

# Al-Qaeda since the Death of Bin Laden

## Jean-Pierre Filiu

Professor

Sciences Po (Paris Institute of Political Studies), Paris

On 21 January 2011, Osama bin Laden aired a particularly threatening message directed against France, demanding it immediately withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. The aggressiveness of this message is all the more remarkable, considering that the leader of al-Qaeda generally reserved such violence for a demonised “America” accused of all the ills of Islam. In any case, bin Laden did not have a word to say on the fall of President Ben Ali, overthrown in Tunisia a week earlier by a popular uprising in which Islamists played no role. There was a staggering discrepancy between the al-Qaeda leader’s discourse, hammering home demands regarding the Indian subcontinent, and the reality of the Arab world, which had entered a revolutionary phase of historical significance.

No-one knew at the time that this speech was to be bin Laden’s last. On the night of the 1st to the 2nd May 2011, the leader of al-Qaeda was killed by an American commando unit after storming his hideout in Abbottabad, northern Pakistan. The disappearance of the most wanted person on the planet long mobilised the Western media, whereas it was quickly displaced in the Arab media by other, more pressing developments. As a young Tunisian stated at the time: “Ben Ali, bin Laden, they’re history.” And the very survival of the organisation founded by bin Laden in 1988 now emerges as an acute issue to his successor at the head of central al-Qaeda. The situation of the three branches of al-Qaeda, in Iraq, Yemen and the “Islamic Maghreb,” is, however, quite varied.

## A Problematic Succession for Central al-Qaeda

The (primarily digital) documents seized in Abbottabad prove that bin Laden, far from being a symbolic figure, continued to supervise the planning of al-Qaeda terrorism until his death. The rigorous security mechanism that had protected him for so long entailed that Ayman al-Zawahiri, though his tried deputy, was not involved in all of “Emir” bin Laden’s decisions (“emir” in this case meaning “commander”). Moreover, the founder of al-Qaeda remained the undisputed leader, since any membership, whether individual or collective, involved an unconditional oath of allegiance to “Sheikh Osama.”

To facilitate this transition, central al-Qaeda created an unprecedented structure, the General Command, which made bin Laden’s death official and validated its own existence through this proclamation (before this, there was only the Consultative Council at the summit of al-Qaeda, a poorly named institution since it functioned as the organisation’s executive body). Despite this clever manoeuvre, it was not until 16 June 2011 that the General Command announced that Ayman al-Zawahiri was indeed the new leader of al-Qaeda. Even taking into account the heavy constraints of being a clandestine organisation, this month-and-a-half-long delay demonstrates that the promotion of al-Qaeda’s second-in-line to the position of leader raised many issues.

In fact, only the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda has pledged allegiance to al-Zawahiri, and this via the voice of its own “emir,” Nasser al-Wuhayshi, on 26 July 2011. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have limited themselves to singing the praises of al-Zawahiri through the intervention of intermediate officers. These statements

of deference are a far cry from the formal oaths required by Jihadi protocol. Al-Zawahiri has thus lost the direct authority exercised by bin Laden over AQI since 2004 and over AQIM since 2007. This contraction of al-Qaeda around its first circle and its Yemeni branch is not compensated by the ostentatious rallying of the Pakistani Taliban (*Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan/TTP*) around al-Zawahiri, nor by that of the Somali al-Shabaab, for these two movements are too anchored in their respective arenas to fully integrate global Jihad. The same can be said of the group recently emerging in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Ansar al-Jihad (Partisans of Jihad), whose emphatic declaration of allegiance to al-Zawahiri on 23 January 2012 is part of an active media campaign.

### **Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Yemeni Formula**

Since 2009, the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda amalgamates the Saudi networks that have chosen to retire towards the South to escape the repression of the Arabian kingdom. Called al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), it embraced a revolutionary discourse against President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been in power in Sana'a since 1978 and at the head of a unified Yemen since 1990. Confronted with unprecedented protest beginning in February 2011, the Yemeni dictator did not cease to raise the spectre of al-Qaeda to justify his remaining in power.

### **The disappearance of the most wanted person on the planet long mobilised the Western media, whereas it was quickly displaced in the Arab media by other, more pressing developments**

Thus, on 30 September 2011, he facilitated a fatal American raid against Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-Yemeni imam highly active in AQAP propaganda. Washington appreciated this move all the more since al-Awlaki had been suspected of carrying out or planning different attacks on US territory. The Yemeni opposition, on the other hand, denounced the manipulation of the Jihad menace by

Saleh and his regime. It accused the regime of conniving laxness towards AQAP's takeover of cities in the southern province of Abyan. This process of duplicity was accentuated with AQAP's occupation of the town of Radda, 170 km south of Sana'a, on 14 January 2012. Shortly before this, Saleh had signed an agreement to step down, and protesters denounced him for postponing its application in the name of the struggle against AQAP. However, the Yemeni President eventually did agree to step down, leaving his allies at the head of the intelligence services. The paradox is that AQAP, aggrandised through its media-hyped confrontation with the Saleh regime, ranks in reality as but a second-rate militia in revolutionary Yemen.

### **The Anti-Shiite Obsession of al-Qaeda in Iraq**

In June 2006, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri had appointed an Egyptian jihadi, Abu Hamza al-Muhajer, as the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), but he was killed in April 2010 by the Iraqi army. The proclaimed "caliph" of the "Islamic State of Iraq," Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, of Iraqi nationality, was killed in the same raid. Since then, AQI has distanced itself from central al-Qaeda to return to local issues: for it, the conflict with the Administration of Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, as well as with the so-called "Awakening" (*Sahwa*) Sunni militias, who are United States allies, is implacable. This purely Iraqi orientation of AQI is assumed by its "emir," Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali (also known as Abu Doha or Abu Bakr al-Husseini al-Baghdadi).

### **The succession of bin Laden thus requires a delicate process of renewal of allegiance, which is proving uneven and complex**

The AQI terror, far from subsiding with the perspective of American retreat, intensified as of August 2011, with two waves of particularly bloody attacks: on 22 December 2011 (63 dead) and 5 January 2012 (73 dead). The departure of the US contingent, taking place as planned at the end of

2011, leaves the question of Sunni participation in Iraqi power open, with an increasingly confessional approach by Prime Minister Maliki to the benefit of his own Shiite party. It is in this context of community polarisation that AQI aims to become the armed branch of Sunni dissent. Although the AQI Emir may pay tribute to bin Laden or al-Zawahiri, he can now only do so as the independent head of the most dreaded militia in Iraq.

### The Divisions of the “Islamic Maghreb”

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was constituted when Abdelmalek Droukdal's Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) became part of al-Qaeda in 2007. In early 2011, its members numbered some five hundred jihadis, half of whom are part of the guerrilla of Kabylia led by Droukdal, while the rest live as nomads in the Sahara region, in the *katiba* (battalion) led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar (in the west) or the one headed by Abdelhamid Abou Zeid (in the east), both officially subordinate to Droukdal. Despite its grandiloquent statements, AQIM remained entirely passive during the Tunisian revolution. Moreover, its condemnation of NATO's “infidel” intervention in Libya placed it at odds with the anti-Gaddafi insurrection (though the Libyan despot continued to accuse the rebels of being in bin Laden's pay in a crude manoeuvre to discredit them).

**AQIM would nonetheless take advantage of the civil war in Libya by taking over (together with a good many other criminal groups) part of the weapons looted from the Gaddafi regime's arsenals then sold by various traffickers throughout the region**

AQIM would nonetheless take advantage of the civil war in Libya by taking over (together with a good many other criminal groups) part of the weapons looted from the Gaddafi regime's arse-

nals then sold by various traffickers throughout the region. The exact nature of the surface-to-air missiles smuggled to the Saharan *katibas* is still the object of debate by specialised analysts, but it has been confirmed that a new generation explosive device reached the north Algerian jihadi cells. This explosive was used on 26 August 2011 in the spectacular suicide bombing against the Cherchell Military Academy (at least 11 dead). The Algerian army, thus challenged, takes up the offensive again (namely, with the death by ambush of the AQIM treasurer, Adel Bourai, on 28 September 2011), whereas the jihadi chiefs were tried in absentia one after another in Algeria.

### The competition between the kidnapers increased in autumn 2011, reaching areas previously untouched by this scourge

It is in the Sahel that the AQIM threat seems most worrisome, for the flight of Gaddafi's African auxiliary forces has attracted a certain number of them to the ranks of the jihadis. The terrorist escalation is likewise aggravated by the rivalry between Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid, the latter having attempted to use his connections to central al-Qaeda against the former. Droukdal's refusal to swear allegiance to al-Zawahiri on behalf of AQIM has played into the hands of Belmokhtar, who is gaining power in the region and beyond (his *katiba* is making ties with the Boko Haram Islamist militia in Nigeria). The escalation between the two *katiba* leaders also means an all-out hunt of Western foreign nationals: Abou Zeid is holding four French hostages, abducted in northern Niger in October 2010, and was behind the abduction of an Italian tourist in southern Algeria in February 2011; Belmokhtar, who in January 2011 had attempted to seize two French hostages in Niger (who died during transfer), took over two hostages in June 2011, namely a Briton and an Italian who had been kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

The competition between the kidnapers increased in autumn 2011, reaching areas previously untouched by this scourge. One Italian and two Spanish aid workers were captured on 23 October 2011 in a Sahrawi refugee camp in western Algeria; two

French geologists were captured on 23 November 2011 in north-western Mali on the eve of the kidnapping of three European tourists in Timbuktu (a German national was killed in the course of the attack). Whereas the Mauritanian and Nigerian armies have successfully focused on methodically pushing back the jihadis, northern Mali is looking more and more like the region's "soft underbelly": both Abou Zeid and Belmokhtar have established their more or less itinerant bases there, their hostages are certainly held there, while the Malian army's inability to cover the area is exacerbated by the revival of the Tuareg insurrection, relaunched in January 2012. The disconnection between Droukadal and al-Zawahiri, however, deprives this novel form of "gangster-jihadism" of global perspective and none of the States in the region are at real risk of destabilisation.

## The democratic uprising in the Arab world has effectively closed the "11 September Decade," during which the threat of al-Qaeda constantly hung over Western societies

Bin Laden had so come to embody the globalised dynamics of "global jihad" that his death could not but deal it a terrible, if not fatal, blow. Already, al-Qaeda has lost, together with its charismatic founder, the hierarchical structure that lent it formidable operational coherence: only al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) effectively recognises the authority of al-Zawahiri, from whom al-

Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have become independent. These groups continue to "talk global," while they are increasingly "acting local."

This phenomenon of "glocal" (combination of "global" and "local") terrorism is a source of legitimate anxiety, fuelled by the kidnappings of Western nationals in the Sahel and the deadly escalation of violence by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Yet the democratic uprising in the Arab world has effectively closed the "11 September Decade," during which the threat of al-Qaeda constantly hung over Western societies. It was a Norwegian racist, Anders Breivik, and not an infiltrated jihadi, who brought horror and carnage to his country on 22 July 2011, perpetrating the bloodiest terrorist massacre in Europe since the London attacks six years earlier, which bore the mark of al-Qaeda.

### Bibliography

- BERGEN, Peter. *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and al-Qaeda*. New York: Free Press, 2011.
- FILIU, Jean-Pierre. *Las nueve vidas de Al Qaeda*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2011 (*La Véritable histoire d'Al-Qaida*, Paris: Pluriel, 2011).
- FILIU, Jean-Pierre. *The Arab Revolution*. London: Hurst and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011 (*La Révolution arabe*. Paris: Fayard, 2011).
- LAHOUD, Nelly. *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- RIEDEL, Bruce. *Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America and the Future of Global Jihad*. Washington: Brookings, 2011.