefix these sub-organizations garner in western media. If these groups maintain a unique organizational name, like Harakat Shabaab Mujahideen, it is imperative that we discuss them by that name and not al Qaeda in East Africa.

By de-emphasizing AQ as any kind of united or homogenous entity, instead marketing them as disparate regional or national insurgencies and/or terror groups, we set the conditions for fissures to develop between AQCL and subordinate groups. The 30 DEC Khost attack is a prime example of a fissure that we could have exploited. Three separate entities claimed responsibility for the attack: the Afghan Taliban (AT), AQ and TTP (Pakistani Taliban). After the apparent foolishness of AT and AQ’s false claims, a conglomerate model would have highlighted the potential fissure and allowed us to attack AQ and subordinate groups with tailored messages. In terms of AQCL we could have highlighted the unwillingness of subordinate groups to cooperate with AQ’s attempted media plan after the strike. By continuing along this line, we would hope to create an over-reaction on the part of AQCL by attempting to rein subordinate groups back in. Toward subordinate groups we could have highlighted that AQCL wants to steal the glory that should be bestowed upon the small group. Taking it one step further, we could then have pushed for recognition that AQCL is not actually in charge of each group’s destiny, they drive their own train and fight their own fight. The non-lethal targeting opportunities after AQ’s IO fumbling were tremendous; sadly, from my vantage point we missed the boat. The hope obviously is that any fissures created through these targeting recommendations would grow and eventually cause

AQCL's own subordinate groups to marginalize AQCL and weaken the accompanying brand/ideology.

Conclusion

By changing our frame of reference from franchise to conglomerate, we will be better poised to anticipate areas of growth for AQ. As previously noted, these smaller national and regional groups started off without a transnational agenda; instead they maintained their own list of local or regional grievances. When identifying the next round of potential "breakouts", one organization with potential is Nigeria's Boko Haram. Political turmoil over the extended absence of President Yar'adua and a fresh round of religious violence may set the conditions for a re-emergence of a stronger, better supported organization.

The isolation (where applicable) of future terror outbreaks as local issues reduces the perception of "us vs. them" and eliminates the allure of AQ's central anti-West message. This is a war of information and popular ideas more than a war of bombs and bullets.

Prior to my last deployment, a common theme for all levels of Battalion leadership was to stress that it did not matter how many times a Soldier had previously deployed, we were going to a new area with unique challenges. This mindset allowed us to approach the problem set in Mosul, Iraq without any preconceived notions of what worked elsewhere just a year prior. On a similar note, no single business model fits perfectly, AQ continues to grow and morph. The true strength of a conglomerate model is that it allows for greater multi-disciplinary and multidimensional exploration of each sub-organization independently, while simultaneously (and rightly) isolating the effects of al Qaeda's central capabilities and supporting cadre.

The opinions and recommendations provided are those of the author and do not reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. Army.

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