

# The evolution of command

With recent leadership losses raising questions about Al-Qaeda's organisational coherence, **Leah Farrall** examines the evolving dynamics of the group's command and control structures and processes.

According to recent reports, the intensified airstrike campaign against Al-Qaeda in the tribal borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan has damaged its operational capacity, and brings into question the ability of Al-Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL) to effectively govern the organisation in such increasingly challenging circumstances. Yet assumptions about Al-Qaeda's degraded capacity are often based on the death or capture since 2007 of a dozen or so militants, many of whom were not Al-Qaeda members. Rather, they were individuals associated with Al-Qaeda to varying degrees who, for the most part, played a limited role in its internal command and control processes. Al-Qaeda appears to have faced few problems replacing senior leaders detained in the region or killed in airstrikes.

Earlier this year, Al-Qaeda member Bryant Neal Vinas – a US national who travelled to Pakistan in September 2007 and trained with the organisation before being arrested by Pakistan authorities in November 2008 – testified that US airstrikes led Al-Qaeda to order that no more than 10 operatives were to reside in the same location. His revelations led to suggestions that this decentralisation, along with personnel losses, may have damaged Al-Qaeda's command and control processes. From Vinas's testimony it is clear that after Al-Qaeda decentralised, a courier system was put in place to facilitate communication while also minimising the risk of further airstrikes arising from the use of telecommunications equipment.

While this makes communication a more time consuming process, it does not

## KEY POINTS

- Al-Qaeda's decentralised operating structure has cushioned it from the impact of drone attacks and arrests. A clear hierarchy remains intact, supported by robust and adaptable command and control processes, despite the losses it has suffered since 2001.

- This modus operandi for external operations plots has remained remarkably constant in recent years, with plot members assigned several points of contact who provide technical and logistical support.

- Nearly all recent disruptions to Al-Qaeda's operational activity have occurred outside of its Pakistan-based command structure via the arrest of couriers tasked with facilitating franchise communication or co-ordinating the activities of operatives in the West planning for attacks.

necessarily equate to a devolving of command and control. Al-Qaeda has operated with a decentralised hierarchy since fleeing its Afghan base in late 2001. This structure has enabled it to adapt to changing circumstances, including the new challenges posed by an intensified airstrike campaign and personnel losses.

In its Afghan heyday, AQSL maintained direct command and control over all of Al-Qaeda's activities, and in particular, its external operations section and external relations branch. When Al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan, this level of control ceased. As a result, command and control processes devolved and

Al-Qaeda's branch managers and mid level commanders gained more autonomy of action, especially in operational planning matters and external relations. However, a clear hierarchy remains in place within Al-Qaeda, supported by robust command and control processes.

The additional decentralisation of personnel seems to have driven an expansion of this system. However, while adding extra burdens, it does not appear to have degraded Al-Qaeda's command and control processes in any significant manner. AQSL continues to issue strategic orders and other communications.

## External operations

Before Al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan, its external operations section was heavily micro-managed by AQSL. Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Hafs al-Masri (Al-Qaeda's leader, deputy leader, and military operations commander respectively) were involved in target identification and provided direction across a range of operational areas. Bin Laden also personally selected the operatives for Al-Qaeda's external attacks. In this respect, Al-Qaeda operated on a 'great man' leadership style of terrorist recruitment. There was prestige in this personal selection, which was usu-

ally done by Bin Laden on Abu Hafs' recommendation. It was central to Al-Qaeda's ability to turn recruits away from a desire to fight jihad and instead convince them to carry out external operations.

Al-Qaeda's senior leadership ceased to have such an overbearing role after the group had fled Afghanistan. They remained involved in directing which target sets the external operations section should attack, but were less active in providing operational guidance. They were also not involved in selecting operatives for external attacks. This task fell instead to the head of the external operations section, along with

Forensic investigators work amid the debris at the site of the 17 July bomb blast at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia, thought to have been carried out by Al-Qaeda-linked group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). After Khalid Sheikh Mohammad and Riduan Hambali were captured in 2003, JI became isolated from Al-Qaeda's command and control processes

other senior operatives it depended upon, such as Al-Qaeda's chief of military training in Pakistan.

## Recruitment issues

Without access to AQSL, the external operations section has at times struggled to convince newly arrived recruits to participate in external attacks instead of fighting jihad in Afghanistan. Reports suggest that this shortcoming is driven by a lack of access to the senior leadership, whose role in selecting operatives is crucial in steering new recruits towards external attacks rather than participation in local jihad.

In this regard, Al-Qaeda's security precautions have clearly had a detrimental impact on recruitment for external operations. One of the ways in which Al-Qaeda dealt with this was to reinvigorate its training system and levels of progression towards membership. The progression system and personalised reviews by senior leadership, coupled with peer group dynamics in a small group environment, has a radicalising effect.

While not as effective as when combined with the attendance of AQSL at training camps, it has enabled Al-Qaeda to convince some newly arrived recruits to conduct external operations instead of fighting. Information from those who most recently attended such training in Pakistan shows that Al-Qaeda's primary focus is on recruiting operatives for external attacks and that this training system continues to be the means through which it does so.

If this training based system of radicalisation and recruitment is abandoned because of security precautions and ongoing decentralisation, Al-Qaeda's external operations section may struggle to recruit or suffer greater levels of attrition. One potential way it may seek to overcome this

is through internal propaganda productions aimed at raising the status of those who carry out external attacks.

These productions would be effective substitutes for the speeches promoting external operations Bin Laden used to make in Al-Qaeda's camps in Afghanistan. They could also double as an AQSL approval mechanism for external attacks.

### Approval for external operations

Given that most recruits have to be convinced to join Al-Qaeda's external operations section and do not arrive with this type of activity in mind, the role of such permissions, and alongside it encouragement from AQSL, is crucial. A similar process appears to have taken place during early planning of the August 2006 plot to bomb transatlantic aeroplanes, for which three men were convicted by a jury in the UK on 28 September 2009 of conspiracy to murder by detonating improvised explosive devices (IEDs) onboard transatlantic passenger aircraft. All three individuals were sentenced to life imprisonment.

According to reports from Pakistani authorities and other unnamed intelligence officials, Zawahiri is believed to have sanctioned the attacks via his son-in-law, who was reportedly in contact with several of the key plotters and passed this sanction on to them. Zawahiri's son-in-law is also thought by Pakistani authorities to have provided funding to the plotters.

Although Zawahiri approved these attacks, a number of fatwas and directives by Al-Qaeda and religious figures who support it have supplanted the requirement for AQSL approval of all external operations plots. This body of work pre-approves repeatedly attacking certain target classes and countries, and allows the external operations section to have some pre-fabricated, pre-approved plots, which can be operationalised when suitable recruits are identified. This assists the organisation and reduces the command and control burden on AQSL, while maximising the benefits for both its external operations and the franchises it lobbies to carry out such attacks. This appears to be standard practice, given the similarities in Al-Qaeda's

external operations plots and the ideas they are known to discuss and recommend, as well as similarities in training.

When additional permission is required for certain types of extraordinary attacks, Zawahiri appears to be responsible for issuing the necessary edicts, either directly or as a conduit for Bin Laden's instructions. This tends to occur early on in a plot lifecycle, when targets and tactics are first decided. Aside from permission requests, the external operations section operates in a stand-off manner from the rest of Al-Qaeda.

### Structure and modus operandi

Until 2003, there was close co-ordination between the media and external operations sections because they had the same section chief – Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. The management of these two sections under one leader appears to have ceased after Mohammed's arrest in March 2003. However, the media section continues to provide a critical informational conduit for Al-Qaeda leaders to access their senior leadership. It also provides the networks to

**“While Al-Qaeda's executive leadership manages high-level issues, they have deputised senior leaders beneath them to deal with general matters”**

facilitate the transfer of martyrdom videos, which are now made in the later rather than earlier stages of a plot, and outside of Pakistan. The earlier deployment of operatives to target countries, coupled with their deputisation to build a cell and operate in the target country, has seen the old strategy of filming before deployment become unsuitable for most external operations.

To accommodate these changes and support operational activities – which largely occur outside of Pakistan – Al-Qaeda's external operations section operates with a devolved network hierarchy. In most plots, several key members communicate with external operations personnel. Communication is generally restricted to those

members who were originally recruited in Pakistan and have been deputised to enlist additional cell members upon arrival in their target country.

While in Pakistan, they are assigned a case officer(s) who is their primary point of contact, either directly or via an intermediary. This person is responsible for communicating or issuing operational orders, as well as receiving progress reports from the cell. Contact between the appointed cell members and the case officers is usually via email, though some also takes place via telephone.

This modus operandi has remained remarkably constant in external operations plots over the past few years. Email accounts are created during the early stages of plot planning while the lead operatives are in Pakistan. Several email addresses are usually created and the details then shared with the case officers.

Plot members may also have additional points of contact within the external operations section network, such as a point of contact for technical support in IED construction. They may also deal with another external operations member or facilitator for financial support. The person(s) who provides this support to operatives may be supporting multiple plots simultaneously, depending on whether Al-Qaeda has initiated a planned campaign or a more ad-hoc attack.

In some cases, there appears to be an additional contact or communications system to send martyrdom videos to Al-Qaeda's senior leadership. This allows its media apparatus to swing into gear, and facilitate the delivery of the videos, which are now usually made in raw form outside of Pakistan. It is likely that at some point guidance is given to the operatives as to the required narrative on these videos to ensure that Al-Qaeda stays on message.

These multiple channels of communication are agreed early on in the formation of each plot, and are reinforced with multiple network crossovers, which offer a high degree of resilience on the Pakistan end of external operations. If a node is taken out of this network, a plot can still be supported and communication maintained.

### A resilient operating structure

AQSL has very little impact beyond the deployment stage, unless a plot is called off, as was the case when Al-Qaeda abandoned a plot to carry out a chemical attack targeting the New York City subway in 2003. Likewise, the senior echelon of Al-Qaeda's external operations section has a limited role post-deployment. In most instances where contact has been maintained, technical or financial assistance was required by plot operatives. The 2006 transatlantic airliner plot appears to be the exception, where contact was maintained not only for the purposes of logistical support, but also for seeking additional permission for trial runs to ascertain the effectiveness of airport and airliner security.

Generally speaking, the death or arrest of the external operations chief or even a case officer underneath him will do little to stop plots where members have already left Pakistan on deployment. By this stage, targets have been identified and approved and training provided. Taking out a support node in Pakistan might impede a plot's progress if operatives in the target country are having technical or financing issues. However, if adequate training has been provided, this may only result in a disruption to the plots progression and the loss of potential martyrdom videos being sent back to Pakistan.

Although it is undesirable for plot operatives to be left without communication back to base, there is no command and control issue on Al-Qaeda's part with them progressing independently. Significantly, suspicions of being under surveillance do not appear to stop communications between operatives and the external operations section in Pakistan. This indicates a comfort level exists with the communications systems in place, as well as a determination to follow through with plots, despite falling under surveillance.

### Control of affiliates

Al-Qaeda's control of its affiliate or franchise groups, as well as its external outreach, has suffered from disruptions to its courier and intermediary system. However, recent disruptions have largely been on the fran-



Atiya Abd al-Rahman (alias Sheikh Attiyatallah), a Libyan national in his late thirties, is Al-Qaeda's emissary in Iran and a key member of the group's tier-two leadership

chise end of networks, rather than from Pakistan or Iran (which serves as a key outpost in this courier network). In Iraq, these disruptions have been a combination of arrests, deaths and technical issues. The same issues do not appear to have plagued Al-Qaeda in Pakistan or Iran, largely because the communications networks on that end are more robust and able to absorb disruptions caused by such events.

The most recent publicly available intercepted Al-Qaeda communications with its Iraq franchise, from 2008, show that communications methodologies between Al-Qaeda and this franchise remain largely unchanged since its inception. The letters reveal that both groups still rely on open communication via communiqués and messages on the internet. This includes requests for support. Couriers and intermediaries continue to be used to transport letters on more sensitive issues. Letters are stored and often encrypted on storage devices, and transported via a personal courier system as well as possibly over the internet.

The disruptions on the Iraq end of the network have, however, caused Al-Qaeda to lobby the franchise to build additional

robustness into its system and bring in more operatives to the communication chain, which it appears to have done. The letters show AQSL identified who the franchise should use as conduits. These operatives are members of Al-Qaeda or the franchise, who have pre-existing links or are known to AQSL.

The guidance Al-Qaeda provides to its Iraq franchise reveals how it may structure its own communication networks and interact with other affiliates. Outside of nominating operatives known to it, AQSL also specifies that Al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) minister for information be a key point of contact. He is directed to provide both public and private updates and status reports to AQSL about AQI.

This highlights the important role media committees or information ministries in both Al-Qaeda's core and its franchises play in communication networks. Given the crucial role Al-Qaeda's media wing plays in facilitating internal communications in Pakistan and the AQSL stipulation that its Iraq franchise does the same, it is highly likely this method is used to communicate with other franchises.

## Command and control reorientation

Letters between Al-Qaeda core and its Iraq affiliate also reveal that communications from the Iraq franchise cycle through several senior Al-Qaeda leaders, some of whom are reportedly in Iran, before eventually reaching the AQSL in Pakistan. This system, which is presumably used for organisational command and control communications, is slow. Consequently, decision making within Al-Qaeda's senior levels of leadership on big ticket issues, such as affiliate relations, methodologies of action and financing, has not been timely.

In relation to Iraq, this has been of concern to AQSL because their failure to quickly resolve problems was believed to be harming the Al-Qaeda brand and methodology. The intercepted letters reveal that damage to the brand from delays in resolving issues (especially those relating to deviations in methodology and action) is the main concern of AQSL.

This concern appears to have driven a decision by AQSL to also shorten communication turnaround time on its end. This has been achieved by reorientating command and control processes dealing with this franchise, and presumably others. The minutia of organisational management and franchise relations has been delegated to a second tier of senior leaders.

AQSL now focuses on strategic issues such as unity of purpose, narrative, actions and methodology, both in terms of its own operations and those of its franchises. This can be clearly seen in instructions from AQSL to its Iraq franchise requesting that it focus on particular issues in its propaganda releases. The intercepted letters also show that a part of this focus extends to tasking franchises to carry out attacks in support of Al-Qaeda core's agenda. However, while such operations are paramount for Al-Qaeda core, they are not primary business for all of its local franchises.

## Core-franchise dynamics

Despite AQSL exerting pressure on its affiliates to carry out attacks on its behalf, local franchises appear to do so only when it is in their interest and when they have capacity in place. The degree of obedience of local

franchises and effort they place in meeting these requests also depends on the nature of its links back to Al-Qaeda core.

Affiliate groups with closer links to Al-Qaeda's core seem predisposed to obeying such orders. This can be clearly seen in relation to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as well as AQI. The status of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is less clear. Al-Qaeda has always faced difficulties in its relationship with Algerian groups, who have been sceptical of its international agenda. This is reflected most recently in the reluctance of AQIM to prioritise attacks against the West; despite requests from AQSL for it to do so. The ascendancy of Maghreb-linked figures Abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiya Abd

**“Al-Qaeda's security precautions have clearly had a detrimental impact on recruitment for operations”**

al-Rahman in Al-Qaeda's leadership structure may have assisted it to gain a greater level of influence over the activities of this franchise.

While AQSL manages high-level issues, they have deputised senior leaders underneath them in Pakistan and Iran (such as Abu Yahya and Abd al-Rahman) to deal with more general organisational and franchise management matters. This effectively forms a second command and control network, which speeds up decision making on issues not requiring executive resolution. Such an arrangement maintains a hierarchy of control while sharing the command and control burden.

In this way, internal cohesion and rank – two issues identified by AQSL as critical to its ongoing success – is maintained within its core grouping and between it and its franchises.

Personal links are also crucial to preserving franchise relations and the associated command and control processes. An example of the consequences of limited personal linkages can be seen in Jemaah

Islamiyah's (JI) fall from Al-Qaeda's focus after Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ridwan Hambali were captured in 2003. Without the links that these two figures provided, the JI faction became isolated from the Al-Qaeda leadership. Despite re-branding itself as an Al-Qaeda franchise and attempting to gain Al-Qaeda's attention via media productions, this faction was unsuccessful in rebuilding links to AQSL. This faction appears to have been decimated when the Indonesian Police killed its leader, Noordin Mohammed Top, in September 2009.

The experience of JI demonstrates that without personal links, it is extremely difficult to contact AQSL. It also reveals that AQSL prioritises its communications with franchises on the basis of its perception of their strategic importance to its agenda. In the case of JI, Al-Qaeda's leadership saw no value warranting expanded outreach efforts to the faction.

## The scorecard

While the airstrike campaign has added extra burdens on Al-Qaeda's communications systems, it has not substantively affected command and control within the organisation. The communications limitations and senior leadership losses have not overly affected Al-Qaeda's Pakistan-based external operations section. Its operating structure has cushioned it from much of the impact decentralisation, communication disruptions and personnel losses has had on Al-Qaeda.

The section continues to maintain a capacity to take plots to maturation at a tempo that remains largely unchanged. Like the communications issues Al-Qaeda has with its franchises, disruptions to its external operations plots have largely occurred outside of its Pakistan-based command structure. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Leah Farrall** is an independent counter-terrorism consultant. She served as a senior counter-terrorism intelligence analyst with the Australian Federal Police (AFP) from 2002-2008, where she was also the AFP's leading expert on Al-Qaeda.