For Country or Caliphate? : Why Maghrebi Terrorist Groups Join al-Qaeda's Global Jihad

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Introduction

“The great majority of Islamists worldwide have given up on violence, except possibly against Israel. Even most of those in the tiny minority who embrace violence embrace a revolutionary ideology and consider global jihadis who target the far enemy to be reckless, irresponsible, and a threat to the entire movement” — Fawaz Gerges¹

If, as Gerges says, only the tiny minority of reckless, irresponsible fighters adopt al-Qaeda-style global jihad, why are so many terrorist groups rallying to al-Qaeda’s cause? Groups like al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb are grabbing headlines, but few people understand what forces are creating these violent offshoots. In the Maghreb region, al-Qaeda’s influence has been a key factor in keeping alive otherwise fading violent Islamist movements. The Maghreb region – which includes Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia – a long history of Islamist activity and, unfortunately, of violence.

Jihadism in the Maghreb essentially began during the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. At that time, Islamists from across the Arab world traveled to the front to fight off the Soviet invasion as mujahedin, or holy warriors. In fact, most of the so-called “Arab Afghans” from North Africa came to Afghanistan intending to learn the ways of jihad and organize campaigns in their home countries. Thus, despite the international nature of these travels and communications, the religio-political goals of the participants were national or local in nature. During and after the war, jihadist organizations were started in each of the countries of the Maghreb, each with the goal of overthrowing the regime at home and establishing an Islamic state ruled by Shari’a, or Islamic law. I will call this locally-focused ideology “revolutionary

Islamism,” following scholar Thomas Hegghammer, or a “near enemy” ideology, following common usage.\(^2\)

During the 1990s, these organizations launched terrorist insurgencies on their home governments. In Algeria, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) was defeated in 2002 after a decade-long civil war, but the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) essentially grew out of the ashes. Libyan security forces wiped out most of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) within a few years of their first attack. In other countries, the Islamists maintained a lower profile but continued to operate in the shadows. These violent Islamist movements were going through hard times when the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed in New York in 2001.

The attacks gave a major boost to al-Qaeda’s war against the U.S., declared definitively in 1998 through a declaration from the World Islamic Front – a new name for al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), and three others.\(^3\) The statement was a charter for “global jihadism,” an alternative to revolutionary Islamism with a new set of goals and strategies.\(^4\) Before then, al-Qaeda and its allies, including prominent jihadi theorist Abu Musab al-Suri, talked about spreading jihad across the globe, but they believed first and foremost in supporting “other ‘jihadi revolutions’ in their local or regional struggles for an Islamic state.”\(^5\) Al-Qaeda’s goals since 1998 have changed to emphasize attacking the “far enemy” (America and the West) and, longer term, uniting all Muslims under an Islamic Caliphate.

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\(^4\) Hegghammer, “The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups.”

There is at least one Islamist terrorist group operating in each country of the Maghreb, and most have ties of some kind to al-Qaeda. However, only one group has officially become part of the al-Qaeda organization. In Algeria, the GSPC joined al-Qaeda in 2007. In another case of increasing transnationalization, the Islamic Moroccan Combat Group (GICM) increased its ties to al-Qaeda throughout the 2000s without officially joining, which suggests the GICM may simply be too small for al-Qaeda to want to recognize as a full branch of the organization. In Libya, however, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) has actually rejected al-Qaeda entirely, following a period when the LIFG appeared to have in fact joined the organization.

Less is known about the jihadist groups in the other Maghrebi countries, but they are small and known to have links to other groups, including al-Qaeda.

Given the ideological differences between the traditional Maghrebi Islamists and Bin Laden’s radical anti-American vision, this situation is a puzzle. Why do revolutionary Islamist groups in the Maghreb join al-Qaeda’s global jihad? And if some do join, why do others decline? A first proposition is that organizational or leadership factors may contribute to the decision. Second, there is a precedent for al-Qaeda to accept affiliates of various kinds. In the next chapter, we will see the different kinds of relationships al-Qaeda forms with like-minded organizations.
Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

Many factors contribute to a terrorist group's decision to join al-Qaeda. In this chapter, I will lay out a theoretical framework for understanding this decision process. First, I will discuss several existing conceptualizations of terrorist organizations and argue that models drawn from the existing literature do not fully explain groups' joining al-Qaeda. Second, I will discuss ways to describe group affiliations and propose a new organizational membership model, which I will use to explain groups' joining al-Qaeda. In the next chapter, I will develop schools of thought and offer specific hypotheses to explain the decision to join al-Qaeda.

Although analysts often study the spread of al-Qaeda globally, few have focused on the decision of existing terrorist groups to become members of al-Qaeda. No existing studies have addressed the specific question of why a terrorist organization would forsake its independence to join the al-Qaeda organization. Although most analysts have described previous mergers from the perspective of al-Qaeda's global strategy, there is no known case of al-Qaeda rejecting a willing affiliate. This paper explains membership from the side of the potential member organization, a bottom-up approach to al-Qaeda's global expansion.

Deficiencies in Existing Explanations

Existing explanations for al-Qaeda's global expansion typically approach the question from the perspective of al-Qaeda's decision to expand, not the affiliate's decision to join, for three reasons. First, public figures and journalists treat al-Qaeda as the primary decision maker in expansion because al-Qaeda and its leaders are more visible and familiar than the often obscure local figures leading joining groups. Since more is known about al-Qaeda, it is easier to explain the expansion from that group's perspective. Second, most analysts, governments, and publics are primarily interested in the counterterrorism implications of the expansion of al-Qaeda,
and focus accordingly on al-Qaeda Central. The most important implications for counterterrorism policy and domestic and international security are the increased geographical reach and operational capacity the merger would permit al-Qaeda. From this perspective, al-Qaeda’s expansion appears to be a strategic choice on the part of al-Qaeda rather than the joining group.

Third, theories from across the social sciences are often misapplied to non-parallel cases of jihadi terrorism, leading to conclusions of little merit. To explain al-Qaeda’s expansion, scholars have applied existing models from across the social sciences, including transnational advocacy networks, social movements, and criminal business enterprises. While each of these concepts helps elucidate certain aspects of terrorist activity, none offers a complete explanation of the why groups join al-Qaeda. The following sub-sections will discuss several common explanations of terrorist organizations, which treat terrorist organizations as business firms or social movements or networks, then argue that theories on the behavior of organizations may be the most relevant to the present question.

Business Theory

While researchers have effectively used lessons from the business world to explain the behavior of terrorists, the use of business terminology (e.g. mergers, franchising, and expansion to new markets) tends to lead analysts to focus on the larger organization, al-Qaeda, when

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studying interorganizational relations. In business, the acquiring firm’s interests are paramount.

Consider the acquisition of a national firm by a larger multinational firm, the business world’s proposed analogy to a group joining al-Qaeda. The consent of the smaller firm can facilitate a deal, but the significant costs and risk to the larger firm, weighed against the potential economic benefits, are the primary consideration, and a resolute larger firm can force a takeover of an unwilling smaller firm. In this business environment, small firms (national groups) can only resist pressures from larger corporations (al-Qaeda) for a limited time, if at all.

Transnational terrorism follows a different logic. A capable group has greater agency in the joining process than al-Qaeda Central, because while al-Qaeda leaders can court potential member groups, it cannot force them to join. There is no mechanism for a hostile takeover or buyout of a terrorist group, so even if al-Qaeda is set on a merger, the smaller firm can always say no, as the LIFG did in 2009. The suggestion that al-Qaeda can enter new arenas at will does not withstand scrutiny. Its inability to gain a foothold in the Palestinian conflict, despite the conflict’s preeminence among even al-Qaeda’s own priorities for the global jihad, highlights instead the organization’s geographic limitations.

Another difference is the cost of a merger, which in business typically requires the larger corporation to pay the net worth of the smaller firm. The initial cost to al-Qaeda of accepting a new member is comparatively low, since al-Qaeda directly provides new members with little more than a name, reputation, and ideology. The true cost is the substantial risk is that a member group will tarnish this reputation by perverting the ideology or resorting to unpopular

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tactics, as AQI did when it persisted in inflicting mass civilian casualties despite al-Qaeda Central’s protests.\(^\text{10}\)

However, these risks are largely offset by the benefits of increased membership, regional presence, and media attention associated with attracting a new member organization are significant for an al-Qaeda that is, as Bruce Hoffman writes, “much like a shark, which must keep moving forward, no matter how slowly or incrementally, or die.”\(^\text{11}\) One may argue that even the worst known case of a loose cannon affiliate, AQI, was a net positive for the al-Qaeda organization because its activities kept al-Qaeda in the headlines during a period when much of the group’s original leadership was killed or forced into hiding.\(^\text{12}\) Given the necessity of growth to al-Qaeda’s continued survival, it is no surprise that the organization seems to readily accept new members, undermining the logic of business mergers.

A more useful, although still imperfect, approach is to label groups that join al-Qaeda as “franchises.”\(^\text{13}\) The franchise model fits al-Qaeda in several respects, especially as it infers a reliance on brand name and standardized practices, combined with a decentralized control structure.\(^\text{14}\) However, several important differences exist. The franchise model describes a subsidiary organization that is created essentially at the behest of the parent organization, misrepresenting the phenomenon of transformation and bottom-up agency seen when national groups join al-Qaeda. The extent of control and standardization in a business franchise are also


\(^{12}\) Whitlock, “Death Could Shake Al-Qaeda In Iraq and Around the World.”


\(^{14}\) Fishman, “Using the Mistakes of al Qaeda’s Franchises to Undermine Its Strategies.”
much greater than in the extended al-Qaeda organization, which imposes only broad ideological
tenets and requires only loose efforts at coordination. In business, the right to terminate a
franchise is contractually and legally guaranteed, all but eliminating the risk of a rogue franchise.
In al-Qaeda, though, the bonds of membership are difficult and costly to dissolve, so admitting a
new organization into al-Qaeda ties the groups’ fates more permanently.

Social Movement and Network Theory

Other common approaches treat al-Qaeda as a social movement or a global network. In
1992, before al-Qaeda’s first attack on the World Trade Center, Benjamin Barber envisioned
“jihad” as an expressionist, identity-based tribalism, a reaction against “McWorld,” characterized
by the forces of globalization and interdependence.\textsuperscript{15} A recent example is Jason Burke’s
description of al-Qaeda as a “jihadi international,” suggesting that it is an umbrella for the entire
global movement.\textsuperscript{16} The term describes a transnational association of like-minded activists
supporting a unifying ideology (“jihadism,” or Islamist terrorism) shared by its militants around
the world. The association is mainly non-hierarchical and amorphous, and encompasses a broad
category of “al-Qaeda sympathizers” who ascribe to the organization’s ideology.

A related understanding of jihadism as a global ideology draws on social movement
theory and explains Al-Qaeda as one of many actors within a transnational movement. These
concepts help explain the exchange of ideas and connections among jihadis worldwide, which
influence interorganizational interactions and ideologies.\textsuperscript{17} If social movement analyses describe
the collective development of jihadism, it fails to explain the interactions between the many
organizations, networks, cells, and individuals that make up the movement. Such analyses tend

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{16} Jason Burke, “Think Again: Al Qaeda,” \textit{Foreign Policy}, May 2004.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Gentry, “Social Movement Theory.”
\end{itemize}
to assume either too much or too little coordination among jihadis. Observing its many clashes and fissures, we see that the jihadi movement is not a monolithic movement, as Burke and others suggest. At the same time, its variety does not imply a lack of hierarchy among certain jihadis and jihadi organizations; this is the major deficiency of network analysis, which overemphasizes complex, non-hierarchical relationships.  

Network scholars adopt a highly decentralized view of terrorism in which all actors, from prominent groups like AQIM and AQI to tiny, independent cells and individuals, are nodes in a vast, non-hierarchical network. This network view can be valuable in understanding the historical genesis of jihadi ideology and the periodicity of terrorist activity. Its primary defect is that it undervalues the command-and-control structures that exist within various terrorist groups. Additionally, the network approach is too inclusive, labeling co-terrorists the zealous but disconnected supporter and Bin Laden’s loyal foot soldier, tightly integrated into the al-Qaeda hierarchy. As Brian Jackson argues, too broad an understanding of al-Qaeda’s boundaries may “skew judgments about the capabilities and likely actions of an organization.” Adopting a freeform definition makes al-Qaeda a nebulous concept, reducing its analytical usefulness.

Jihadi terrorism is indeed a global social movement, but the movement includes diverse groups whose interactions are best understood by treating them as unique actors. Jackson argues convincingly that the three models – groups, movements, or networks – each have advantages and disadvantages, but that it is essential to be clear about which model a particular analysis relies on. In this case, the group model is most appropriate because it allows us to develop a

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21 Ibid., 256-257.
more precise understanding of formerly independent groups, like AQIM and AQI, which have been integrated into the al-Qaeda organization, and to distinguish them from other groups and individuals affiliated with al-Qaeda.

An Organizational Approach

The choice for a group to join al-Qaeda is an organizational decision, so I will treat each terrorist group as an organization—a discrete entity whose membership pursues common goals. We need not assume perfect organizational unity, or collective rationality, which would treat the group as a unitary actor. In fact, complete agreement within an organization is rare, and we will see cases where the interests of the leadership may diverge from that of the membership. As a result, leaders' decisions may incur significant, even public, dissent from other members of the group. For example, Ayman Al-Zawahiri's decision to merge his Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) organization with al-Qaeda in 1998 created a great deal of resistance within the EIJ, many of whose members remained committed to their original goal of fighting the Egyptian regime.

Nevertheless, for leadership to be meaningful, leaders must be able to influence—or act in opposition to—the preferences of the group's members. Therefore, we expect major decisions to be made by leaders and followed by group members. As such a decision, action, or position ascribed to a particular group is one taken by its leadership and generally supported by its members. To determine organizational policy decisions, we will consider the statements of a group's emir and Shura committee, traditionally the holders of executive decision making power within Islamic terrorist organizations. In the example of the EIJ, Zawahiri was successful in

24 *Emir*, Arabic for "commander," is a traditional title of nobility in the Islamic world and a common title for the highest ranking leader of an Islamic terrorist group. *Shura*, the Arabic name for the Islamic principle of consultation, is name often given to the highest governing council of an Islamic state or organization.
bringing most of his organization into al-Qaeda despite resistance to his decision.\textsuperscript{25} Because most of the group eventually fell into line behind this decision, we may say that the EIJ, as an organization, decided to join al-Qaeda, even if, as some claim, that decision is best explained at the individual level, focusing on Zawahiri’s personal motivations.

Individual terrorists who are members of national groups may also join al-Qaeda on their own initiative, but these ties do not constitute a group joining al-Qaeda and are not part of the phenomenon studied in this paper. Even many prominent figures in al-Qaeda’s central leadership fit in this category, including Abu Yahya al-Libi and Abu Laith al-Libi, who were also members of the LIFG, and Hambali (Riduan Isamuddin) of the Jemaah Islamiyah. Although such individuals often push their compatriots and national groups closer to al-Qaeda, their ties do not represent an actual merger, since they do not bring the weight of their former groups with them into al-Qaeda. Nor do close personal ties guarantee harmony between groups, as demonstrated when the LIFG leadership rejected al-Qaeda despite LIFG leaders’ high-level positions within al-Qaeda Central.

**The Membership Model**

Many groups have attracted the “al-Qaeda affiliate” label in recent years, even in cases where actual contact between the organizations is quite limited. As a recent article in *Foreign Policy* argues, the use of this term to describe individuals has been so abused and overused “as to render it useless.”\textsuperscript{26} Contact between single members of two organizations might be enough to qualify two groups as “affiliated” even if nature of their connection is unclear, and there are numerous “affiliate” groups that al-Qaeda has inspired but over which it enjoys no practical


control.\textsuperscript{27} This is not to argue that such groups are not al-Qaeda affiliates, but that not all affiliates are created equal, and that there exists a more analytically significant level of association, what I will call “membership.”

While other levels of affiliation — including more non-hierarchical arrangements, personal contacts, and ad hoc collaboration — all contribute in important ways to the global terrorist threat, this paper focuses on the phenomenon of membership in al-Qaeda for several reasons. First, these member organizations are increasing in number, suggesting they may play a prominent role in al-Qaeda’s future. Second, while a complete picture of the global jihadist network should include all groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, a narrower view of membership allows us to construct more useful boundaries around the organization for analytical purposes. I will use a new term, “member organization,” to describe a group that demonstrates three key characteristics of membership: ideological compatibility, operational coordination, and mutual recognition.

\textit{The Elements of Membership}

Participation in al-Qaeda is primarily a matter of adherence to the group’s ideology, so a potential member organization must adapt itself to achieve \textit{ideological compatibility} with al-Qaeda. Groups might maintain elements of their pre-merger ideologies during the transition, for example keeping references to the local regime, but must adopt the priorities and rhetoric of al-Qaeda’s global jihad. This means demonstrating a commitment to attacking the U.S. and its allies and foreign interests at home and abroad. The group should also pick up al-Qaeda’s lines of argumentation to justify its activities.

\textsuperscript{27} Scheuer, “Al-Qaeda and Algeria’s GSPC: Part of a Much Bigger Picture.”
Operational coordination means informing al-Qaeda of their major attacks as they are able, so that al-Qaeda’s leadership can refer to and claim credit for the attacks in its own statements and propaganda. Groups need not inform al-Qaeda Central of all their day-to-day activities or provide detailed records of attacks; however, no major attack should be carried out without informing the central leadership, preferably in advance, because the al-Qaeda leadership would be unable to confirm or take credit for the attack, making them appear powerless. Member groups must also plan attacks that follow the al-Qaeda’s global strategy, targeting American and European interests and employing high-impact terrorism. Al-Qaeda’s image is dependent on its operations and the publicity thereof, so coordinating these activities with the central organization is an important obligation for member groups.

Despite al-Qaeda’s influence over member organizations, there need not be a total command-and-control relationship. Membership does not guarantee complete and unwavering adherence, and members may act against the central leadership’s stated policy. Groups operating under the al-Qaeda name typically provide most of their own funding and plan their own operations, so even Bin Laden cannot necessarily force a member group to abort a mission it has planned. In addition, communications between the groups are unreliable because the leaders must operate secretly in remote locations under the strain of vigilant military and police action. A prominent example of disunity within the organization was AQI, which since 2004 has continued to rely on mass casualty violence despite al-Qaeda Central’s protests. From this example, we see that even an organization with a close ideological affinity may not make the same calculations as al-Qaeda Central or adhere to its directives.

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Nevertheless, public disunity within al-Qaeda would signal weakness, thereby hurting member organizations, so they are unlikely to flagrantly disregard al-Qaeda Central’s directives. Allying with al-Qaeda is a meaningful commitment, if not an absolute one. We must also bear in mind that non-member organizations sometimes carry out Bin Laden’s exact wishes, which creates a false sense of coordination. Al-Qaeda may even attempt to claim credit for the actions of groups outside its control, as in the London bombings of 7 July 2006, where the bombers’ video statements were apparently edited after the fact to include an endorsement from al-Zawahiri. This situation demonstrates the importance of the final requirement of membership, the public acknowledgement of the two groups’ alliance.

Mutual recognition is the public announcement of cooperation and shared goals, which indicates the group has officially joined al-Qaeda and binds the two groups’ fates to a certain extent. Groups that deny their links to al-Qaeda, like the MILF, are not members of al-Qaeda even if they achieve ideological compatibility and operational coordination. By denying their alliance, they are free to act more independently, with a smaller impact on al-Qaeda Central and its reputation, and they are less invested in al-Qaeda because they can more easily change strategic direction or disassociate from the movement. When a group joins, its leader must swear an oath of allegiance (bayat) that obligates him to follow Bin Laden’s commands absolutely. In practice, however, Bin Laden’s control is far more limited, due to poor communications, imperfect information, and lack of a way to enforce his orders. Nevertheless, mutual recognition between al-Qaeda and its affiliates is the clearest outward signal that both groups’ leaders have approved the merger.29 At this point, we consider them part of the same greater organization.

The requirements of ideological adhesion and operational coordination take time to negotiate and implement. Once a group decides to pursue membership in al-Qaeda, the two

organizations must coordinate an official merger. In Iraq, the official transformation of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Tawhid Wal-Jihad group into al-Qaeda in Iraq took many months. The need for a group to adopt al-Qaeda's ideology and methods before it can be officially recognized means that joining is a process, not a quick action. Because of this rapprochement process, ideological changes may appear before the official merger even though they are a result, and not a cause, of the decision.

**Joining as a Dynamic Process**

With the membership model, we understand joining as a process, which develops through four distinct stages of joining al-Qaeda: from non-affiliation to affiliation, then to membership through a process of rapprochement, as shown in Figure 1. Alternatively, a group may choose to renounce its support for al-Qaeda, passing into the renunciation stage. Any group that espouses some form of jihadist ideology can be placed in one of the stages of membership. Non-affiliation is the natural state, in which a group has no ties to al-Qaeda. In today's interconnected environment, mass communications and online discussion forums mean that few jihadi organizations remain truly unaffiliated with al-Qaeda. Organizations that are fundamentally unsupportive of al-Qaeda are not considered under this framework, but supportive non-member organizations with some differences in ideology and tactics may still be considered al-Qaeda affiliates.

![Figure 1. Stages of the joining process under the membership model.](image-url)
In fact, most jihadist organizations are in the affiliation stage. Affiliation may begin when a group shares members, training facilities, or support networks, or receives funding or guidance from al-Qaeda. Examples of such affiliated groups are Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which have many personal and financial ties to al-Qaeda (cf. these and similar groups listed in Table 2). This stage includes relationships where only one side recognizes an affiliation, as with the MILF, which continues to deny its relationship with al-Qaeda while maintaining clandestine cooperation. Affiliation can also occur through personal contacts between leaders of the two organizations, in the absence of the organization-level agreements that would be necessary for full membership.

Affiliation is easy to achieve and occurs often, but membership is more difficult to negotiate and, unsurprisingly, more rare. Most affiliates are content to remain just that. The affiliation stage implies a level of cooperation that suits most groups' purposes without the need for membership. For an affiliate to join al-Qaeda as a member, it must go through a process of rapprochement, a period of negotiation and reconciliation of the groups' ideological values. This process strengthens interorganizational ties as the potential member group implements al-Qaeda ideology and the two sides negotiate a membership agreement. The bulk of the organizational changes associated with membership will occur during this phase. This process will continue unless a group has a change of heart (or strategy) and decides to cut its ties with global jihad. A group that permanently decides not to join al-Qaeda may opt for renunciation, or public rejection of al-Qaeda. This effectively removes the group from the framework of membership, and represents a radical change in orientation.

If rapprochement is successful, mutual recognition between the groups signals that they have completed their negotiations and the smaller group now operates as an integral part of the
larger organization. Given the requirements of membership and commitment required to join, it is no surprise that relatively few groups reach the membership stage, although we do not have data on how many groups have tried and failed to negotiate membership. The difficulty of negotiations also explains the lengthy delays between groups deciding to join forces with al-Qaeda and their actual mergers, as well as the relatively small number of member organizations. The GSPC–al-Qaeda merger took at least a year to conclude from the time GSPC leader Abdelmalek Droukdal decided his group would join.\(^{30}\) Although it is advantageous to al-Qaeda to accept new members, they still think strategically about whom to admit, due to the risks to its reputation.

**Summary**

This chapter argued that although theories from many disciplines can help clarify certain aspects of terrorism, no one theory can explain all aspects. By definition, a theoretical model is a simplified abstraction of reality that allows us to consider causal implications but necessarily forfeits much true-to-life complexity, so we must choose a model appropriate to the specific phenomenon in question. To study a group’s decision to join al-Qaeda, which is an organizational decision, I adopted a theoretical framework that views terrorist entities as distinct organizations. On this premise, I treat terrorist groups as organizations whose boundaries, structures, and behaviors are analogous to those of non-terrorist organizations. From this starting point, I developed a model of group membership in al-Qaeda, defining a clear point at which a group “joins” the organization. The next chapter will identify schools of thought to explain why “terrorist organizations” “join” al-Qaeda, drawing from a review of the literature on terrorist decision making generally.

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Chapter 2: Schools of Thought

The membership model described in the previous chapter helps to disambiguate al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and the relationships between them over time better than previously existing models. With this framework in mind, I will survey the existing literature on terrorist decision making, which developed to explain the choices and motivations of terrorist groups. I will then draw on this theoretical foundation to develop four schools of thought that explain one particular terrorist decision: joining al-Qaeda. These hypotheses offer four possible ways of explaining why a group progresses toward either membership or renunciation.

Theories of Terrorist Decision Making

Although there is not an extensive literature on the specific question of terrorist groups joining a transnational terrorist organization, there is a well-developed literature on terrorist decision making more generally. This literature can be organized into three schools of thought, emphasizing instrumental, organizational, and psychological approaches. These schools of thought developed to explain why groups choose to use terrorist violence, and subsequent studies have expanded these schools of thought to explain other terrorist group behavior. For example, Scott Atran critiques the way scholars have used instrumental and psychological approaches to explain suicide terrorism and calls instead for a closer look at the organizational dynamics of terror cells. In the next section, I will apply these ideas about terrorist decision making to the decision to join al-Qaeda.

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The first school of thought, known as the *instrumental* or rational choice theory, assumes that groups use terrorism to achieve specific goals. According to rational choice theory, a terrorist organization, as a unit, will weigh the costs and benefits of all available options before deciding whether terrorism is the best means to achieve their collective political goals. The organization’s success or failure is determined by the extent to which it is able to attain its stated political ends. Although all the terrorist groups covered by this paper seek to overthrow secular governments and establish Islamic law, national revolutionary Islamist groups focus primarily on the regime in their home country. This national focus distinguishes such groups from al-Qaeda, whose goal is to drive the United States and its Western allies out of the Muslim world, allowing them to establish an Islamic caliphate across the region.

A key insight from this school is that terrorist ideologies, although they often seem unrealistic, must be taken seriously as a guide to jihadists’ intentions. Terrorists are rational and sensitive to costs, and likely to pursue violence only if “the value sought is overwhelmingly important; the costs of trying are low; the status quo is intolerable; or the probability of succeeding (even at high cost) is high.” Groups exhibit collective rationality, meaning they make decisions as a unitary actor according to a “single, stable, ordered set of preferences,” not as a collection of individual goals and preferences.

Critics argue that the instrumental school oversimplifies terrorist decision making, assuming unrealistic levels of group cohesion, accuracy in predicting outcomes, and access to information. Still, terrorist groups will usually follow their leaders, and research has proven al-

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33 Crenshaw, “Theories of Terrorism,” 13.
35 Crenshaw, “Theories of Terrorism,” 15.
36 Ibid., 14.
37 McCormick, “Terrorist Decision Making,” 482.
38 Ibid., 485.
Qaeda's capacity to effectively use intelligence to make rational choices.\textsuperscript{39} Although scholars have convincingly defended the rationality of terrorists' decisions, not all rational choices serve the stated goals of an organization.\textsuperscript{40} The main result of this line of criticism is the organizational school of thought, which considers a group's focus on survival and weights the influence of organizational factors in a final group decision.

The organizational school of thought relies on the characteristics and behavior of organizations to explain why groups use terrorism. In this view, organizations are naturally motivated to ensure their own survival, and members' reliance on the group and high cost of exit. Because "the fundamental purpose of any political organization is to maintain itself," perpetuating the group's cadres can become an overriding goal. To survive, terrorist groups may "make up" new political goals because, at the group level of analysis, "survival may be a stable preference over time."\textsuperscript{41} Over time, the personal ambitions of group members become tied to the viability and political position of the organization.\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, the costs of exiting terrorist groups are high because terrorism is illegal, so terrorists rely on the group for protection against prosecution for these crimes. Both of these factors encourage terrorists to protect the integrity of the organization. Due to organizational development and the tendency of exit costs to increase over time, these organizational imperatives become stronger the longer a group has been together.

Like the instrumental arguments, organizational explanations assume that groups make rational, strategic choices. The difference between the two explanations is how groups order their preferences. In the instrumental school, groups value their political goals above all else. In the organizational school, however, the survival and maintenance of the group become the

\textsuperscript{39} Gaetano Joe Ilardi, "Al Qaeda's Operational Intelligence—A Key Prerequisite to Action," \textit{Studies in Conflict & Terrorism} 31, no. 12 (12, 2008): 1073.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{42} Crenshaw, "Theories of Terrorism," 19.
highest priorities. As such, terrorist organizations are willing to modify their goals and causes, or become more extreme, to entice members and ensure organizational survival.\textsuperscript{43} To reduce the costs of this inconsistency, groups will likely attempt to mask or rationalize their ideological shifts, so the changes may not be apparent to observers or even to members of the group itself.\textsuperscript{44} In addition, organizational survival requires maintaining a minimal level of action, so groups will demonstrate a bias toward action, regardless of its purposive outcome.\textsuperscript{45} This contrasts with the instrumental school, in which organizations will not act unless doing so serves their mission. The need to act leads to further departures from the group’s original ideology.

The \textit{psychological} school of thought focuses on the psychological traits and processes that contribute to an individual’s decision to use terrorism. Psychological explanations evolved from an expressionist theory of terrorism, which sees violence as an end in itself, not a means of achieving another objective.\textsuperscript{46} Today, psychological theories offer an individual-level explanation for terrorists’ decisions. These theories focus on the terrorist’s individual psychology or on the psychological processes of socialization that modify his understanding of the world. Generally, these individual-level factors are not directly applicable to the organization-level question of joining al-Qaeda, but offer some valuable insights.

The first type of psychological hypothesis suggests that certain individuals are disposed to terrorism or particular strategies. Cognitive distortions derive from the particular way the individual attempts to understand the world around him, while affective distortions derive from the individual’s emotional or personality characteristics.\textsuperscript{47} Both cognitive and affective factors may pre-dispose individuals to pursue violent strategies. The second type of hypothesis argues

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item McCormick, “Terrorist Decision Making,” 490.
\item Ibid., 487.
\item Ibid., 477.
\item Ibid., 490.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
that previously normal individuals are socialized into terrorism through “a dialectical process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time.”

Through a psychological process, just being a member of a terrorist group will gradually radicalize the individual.

Unfortunately, neither of these factors is particularly useful for understanding why groups join al-Qaeda. Theories about terrorists’ predisposition to violence cannot explain the dynamic change involved in joining al-Qaeda, although they may reinforce the organizational school of thought by helping to explain why a terrorist may continue to fight even if his original goals are lost. Likewise, theories about socialization into terrorism cannot explain joining al-Qaeda, but helps to explain why terrorists might stay committed to the group even if it changes ideology. Although these psychological models are not directly applicable to the decision to join al-Qaeda, they offer important insights. This school warns us of the possibility that individual-level factors will create an unexpected result at the group level. Psychological factors may shape the ideologies, beliefs, and preferences of terrorists and terrorist organizations, so we should not expect all groups to respond the same way to an ideological stimulus.

Schools of Thought on Joining al-Qaeda

This section will use the schools of thought on terrorist decision making, described above, as the foundation for a theoretical framework to explain why existing terrorist organizations join al-Qaeda. I will develop four schools of thought for joining al-Qaeda, presenting instrumental, organizational, ideological, and individual-level explanations. In accordance with the instrumental school above, the instrumental explanation for membership argues that groups join because it furthers their existing mission. The organizational arguments made in the decision

48 Ibid., 492.
making literature are represented here in an organizational explanation that says groups join to ensure their own survival. There is no psychological school of thought for joining al-Qaeda, but the insights from this school helped to inform the other schools.

In addition to the instrumental and organizational schools, I add an ideological explanation and an individual-level explanation focused on leadership. The ideological school addresses the dynamic nature of a group’s preferences, proposing that a group will join after its ideology has come into harmony with al-Qaeda’s beliefs. The leadership school uses the individual level of analysis to argue that terrorist leaders’ personal interests may differ from those of the group, leading to an outcome that does not achieve to the group’s preferences.

**Instrumental**

_A group will join if membership will help achieve its existing goals._

The instrumental school follows the logic of strategic choice, that a group will consistently follow a rational course of action according to relatively fixed preferences and constraints. The group will operate as a unit according to the principle of collective rationality, rather than a collection of potentially discordant voices. Under this logic, a group will join al-Qaeda when doing so will help it achieve its existing mission. Throughout the decision making process, the group believes membership will help in achieving its main strategic objective: defeating the “apostate” regime at home. The group will continue to prefer its original goals, ideology, strategy, and rhetoric, although it may modify its behavior or rhetoric somewhat to appease al-Qaeda.

The potential benefits of joining al-Qaeda are multiple, including access to new resources, an improved ability to carry out attacks in the short term, and a means of recruiting fighters inspired by foreign jihads in Iraq and elsewhere. Joining may help a group to escalate attacks
within its home arena, drawing on the financial and tactical support al-Qaeda offers and the improved recruiting the al-Qaeda brand name makes possible.⁴⁹ One recruiting benefit to joining is that it helps groups change their message to embrace the popular currents of thought among potential recruits. Due to the changing political context, local jihadis may increasingly choose to leave their home country to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan instead of taking up arms against the local regime. Joining al-Qaeda and rhetorically adopting the popular themes of global jihad may help convince potential recruits to join a national jihadi group instead of going abroad.⁵⁰ In a bit of a bait-and-switch trick, groups hope to draw in recruits with global rhetoric but use them to fight the national jihad.

The instrumental school of thought expects a group to decide on joining through a process of rational choice. The group will perform a cost-benefit analysis according to its existing preferences, even if those preferences later shift as a result of membership in al-Qaeda. The presumed benefits of membership are the financial resources and advanced training the organization offers. Beyond offering direct financial help, al-Qaeda offers access to global financing networks, which are able to funnel money from wealthy donors to resource-strapped jihadi groups. Groups hope to tap into al-Qaeda’s financial and recruiting networks without forfeiting ideological control to Bin Laden, making this an attractive way to augment their existing activities.⁵¹

However, joining al-Qaeda is not as easy as signing up for support checks. From our discussion of membership, we know that joining requires groups to claim an ideological affinity with al-Qaeda. Many groups do not have this affinity to begin with, for example because they

⁵¹ Ibid., 410.
prefer attacking the national police instead of foreign tourists. Groups will avoid actions that make accomplishing their strategic aims more difficult. In Iraq, for example, al-Qaeda Central’s main strategists used Clausewitzian arguments to try to convince Zarqawi to stop his attacks on Muslim civilians because these attacks were counterproductive to the organization’s end goals.\textsuperscript{52} By this instrumental logic, groups will be reluctant to change their tactics and targeting, expending scarce financial and human resources attacking a distant enemy. They will only join if the additional resources gained outweigh this increased cost.

In order to join, groups must signal their adherence to al-Qaeda’s beliefs, despite remaining committed to their original ideology. Rather than changing goals, groups will adopt global jihad as a new side cause and limit their commitment to this cause. The group will not reorder its preferences – state level goals remain dominant – and will instead proclaim its rapprochement with al-Qaeda while continuing to put most of its resources into attacks on the local regime. The group may continue to attack targets the same kinds of targets it chose before the merger, but now it will justify the attack using the rhetoric and logic of al-Qaeda.

The costs of joining al-Qaeda are significant. Apart from the partial loss of control in giving Osama bin Laden an oath of allegiance, al-Qaeda publicly and privately requires ideological adhesion, which compromises the preferences of many national groups. The difficulty of reconciling existing goals with the ideological demands of membership implies that groups should demand substantial awards before they are tempted to join, but the actual benefits are likely to be smaller. Historically, member organizations have provided funding to al-Qaeda Central, not the other way around, so the financial incentives to join are limited, even if membership offers access to al-Qaeda’s support and donor networks.\textsuperscript{53} Another downside of

\textsuperscript{52} Brahimi, “Crushed in the Shadows,” 94.
\textsuperscript{53} Guidère, \textit{La tentation internationale d’Al-Qaeda au Maghreb}, 120.
joining al-Qaeda is that it usually increases pressure on the group domestically and internationally by attracting the wrath of local and Western security forces. Overall, joining al-Qaeda and accommodating its radical tactics seems unlikely, in the medium term, to lead to the overthrow of a particular regime, so the instrumental explanation does not appear to fully explain groups’ decisions.

Organizational

A group will join if it believes membership will help it avoid serious decline or imminent defeat.

From the premises of the organizational school of thought on terrorist decision making, we expect a terrorist organization facing impending collapse to act urgently to maintain itself, even if doing so requires a change of strategy and goals. Under this hypothesis, a group will join if it believes al-Qaeda will help it survive – that is, maintain its leadership structure and membership. Al-Qaeda’s support networks and ideology may help a group carry out a minimum number of attacks necessary to survive as an organization.

Al-Qaeda may offer a group the financial, tactical, and recruiting networks necessary to survive. Although al-Qaeda does not usually directly fund its member organizations, its financial networks may provide a critical level of support, allowing the group to continue operating. A prominent example of this is the EIJ, which “was only able to survive imminent demise by leaving its immediate area of operation, establishing a widespread international network, and merging with a stronger, more robust terrorist organization [al-Qaeda].” This strategy may require giving up the group’s presence in its original area of operations; in this regard, the organizational explanation is similar to the instrumental, except it recognizes that al-

55 Guidère, La tentation internationale d’Al-Qaida au Maghreb, 15.
Qaeda’s support may not help a group achieve its original objectives. The case of a group leaving its home country would be a clear-cut example of sacrificing instrumental goals (i.e. attacking the local regime) in order to survive. For example, joining al-Qaeda actually undermined the EIJ’s local goals by removing the group from the Egyptian scene, even though the group benefited in other ways from the merger.\textsuperscript{57}

Groups may look to al-Qaeda to help them carry out attacks regardless of the instrumental value of those attacks. Jihadi organizations’ survival depends on their ability to attract attention, not to win public support, as revolutionary nationalist organizations must do.\textsuperscript{58} Consequently, terrorist groups have a natural bias toward action, since they must maintain a “minimum violent presence” to survive.\textsuperscript{59} Joining al-Qaeda allows groups to expand their area of operations and range of possible targets, which helps them carry out more attacks in the short term. Although this strategy may not increase the probability of achieving the group’s original objective, adopting a broader mission may make it easier for the group to stay relevant by carrying out attacks on new targets. Moreover, it is very costly to attack the local regime because killing other Muslims is difficult to justify religiously and incurs a negative public reaction. Attacking foreign targets may reduce these negative externalities and public opposition, if the group can avoid local collateral damage.

\textit{Ideology}

\textit{A group will join if its ideology becomes compatible with al-Qaeda’s global jihad.}

Exposure to and adoption of new ideologies, independent of strategic needs or organizational pressures, may lead a formerly national group to embrace a global jihadi ideology.

\textsuperscript{57} Sara Daly, “The Algerian Salafist Group for Call and Combat: A Dossier,” \textit{Terrorism Monitor} 3, no. 5 (May 5, 2005).

\textsuperscript{58} Anneli Botha, \textit{Terrorism in the Maghreb: the Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism}, ISS Monograph Series 144, 2008.

\textsuperscript{59} McCormick, “Terrorist Decision Making,” 496.
and join the al-Qaeda organization in service of this revised mission. An ideological shift means adopting al-Qaeda's global goals and strategies, which we see expressed through a group's rhetoric or propaganda, on the one hand, and its targeting and tactics, on the other.\textsuperscript{60} The two major causes of a group's ideological drift toward global jihad are 1) changes in the political environment, 2) the globalization of communications, personal connections, and transnational network ties between jihadi groups, enhanced by the effects of isomorphism.

The foundational goal of national groups like the GSPC and the LIFG is the overthrow of the ruling regime in the group's home country. Since their inception, these groups were dedicated to replacing "apostate" secular nationalist regimes with Islamic regimes. As a result, they targeted the symbols and instruments of national power through assassination attempts, bombings against government targets, and attacks on the national police. There was a limited transnational dimension in their ideology, as they denounced American and European support for local regimes, but most of their activities abroad (e.g. training in Afghanistan and organizing in Europe) was intended to support the jihad at home.\textsuperscript{61}

Despite a history of collaboration with these and other national terrorist groups, al-Qaeda espouses a markedly different ideology, focused on liberating the Muslim world from the oppression of the "far enemy," the Western states that prop up apostate regimes in the Muslim world. Since al-Qaeda's time in Sudan in the 1990s, its goals have been the withdrawal of Western powers from the Middle East and the establishment of a caliphate across the entire Muslim world.\textsuperscript{62} The overthrow of apostate regimes is a result of this revolution, but it is not the group's immediate strategic goal. Bin Laden declared war on the United States in 1998, and the

\textsuperscript{60}\textit{Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups."}
\textsuperscript{61}\textit{Guidère, La tentation internationale d'Al-Qaida au Maghreb,} 32-33.
\textsuperscript{62}\textit{Assaf Moghadam, The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 129.
group’s policy demands for the U.S. have remained remarkably consistent. Since then al-Qaeda has consistently the surest path to victory is to attack foreign targets at home (e.g. Western embassies and tourists in the Muslim world) and abroad (e.g. public transportation systems in Western cities). When it is able to target non-Muslims and limit collateral damage, al-Qaeda is able to lessen the public backlash against its bloody tactics. Although years of spectacular terrorist attacks have habituated us to the boldness of global jihadism, it bears reminding how radical this ideology is even in comparison with its revolutionary Islamist cousin, and how disputed an idea it has always been even within hardcore jihadi circles.

Major changes in the political environment, like the September 11th attacks and the Iraq War, shape the context and interactions that drive ideological change. These events affect jihadi ideology either by facilitating global interactions and dialog or by increasing fighters’ awareness and hatred of the West. The Iraq War and other conflicts have attracted fighters from around the world, putting them into close and sustained contact and providing them with a unifying objective. According to David Gray and Erik Stockham, the increased interaction and cooperation of jihadi groups internationally over this period led formerly unassociated groups to al-Qaeda’s global jihad. Similarly, Daniel Lav draws a causal chain from the Iraq War to the rapprochement of separate jihadi ideologies, writing, “Iraq was definitely the issue that brought the GSPC more and more in line with al-Qa’ida.” Although this contact helps foster globalism within the jihadi movement, participation in foreign jihad arenas does not always lead jihadis to

64 Brahimi, “Crushed in the Shadows.”
adopt a globalist ideology. In fact, most of the foreign jihadis who helped defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s (the so-called “Arab Afghans”) returned home after the war to wage jihad against their own governments, not against the far enemy.

Alternatively, political events may cause jihadis to develop an increased hatred of the West, which in turn leads them to embrace global jihad. Focusing on how events shape jihadis’ views of the West, Thomas Hegghammer argues that the Iraq War and other developments in the political context increase terrorists’ hatred of the United States and its allies, causing a change in ideology.\(^{69}\) In addition, American counterterrorism cooperation with Maghrebi regimes may have fueled a spike in anti-Americanism, leading local terrorists to focus their ideological hatred on a “far enemy” that is now much more present in their daily lives.\(^{70}\)

According to other scholars, political events are simply triggers that nudge along the gradual rapprochement of terrorist groups through increasing global contact and network ties: the globalization of jihad.\(^{71}\) Mohammed Hafez traces the development of significant network ties during and since the Soviet war in Afghanistan and subsequent conflicts, including Iraq.\(^{72}\)

Contributing to this homogenization are new communications technologies, tied to the force of globalization, that empower terrorist groups with new global methods and put them into dialog with one another at a global level.\(^{73}\) Another important aspect of communication is a heightened awareness of what is going on in the rest of the world. A Tunisian jihadi fighting his national government may adopt a global view of terrorism once television and the internet start providing him with daily news of similar jihadi struggles in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Such

\(^{70}\) Steinberg and Werenfels, “Between the ‘Near’ and the ‘Far’ Enemy,” 410.
\(^{73}\) Hegghammer, “The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups”; Guidère, La tentation internationale d’Al-Qaida au Maghreb, 7.
ideological change may also be an evolutionary development, following the general trend of the
time. Lakhdar Benchiba supports this positivist interpretation, using the term “ideological
update” to describe the adoption of global jihadism.74

Another mechanism facilitating the globalization of jihadi ideology is isomorphism, a
widely observed phenomenon whereby groups adopt prevailing practices from other
organizations in their field.75 Through isomorphism, terror groups tend to adopt the existing
jihadi model, including its preexisting “script” or theory of victory, rather than developing a
program tailored to their specific requirements or operational and strategic objectives.76 An
example of this is the adoption of suicide bombings by North African groups, following the
model of groups fighting in Iraq, despite the negative impact on public opinion created by
massacring civilians. Terrorist organizations’ natural tendency to adopt the practices and
ideology of global jihadism facilitates a rapprochement with al-Qaeda and leads the group away
from its original goals.

Leadership

A group will join if its leaders will benefit from the merger, regardless of the group’s interests.

Individual leaders play an important role in leading organizations into al-Qaeda.

Although the other schools of thought consider leaders as simply catalysts for the organizational
decision to join al-Qaeda, the personal motivations of group leaders may offer an alternative
explanation for the decision. When a leader’s preferences do not match those of his group, his
final decision will be influenced by personal motives that do not apply to the group as a whole.

75 Helfstein, “Governance of Terror.”
A leader’s self-interest, especially for fame, power, and material interests, may motivate him to push his group into joining al-Qaeda, and his organizational power may allow him to succeed.

Membership in al-Qaeda offers a group leader status, recognition, and influence within the global jihadi movement, even though he must give up being at the top of the organizational hierarchy. For the leader of a national group, becoming a secondary leader within al-Qaeda may still be considered a promotion, even if membership requires him to swear allegiance to another commander. This was the case for al-Zawahiri, who improved his global standing and prominence when he swore allegiance to Bin Laden.  

Terrorist leaders often may have sufficient power to shift the group’s direction. Such personal benefits of membership need not carry over to the rest of a group’s members or serve the group’s goals. Instead, a powerful leader may act on his own incentives to force his group into al-Qaeda, as in the case of the EIJ’s joining. When the EIJ joined al-Qaeda, it largely abandoned its campaign against the Egyptian government, effectively giving up on the group’s immediate objective. However, the group’s leader, al-Zawahiri, became the second leading figure in the global jihadi movement, suggesting that the decision was motivated primarily by self-interest.

Arguments from the psychological school of thought on terrorist decision making are unnecessary to explain a group’s decision to join al-Qaeda. Possible applications of psychological theory include violent pathologies and radicalization through violence. If a violent pathology motivates the individual to commit acts of terrorism, al-Qaeda’s global jihad may help satisfy the terrorist leader’s will to commit violence. However, global jihad does not necessarily represent a more violent path than revolutionary Islamism, so the terrorist primarily acts to preserve the group, which is best described by an organizational approach. Within a terrorist

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77 Cragin and Daly, The Dynamic Terrorist Threat, 74.
organization, violence or the threat of violence is often the basis of competition for leadership positions, so a group’s more violent members tend to gain influence over time, leading to a radicalization of the group. However, such radicalization can be examined at the group level, and the relevant aspects of these psychological explanations are best represented within the instrumental, organizational, and ideological schools of thought.

While the leadership school of thought is an individual level explanation, the instrumental, organizational, and ideological schools of thought operate primarily at the organization level of analysis. However, there is also an individual-level component of the organizational school of thought: the claim that a leader’s (and therefore, a group’s) decisions will be partially motivated by his personal investment in the group’s survival and the high cost of leaving the group. This individual component is still a part of the organizational school, even though it bridges two levels of analysis. The leadership and organizational schools can be analytically separated because while the former sees a leader subordinating the group’s goals for personal reasons, the latter sees a group subordinating its original goals for collective reasons.

Individuals play a major role in a group’s adoption of a new ideology, but this influence need not be explained at the individual level. A group looks to its leaders to contribute to the development and innovation of its ideology, so a leader should be able to convince his group to follow his ideological beliefs as they change over time. However, the individual level of analysis is only necessary if the leader is able to impose his own preferences, which diverge from those of his group. If a leader’s ideology changes, he is unlikely to be able to remain in power long unless he convinces the group of his new beliefs, and the decision to join al-Qaeda would be very difficult for even a strong leader to achieve singlehandedly without the support of a

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78 Hegghammer, “The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups.”
substantial part of the group's membership. Therefore, the leadership hypothesis really hinges on the ability of a leader to act against the will of his organization, in pursuit of his own interests.

Summary

With the theoretical groundwork laid in the previous chapter, I surveyed the literature on terrorist decision making in general, then adapted and added to the existing schools of thought to develop four schools of thought for joining al-Qaeda: instrumental, organizational, ideology, and leadership. Now, with a theoretical model of membership and four functional explanations for the decision to join, I will test the viability of each of these hypotheses. The next chapter describes and justifies the research design I will use to test these theories against cases from the real world.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Having identified four distinct schools of thought and four specific hypotheses, I will test these possible explanations using comparative case studies. Within the Maghreb region, the terrorist groups with the greatest size and impact during the first decade of the 21st century were the GSPC and the LIFG. By mid-decade, both groups appeared to be moving toward membership in al-Qaeda. In the end, the GSPC joined al-Qaeda, but the LIFG did not. These cases make a good comparative study of what factors are responsible for national terrorist organizations joining al-Qaeda.

From this discussion, we arrive at four hypotheses answering the question “why do national terrorist groups join al-Qaeda?” each drawn from the one of the four schools of thought developed in the previous chapter and presented in Table 1. These explanations predict a very similar process of joining, but in each case the motivations of the group’s decision are different. By comparing the apparent preferences of the GSPC and the LIFG at the time of decision, we can determine which of these explanations is most useful for understanding groups’ joining al-Qaeda.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School of Thought</th>
<th>Group joins al-Qaeda if...</th>
<th>Goal of membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>membership will help achieve existing goals</td>
<td>political goals: regime change and implementation of Sharia law in home country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>membership will avoid serious decline or imminent defeat</td>
<td>avoiding serious decline or imminent defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>ideology becomes compatible with al-Qaeda’s global jihad</td>
<td>serving a common global jihadist ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>leaders benefit, regardless of group’s interests</td>
<td>self-interest of leaders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Hypotheses
Methodology

I will test the four hypotheses against two case studies in North Africa, using the comparative case study method and applying it to one positive and one negative case. The cases will come from the Islamic Maghreb, a region whose relative cohesiveness helps to minimize the influence of extraneous variables.

Comparative case studies are the best way to study this question because of the small number of cases (i.e. known jihadi groups affiliated with al-Qaeda as described in this paper). With such a small n, statistical analysis would yield inconclusive results. A single case study would allow a more detailed treatment, but causality cannot be proven from a single case and various biases would interfere with the results. Furthermore, most previous related studies have focused on a single case and have produced results that are not broadly generalizable.

The limitations of this method are its small sample size and lack of geographic variation. Terrorist groups’ decision to join al-Qaeda is very complex, so even a strong match between theoretical predictions and case findings may not yield conclusive results. Between two cases, more than one variable is bound to be different, so it will not be possible to isolate the most important independent variable with certainty. Since multiple factors are likely to influence the decision, it will be difficult to measure the relative weight of these influences without seeing the effects of variation within each variable. Al-Qaeda affiliates exist across the Muslim world and beyond, so the limited scope of this research, focusing primarily on the Maghreb and on two countries in particular, may limit the value of its results.

The two cases are chosen based on variation in the dependent variable (i.e. one group that joined al-Qaeda and one that did not), so the study relies on inductive logic. That is, observing differences between the cases is the primary means of identifying relevant factors. Inductive
logic has higher error rates because it is easy to miss competing variables and fail to control for them. To instead use a deductive logic, I would ideally select cases based on variation in each independent variable (e.g. one group in decline and one group not in decline, etc.). These cases would then prove or disprove each hypothesis by showing a correlation between a change in one independent variable and a resultant change in the dependent variable. Nevertheless, the scope and time limitations of this project only allow for two cases, and within the Maghreb, only two groups have had enough written about them to achieve an adequate level of certainty on the details of their activities and relations with al-Qaeda. With only two cases available, the methodologically preferred approach to choosing cases is not possible.

**Timeframe**

The timeframe for this study is 1998 to 2009. Although the al-Qaeda organization formed in the late 1980s, it was not until February 1998 that Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri created the “World Islamic Front Against the Jews and Crusaders.” The Islamic Front was not so much a new organization as a redefined identity for the al-Qaeda organization. It was through the Islamic Front that al-Qaeda fully committed itself both to global jihad against the far enemy and to its role as a worldwide umbrella organization. From then on, al-Qaeda international became the standard bearer of global jihadism and membership in al-Qaeda became a known option for national terrorist groups across the Muslim world.

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**Case Selection**

The universe of possible cases for this research is the set of national Islamist terrorist groups operating between 1998 and 2009. A “national” group is one founded for the purpose of overthrowing the ruling regime in a specific country (or countries). These groups explicitly or implicitly accept the established boundaries of the modern state system, although they may insist on specific territorial changes (for example, Jaish-e-Mohammad demands the unification of Kashmir with Pakistan) or target multiple countries (for example, the Jemaah Islamiyah operates in several Southeast Asian countries). This shift in ideological focus from this national orientation to a more global focus is the major puzzle of joining al-Qaeda. Globally, virtually every known national Islamist terrorist group is affiliated in some way with al-Qaeda; a selected list of prominent groups currently operating in this category, including all al-Qaeda member organizations, is provided in Table 2.

This universe of cases offers a great variety, so it is sensible to focus time- and resource-limited research on a single region. Focusing this comparative study on the Maghreb region of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Name</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egyptian Islamic Jihad</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libyan Islamic Fighting Group</td>
<td>Renounced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQ in the Arabian Peninsula</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Iraq) [AQ in Mesopotamia]</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lashkar-e-Taiba (Kashmir)</td>
<td>Affiliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaish-e-Muhammad (Kashmir)</td>
<td>Affiliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan</td>
<td>Affiliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salafist Group for Call and Combat [AQ in the Islamic Maghreb]</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Islamic Group (Algeria)</td>
<td>Affiliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Sayyaf (Malaysia, Philippines)</td>
<td>Affiliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jemaah Islamiyah (Southeast Asia)</td>
<td>Affiliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As-Shabaab (Somalia)</td>
<td>Affiliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamist Group of Moroccan Fighers</td>
<td>Affiliate</td>
</tr>
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</table>
North Africa will help to minimize the impact of extraneous variables. The Maghreb is relatively homogeneous for such a large geographic region—the nations of the Maghreb share a significant history, the Arab and Berber ethnicities, and a common language (Arabic) and religion (Islam). Moreover, each country in the region has a history of Islamic jihad and terrorist activity. Since the 1980s, jihadi organizations have been active in every country of the Maghreb. Groups in the region are prominent within the jihadi movement, sending many foreign fighters to Iraq and carrying out headline-grabbing attacks at home and in Europe.\textsuperscript{81}

In the following chapters, I will study the two most prominent groups in this region, the GSPC (now AQIM) and the LIFG. These cases are close to ideal because the two groups have so much in common but have become opposing symbols of, alternately, the rise or decline of al-Qaeda. These two national terrorist groups seemed quite similar in ideology and background until the GSPC joined al-Qaeda in 2006, and the LIFG denounced al-Qaeda in 2009. Since the groups' positions diverged within a relatively short time, we can compare the effect of environmental factors quite effectively, and we know that the al-Qaeda organization the two groups interacted with was roughly the same in both cases.

The GSPC, which became Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb in 2006, is emblematic of the phenomenon of national groups joining al-Qaeda. AQIM is taken as evidence that al-Qaeda is ascendant, threatening to spread its umbrella globally through partnerships with regional affiliates and turning the organization into a hydra that cannot be decapitated. Like the GSPC, the LIFG is a national group that has been affiliated with al-Qaeda essentially since its inception. The group appeared to be in rapprochement with al-Qaeda for years until it made an attention-grabbing announcement in 2009, rejecting claims it had joined al-Qaeda and denouncing Bin Laden's global jihadi ideology. The LIFG recantation has since been presented

\textsuperscript{81} Guidère, \textit{La tentation internationale d'Al-Qaida au Maghreb}, 239.
as a symbol of al-Qaeda’s decline and fading global support. Uncovering the practical
considerations at the root of these decisions may undermine these alternately pessimistic and
optimistic interpretations. Determining the cause of al-Qaeda’s spread offers insight how to stop
the organization’s growth, removing the subject from the realm of fearful speculation.

Research Methods

To test the organizational hypothesis, I will consider primarily each group’s strength and
operating environment. I will study the groups to determine at what stage of the membership
timeline their ideology shifts, as measured by tactics and rhetoric. If the organizational
hypothesis holds, we will expect to see an ideological shift occur during the reconciliation phase
as a result (not a cause) of the decision to join. If the ideological change occurs during the
preceding affiliate period, it would suggest an explanation focused on ideology.

I will also compare the logic of each school of thought with the details of the two cases.
If the various indicators of a particular explanation fit a case, the next step is to match up the
causal chain linking that indicator to the expected outcome. In some cases, the theoretical
expectations may be undermined by other factors. Specifically, certain explanations for why the
GSPC and other groups joined al-Qaeda may seem to apply to the LIFG, seemingly refuting the
theory’s predictive power. However, the influence of other variables may undo the causal
mechanism undergirding the hypothesis, creating an unexpected outcome.

I will rely on multiple kinds of sources to improve accuracy and avoid biases (for
example, the bias toward al-Qaeda found in most journalistic reports). The primary sources for
this study will be statements and other publications made by each terrorist group and data on
their attacks, as well as a few interviews with group members. In addition, secondary sources,
like journal articles and news reports, will provide information on the development of the group and its leaders.

**Examining the Hypotheses**

For each hypothesis — instrumental, organizational, ideology, and leadership — I will identify indicators to differentiate it from other explanations and identify the independent variables for each explanation. Later, using the indicators to determine the state of the independent variables in each case, we will be able to test their comparative validity.

**Instrumental**

The instrumental hypothesis posits that a group will join al-Qaeda if doing so will help achieve the group’s existing, revolutionary Islamist goals. The independent variables are the usefulness of membership to achieving the group’s mission and the existence of group needs, as the group perceives them. We should be able to predict a group’s decision to join by performing a cost-benefit analysis of its pre-merger policy options. According to this theory, membership will offer substantial benefits to the joining group, such as access to material resources and improved capacity to recruit fighters for the group’s national cause. The group’s requirements will also determine its proclivity to join al-Qaeda, since a successful and self-sufficient organization will have no need to join. Environmental factors like public support and regime hostility may also influence the group’s need for external support.

Because groups joining al-Qaeda must signal their adherence to al-Qaeda’s ideology, we expect to see an outward display of ideological change when a national group joins, even if the group remains dedicated its original goals. Terrorist attacks are a costly signaling mechanism, so groups will mostly use words and rhetoric to signal their rapprochement with al-Qaeda. The group may carry out more attacks against foreign targets, at home or abroad, but they will
continue to put most of their resources into attacks on the local regime. As such, the instrumental hypothesis predicts that a group will demonstrate a rhetorical shift during rapprochement but only a minimal change in its targeting.

Indicators for the instrumental hypothesis include the provision of resources from the al-Qaeda network to the group, the hostility of the group’s operating environment, and the combination of a significant rhetorical shift but minimal tactical changes during rapprochement. The first two indicators mark the presence of a window of opportunity, in which joining al-Qaeda will benefit the group’s mission. The final indicator helps to differentiate this explanation from one using an organizational logic, since neither hypothesis expects ideological change before rapprochement.

Organizational

The premise of the organizational hypothesis is that groups will join al-Qaeda to avoid imminent defeat and ensure the survival of their local organization. The independent variables are the weakness of the organization (suggesting its imminent demise) and al-Qaeda’s perceived ability to save the group.

If the organizational hypothesis is correct, the membership process will follow a predictable timeline. When the group’s survival is threatened by a combination of internal weakness and external pressure, the organization will respond by drawing closer to al-Qaeda, thus beginning the rapprochement process. A group’s ideology will change little until the rapprochement period, after it has decided to join al-Qaeda. Then, the group will modify its rhetoric and targeting to benefit as much as possible from al-Qaeda’s support.

The accuracy of the organizational explanation can be tested using several indicators. If a group is on the verge of defeat it will show signs of weakness – including small size, poor
finances, a low recruitment rate, and a low rate of attacks — and be under constant threat and pressure from the ruling regime. Al-Qaeda’s ability to help stave off that defeat is visible in the tactical, financial, and recruiting support it offers a group after membership. Finally, increased activity after joining, as measured by the frequency and scale of activity carried out before and after joining, demonstrates the group’s ability to benefit from membership.

**Ideology**

The ideological hypothesis states that a group will join al-Qaeda if its ideology develops to match that of al-Qaeda. Once the two organizations’ become newly ideologically compatible, membership is a natural way to further the collective cause through cooperation and shared resources. If this hypothesis holds, we will observe the conditions for ideological change and also be able to place the group’s ideological development early on in the membership process, before the actual decision to join al-Qaeda.

There are two hypothesized mechanisms for this ideological development, changes in the political environment and the globalization of jihad through personal and network connections. Political factors include foreign involvement in local and popular causes (e.g. support for the local regime or involvement in Muslim countries like Palestine, Iraq, or Afghanistan) and the broader slate of political conflicts grabbing Arab publics’ attention at the time. The influence of global ideological currents on a particular group will be influenced by the group’s receptivity to global jihadism, which can be measured by the density of its network ties with al-Qaeda and its history of physical and rhetorical attacks against a Western power.

Indicators can be used to determine whether a group is ideologically aligned with al-Qaeda when it decides to join. If ideological change motivates membership, and not the reverse, then a group will adopt al-Qaeda’s rhetoric and begin targeting the far enemy during the
affiliation phase (i.e., before deciding to join). In such a case, we will expect to observe clear external ideological influences and signs that the group is receptive to global jihadism.

Leadership

According to the leadership hypothesis, a group will join al-Qaeda when doing so is in the self-interest of the group’s leaders, regardless of the impact of joining on the achievement of the group’s objectives. This hypothesis is really only relevant if organization-level explanations fail. If a group that joins is acting in its own interests — be they instrumental, organizational, or ideological — the personal benefits for the leader will be only a secondary factor in the decision. If another hypothesis holds in a positive case, this means membership is in the interest of the group, and individual-level factors are largely irrelevant in explaining the decision.

If the hypothesis holds, a leader should expect to gain status and recognition, if not material benefits, from his group’s joining al-Qaeda. The personal success of a leader after joining may indicate the validity of this hypothesis, but we must remember that leaders often miscalculate. An organization that joins because of the leader’s interests will not itself prefer to join, so there should not be overt signs of ideological change or group-level rapprochement with al-Qaeda. Documents supporting al-Qaeda from a single leader in the absence of indications of support from the rest of the group would support this hypothesis as well. A good indicator for this hypothesis would be the presence of dissenting voices within the group or the departure of members opposing the decision after the group joins. These indicators of disunity suggest the ability of the leader to impose his will on a divided or undecided organization.

Conclusion

Because of the small number of cases worldwide and the difficulty of finding and analyzing information about each clandestine organization, comparative case studies will be a
good way to approach the question. In constructing the story of each group, we will see during what stage of the membership process, if any, groups undergo ideological change. Table 3 summarizes where we expect to see ideological change occur along the membership timeline according to each hypothesis. I will use this chart as a guide to suggest which explanations might be most useful.

The following chapters will detail the cases of the GSPC and the LIFG, applying the theoretical framework of the previous chapter to determine what factors best explain a group’s decision whether to join al-Qaeda. Using public statements, data on attacks, and secondary sources, I will construct the storyline of each group. Based on a close analysis of each case and the status of the indicators detailed above, I will determine the usefulness of each hypothesis for explaining groups’ joining al-Qaeda.

<table>
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<th>Table 3. Stage of Adoption of al-Qaeda Ideology</th>
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<td>Affiliation</td>
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Chapter 4: The Salafist Group for Call and Combat

Fueled by the struggle against French imperialism, Islamism developed into a powerful force in Algeria during the twentieth century. Islam played a major role in Algeria's anti-colonial war of independence, which spanned from 1954 to 1962. Having won the battle for independence, the National Liberation Front (FLN) proceeded to rule Algeria as a single-party state for the next 30 years. In 1992, with the popular Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) poised to claim a sweeping electoral victory in the first free election cycle, powerful FLN cabinet took over the government and banned Islamists from politics. In response, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and other organizations launched an extremely bloody campaign to overthrow the regime. The civil war claimed more than 150,000 lives before the government defeated the GIA in 2002.82

With violence dominating the country's post-colonial era, Islamist terrorism seems to have become a permanent fixture on the Algerian political landscape. The current government, headed by Abdelaziz Bouteflika, continues the FLN's tradition of secular autocracy and heavy-handed counterterrorism policy. It is in this environment that the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC, French: Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat) formed, with the mission of overthrowing the secular order and establishing an Islamic state in Algeria ruled by Shari'a. The origins of the GSPC are entirely national, yet the group eventually joined al-Qaeda, in 2006, and it has now embarked on a global jihad against the West. This chapter will attempt to explain why two formerly contrasting organizations eventually chose to combine forces.

From the GSPC to AQIM

Algeria’s bloody civil war, which lasted until 2002, gave rise to a field of violent Islamist groups. The largest terrorist organization created was the GIA, which adopted a version of *takfir* (excommunication) doctrine, one who practices excommunication) doctrine. This extreme policy, later disowned by most jihadis worldwide, holds the entire Algerian society responsible, on pain of death, for their complicity in supporting the apostate regime.\(^8^3\) As the war went on and the GIA failed to achieve its mission, it turned increasingly toward mass casualty bombings targeting ordinary civilians, which understandably turned public opinion strongly away from the group. By 1996, the GIA’s failed tactics were driving it to the point of irrelevance; that year, that the group carried out its last international attack.\(^8^4\) Disgusted with the organization’s tactics and seeing a window of opportunity in its decline, Algiers-area GIA Commander Hassan Hattab led a splinter faction away from the organization. In 1999, the group became the GSPC, bringing a relatively small but sizeable membership along, including future commander Abdelmalek Droukdel, who was at that time still buried in the rank and file.\(^8^5\)

Having ostensibly quit the GIA over tactical and ideological matters, we might expect the GSPC to be more restrained in its choice of tactics. This was true as the group built itself up through the early 2000s, carrying out regular attacks on Algerian government forces. The group showed an aversion to attacking civilians, so it relied primarily on guerilla tactics to “combine a sudden attack with a rapid disappearance.”\(^8^6\) In this way, the GSPC largely avoided mass casualty attacks, although collateral damage was always part of the equation. When the

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\(^8^3\) Ibid., 93.
\(^8^4\) Ibid.
governments defeated the GIA and the civil war officially ended in 2002, the GSPC continued to
fight, maintaining an Islamist insurgency despite waning public support. By 2001, the decline of
the GIA had left the GSPC as the most active insurgent group in Algeria, carrying out regular
attacks despite dwindling membership.

Leadership and Development

The GSPC took major steps toward al-Qaeda each time a new emir took his place at the
head of the group. Hattab was pushed out in 2003 when he attempted to end the insurgency.
Taking his place was Nabil Sahraoui, who managed to only to declare his support for al-Qaeda
and for Abdelmalek Droukdal before he was killed in a 2004 raid. Droukdal, an Algerian
villager who joined the insurgency soon after the 1992 elections, worked his way up the ranks
and became emir of the organization upon Sahraoui’s death.87 Droukdal has led the organization
since then, although his position may be in jeopardy according to some reports.

Recent press coverage suggests that Droukdal has been replaced by Abu Yousef al-
Annabi, the head of the group’s committee of elders and the main opponent of global jihadism
within the organization’s senior leadership.88 The evidence of this possible change at the top is
the March 2010 release of an AQIM propaganda video in which Droukdal does not appear – the
video stars al-Annabi instead. Other recent reports indicate that Algerian armed forces have
surrounded Droukdal and a large number of his followers in the desert, which may suggest that
the group’s power is weakening, although Droukdal has reportedly “survived three previous
ambushes.”89

88 Ismail Fellah, “Abu Yousef el-Annabi new emir of the GSPC,” Ennahar (Algiers, March 9, 2010), Online
89 “Algerian army corners al-Qaeda emir,” Magharebia (Algiers, April 20, 2010), Online edition,
Under the direction of these men, the GSPC evolved from a small splinter group of the dominant GIA into what was, by 2004, the most prominent revolutionary Islamist organization in Algeria.\footnote{Botha, \textit{Terrorism and the Maghreb}, 39.} Dedicated to the destruction of the Algerian regime, the group continued to carry out attacks, mostly skirmishes with Algerian police forces and occasional kidnappings of tourists.\footnote{“Global Terrorism Database,” \textit{National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism}, January 1, 2008, http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/; Gray and Stockham, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” 94.}

\textit{Rapprochement with al-Qaeda}

The GSPC appears to have decided to join al-Qaeda in 2003, when Sahraoui came to power and declared his support for Bin Laden’s global jihad. In 2004, Droukdal began issuing propaganda statements in support of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and in support of recruitment drives for the jihad in Iraq.\footnote{Jean-Pierre Filiu, “The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghrib,” \textit{The Middle East Journal} 63, no. 2 (2009): 222.} In addition, the GSPC itself began to send jihadi fighters to Iraq, forming a “public partnership in terror” with al-Qaeda; by 2005, as many as 20\% of foreign fighters in Iraq were Algerian.\footnote{Marret, “Glocal Organization,” 546.} It was at this point that the GSPC began to rhetorically support al-Qaeda and its ideology, publishing among other items a June 13, 2004, declaration of war on foreign national and companies. Despite the rhetorical shift, the group’s tactics changed little during this rapprochement period. Most of the group’s attacks continued to target Algerian forces of order with skirmishes and small bombs.\footnote{Filiu, “The Local and Global Jihad of AQIM,” 222.}

Joining al-Qaeda required a lengthy process of negotiations.\footnote{Marret, “Glocal Organization,” 546.} First, al-Qaeda had to decide on a regional strategy for North Africa. Although al-Qaeda was willing to accept multiple regional affiliates in the Maghreb, its deep ties to other Maghrebi organizations, including the LIFG, complicated and delayed the eventual decision to declare the GSPC a primary umbrella
group for all of the Maghreb. The various elements they hoped to unify would not all come willingly. After all, the LIFG was on poor terms with the Algerian Islamists since they had publicly revoked their support of the GIA in response to the group’s recklessness and excessive violence. Even with al-Qaeda apparently decided on a geopolitical strategy, the LIFG’s renunciation proves that potential member groups have the final word in joining, so the process can break down at any point. Between interorganizational power dynamics, significant doctrinal questions, and difficult communications, negotiations become a lengthy process despite al-Qaeda’s relative openness in accepting partners. As a result, it was not until 2006 that al-Qaeda publicly confirmed the union and the GSPC officially became an al-Qaeda member organization.

AQIM: New Attacks and Regionalization

Soon after joining al-Qaeda, the GSPC in February 2007 announced it was changing its name to the al-Qaeda Organization in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Ayman al-Zawahiri, celebrating the fifth anniversary of the September 11th attacks, offered a public statement on behalf of Al-Qaeda Central that praised the merger with the GSPC and warned France of new threats from its former colony: “this blessed union will be a thorn in the throat of the American and French crusaders.” Acting in coordination with al-Zawahiri, the new AQIM also escalated its threats against its foreign enemies, especially the French, who it accused of running a “colonialist project” by cooperating with the “apostate” regime in Algiers. The regionalized its goals, adding the “liberation” of Andalusia to the list, and it began emphasizing

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100 Ibid., 224.
that its targets were allied with the Western "Crusader" alliance. For example, AQIM claimed
the triple bombings near Algiers on April 11, 2007, were striking Interpol, even though 30
 Algerians were killed and 200 injured.\textsuperscript{101}

AQIM immediately increased the intensity of its attacks, carrying out several major
bombings in the first years of membership. The GSPC was founded, in part, in protest against
the GIA's indiscriminate killing of civilians, but this did not stop AQIM from targeting
civilians.\textsuperscript{102} Having long targeted primarily police and security forces, it was not until 2007 that
the GSPC first targeted private citizens in its bombing campaigns.\textsuperscript{103} That February, seven
synchronized bombs went off east of Algiers, beginning a series of bombings that would kill
over 140 people within the first year.\textsuperscript{104} Since then, the group's attacks have adopted the
character of al-Qaeda attacks in Iraq and elsewhere, using suicide bombers and IEDs.\textsuperscript{105} The
result of this has been not more attacks but far higher casualty attacks.\textsuperscript{106} The group has
continued to strike its old targets, but it has added al-Qaeda-style suicide bombings to its deadly
repertoire. The fact that the group's primary activity remains unchanged led Jean-Pierre Filiu to
observe that, up to this point, the globalization of jihad has meant "little more than local suicide
bombings, echoed by global e-propaganda."\textsuperscript{107} The change in tactics threatens to alienate
previously supportive segments of the population, including Algeria's Berbers, many of whom
live in the Kabylie region, historically a GIA and GSPC stronghold.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 223.
\textsuperscript{102} Tawil, "A Jihadist in the Sand," 10.
\textsuperscript{103} "Global Terrorism Database."
\textsuperscript{104} "Chronology - Bombings in Algeria," Reuters, September 29, 2008,
http://uk.reuters.com/articlePrint?articleId=UKLT479538.
\textsuperscript{105} Tawil, "New Strategies in al-Qaeda's Battle for Algeria."
\textsuperscript{106} Marret, ""Glocal" Organization," 547.
\textsuperscript{107} Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of AQIM," 226.
\textsuperscript{108} Andrew Black, "Al-Qaeda Operations in Kabylie Mountains Alienating Algeria's Berbers," Terrorism Focus 5,
no. 16 (April 23, 2008).
Another major rhetorical change has been the adoption of a regional project for the Maghreb. The organization has publicly sought to cultivate its image as the regional umbrella group for jihad in North Africa, although such regionalization has so far been mostly symbolic. In the words of Lakhdar Benchiba, despite its regional goals “AQMI remains not a Maghrebi organization but a Maghrebi project.” In other words, regionalization is more a goal than a reality. Various news accounts have drawn attention to the recruitment of small groups of foreign Maghrebis to the organization. However, most analysts downplay the significance of these transnational fighters, agreeing with Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels when they write, “Certain elements from neighboring countries – Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania – have certainly joined AQIM, but their number, judging by available information, remains insignificant compared with the Algerian element.” In essence, AQIM is the same old Algerian GSPC, descended from the Algeria’s Islamist tradition, with new layers of regionalism and globalism superimposed.

Explanations

Most written accounts have focused on only one group, and much of the theorizing that has been done on the question of joining al-Qaeda has been in relation to the GSPC. What limited literature exists on this question offers several pseudo-theories, none of which is precisely defined or developed, to explain the GSPC’s entry into al-Qaeda. All of the explanations for groups joining al-Qaeda seem to fit to a certain extent with the case of the GSPC. As we will see, the instrumental, organizational, ideological, and individual leadership

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110 Black, “Recasting Jihad in the Maghreb.”
theories can all explain the GSPC’s decision to join al-Qaeda to some extent, but the
organizational and individual leadership theories prove to be the strongest.

*Instrumental*

The instrumental hypothesis predicts that the GSPC will join al-Qaeda in order to
advance its goal of overthrowing the Algerian government. In terms of organizational needs, the
GSPC was positioned to be a strong candidate for membership. Lacking guns, recruits, and
money, the group was making no headway in the fight against the Algerian regime.\(^{112}\) With
Algeria’s aspiring jihadis leaving for Iraq instead of signing up to fight the Bouteflika regime,
membership in al-Qaeda offered a way to stem this drain on the jihadi recruitment pool.\(^{113}\)
However, al-Qaeda’s ideology represented a significant departure from the foundational beliefs
of the Algerian Islamist movement, and the GSPC’s willingness to modify its ideological values
suggests that joining was not motivated primarily by the group’s instrumental goals.

Membership in al-Qaeda has had a limited impact on the GSPC. During rapprochement,
from 2003 to 2006, the GSPC began offering statements supportive of al-Qaeda but did not
significantly change its tactics. Its strategy and targeting did not change until 2007, when the
GSPC officially became a member of al-Qaeda. Even now, the group maintains most of its old
targets (primarily police buildings) while mixing in more spectacular terrorist techniques, such as
suicide bombings and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs).\(^{114}\)

Whether the impact on the GSPC is limited or not, one may argue that the group has
benefitted from joining al-Qaeda and also been able to maintain its original mission. Yet if the
GSPC benefitted from membership, what were the benefits? The group’s lack of size and

\(^{113}\) Steinberg and Werenfels, “Between the 'Near' and the 'Far' Enemy,” 411.
\(^{114}\) Marret, ““Glocal” Organization,” 546.
funding leading into the merger suggest one possible answer. Jean-Pierre Filiu writes that joining al-Qaeda provided the GSPC with “an indisputable increase in firepower and expertise.” Accordingly, we see that the group has been able to continue attacking the Algerian security forces, but now it arguably benefits from al-Qaeda’s operational expertise to enhance those activities.

On the other hand, one might argue that joining al-Qaeda did not help the GSPC enhance its battle against the local regime. In the near term, the GSPC no longer poses a serious threat to the government in Algiers, suggesting failure in the original mission despite joining – membership did not serve the group’s original ambitions. The group would like to believe it has managed a neat balancing trick, improving its viability and visibility without giving up on its national goals. Instead of abandoning the fight against the near enemy, the group has adopted “a simultaneous and complementary commitment to fight the far enemy: the American and European masters that prop up the apostate regime.” This complementary approach may fit a version of the instrumental hypothesis, but the theory is relatively weak and is particularly undermined by the fact of the GSPC’s major ideological volte face after joining.

If the GSPC joined al-Qaeda for instrumental reasons, the theory suggests that the group will stick to its original goals even after joining, only displaying a minimum required level of adherence to al-Qaeda. One may argue that the GSPC’s commitments to global jihad are mostly rhetorical, and therefore do not indicate a fundamental ideological shift. Nevertheless, the GSPC’s commitment to global jihad has clearly surpassed the minimum requirements for membership. Even in 1995, well before AQIM was created, Droukdal released a statement that confirmed his group’s clear intention, according to RAND analyst Sara Daly, “to be a full

partner in conducting attacks against the United States and the West. In 2007, AQIM enthusiastically adopted al-Qaeda’s suicide bombing tactics, launching a series of deadly attacks against civilians that year and the next. The extent to which the GSPC adopted al-Qaeda ideology seriously undermines the instrumental hypothesis.

Organizational

According to the organizational hypothesis, the GSPC will join al-Qaeda if that organization can help it avoid serious decline or defeat. With most of the Islamist armed struggle in Algeria winding down in 2002 and 2003, the GSPC was on the verge of demise. Under the organizational school, it is this kind of fear of imminent defeat that drives a terrorist group to innovate and call on the help and resources of al-Qaeda. Despite declining membership, the GSPC remained capable of carrying out significant attacks through 2006, which partially challenges the organizational hypothesis, but without the Iraq War and increased al-Qaeda ties, it seems unlikely the group would have survived past 2003. Therefore, the organizational hypothesis correctly predicts that the GSPC will join al-Qaeda.

Several general factors in the GSPC case support the organizational hypothesis. In an interview with the New York Times in 2008, Droukdal stated clearly that his ultimate goal is not defeating the regime in Algiers but continuing the jihad. His choice to elevate continuity or survival above any particular policy goal or outcome is significant. It validates the logic of the organizational hypothesis, suggesting the group will be open to modifying its mission in order to survive as a jihadi organization.

117 Daly, “Algerian GSPC.”
119 Tawil, “New Strategies in al-Qaeda's Battle for Algeria.”
The development of the GSPC’s public statements and target choices before and after joining supports the hypothesis. During rapprochement, the group’s rhetoric shifted in favor of al-Qaeda, suggesting that the rhetorical shift — less costly than a tactical shift — was used as a tool in the process of negotiations. After joining, the theory predicts the GSPC will adopt al-Qaeda’s rhetoric and targets, and in fact, the West did become a focus of both the GSPC’s rhetoric and targeting. Steinberg and Werenfels confirm both the independent and dependent variable of the hypothesis: the GSPC “adopted an internationalist agenda in a situation when it was pushed on the defensive,” they write, which echoes the EIJ’s decision eight years prior.

Serious recruitment problems heading into 2003 forced the GSPC to take radical steps. The GSPC grew rapidly from 1996 to 1998, and it had over 4,000 members in 2002, but a period of rapid decline followed. By 2006, the group’s numbers had dwindled to around 400, a 90% drop. Surprisingly, however, the group continued to carry out a relatively constant number of attacks. At first glance, this does not support the logic of the organizational school, since ability to carry out attacks is the benchmark for a group’s survival. However, a continuing drop in recruitment threatened the group’s very existence in 2003, and it was probably only the group’s increased ties to al-Qaeda and AQI that kept the group active. In this view, rapprochement and membership were a survival-motivated attempt to win new recruits. The recruitment motive is also enduring: in 2010, the group may have less than 200 total members, numbers potentially low enough to force the group to modify its goals to improve recruiting.

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122 Ibid., 18.
125 Marret, “‘Glocal’ Organization,” 547.
The group faced other setbacks as well. In Algeria, the demise of the GIA in 2002 put the GSPC in a very difficult position. Without substantial popular support and facing an enemy they could not defeat through usual guerilla tactics, the group was pressured to adopt a more nebulous organizing principle and be more flexible in the targets it chose. Since 2002, the group suffered from “infighting, the loss of two emirs, and the steadily improving skills of the Algerian police and security forces.”

Because the GSPC decided to join al-Qaeda when it faced such serious decline shortly thereafter, the organizational theory satisfactorily explains the GSPC’s decision to begin rapprochement with al-Qaeda in 2003–2004 and agree to membership in 2006.

**Ideological**

The ideological school of thought predicts that the GSPC will join al-Qaeda if it first adopts global jihadism because of network ties and the globalization of jihadism and changes in the political environment. The increasing globalization of jihadism and political environment both appear to have influenced the GSPC, which supports the theory. However, the group’s lack of interest in adopting al-Qaeda’s strategy and tactics (and to a certain extent, rhetoric), at least until after joining, suggests that their decision may not have been motivated by true conviction for global jihadist ideology.

It is plausible that trends in global jihadism would have an effect on the GSPC. The GSPC is a well-connected organization within the jihadi world, including extensive support and expatriate communities abroad, so it is reasonable to assume its members’ and leaders’ ties to other jihadis influenced the group’s ideology over time. Individuals who have these contacts with others bring news of innovations in global thinking back to the group. GSPC members enjoyed relatively high freedom of movement and communication, owing to their ungoverned

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126 Daly, “Algerian GSPC.”
desert operating areas and involvement in other jihadi arenas worldwide. While the GSPC had network connections with al-Qaeda from the beginning, the schism between the GIA and the GSPC brought the latter group’s leaders into much closer contact and camaraderie with al-Qaeda. Bin Laden actually supported the GSPC in breaking away from the GIA, partially in order to distance himself from the toxic backlash against the GIA’s brutality. This special connection may have further increased al-Qaeda’s influence.

The political environment in Algeria is another important factor. Since the country has a long, continuous history of Islamist violence, jihadis have long focused their energies and hatred on whoever was ruling Algeria at the time and resisting their jihad: the French, the FLN, and now the secular authoritarian regime. Since the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, America’s War on Terrorism has introduced the U.S. as a new anti-Islamist actor throughout the Muslim world. By funding After the September 11 attacks, the U.S. finally responded to Algeria’s longstanding requests for counterterrorism assistance. Annual direct military assistance increased 560% by 2008, and the U.S. has further involved itself in Algeria through increased intelligence sharing and the multilateral Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative. Such American assistance to the Algerian government fuels anti-Americanism among those who oppose the regime, and convinces them that the U.S. is the true source of the anti-Islamic counterterrorism efforts opposing them. Declaring war on America helps win over potential recruits who may have decided that undermining the Algerian security forces requires attacking their American backers as well.

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127 Ibid.
130 Steinberg and Werenfels, “Between the ‘Near’ and the ‘Far’ Enemy,” 410.
In addition, other changes in the political context since 2000 may have significantly increased the willingness of Algerian jihadis to directly target the United States. For example, unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, considered by many Algerians to be attacks on Islam and Muslims, helped energize radicals to take up arms against the U.S.

The two hypothesized causes of ideological development, changes in the political environment and the globalization of jihad through personal and network connections, both help explain a potential ideological change within the GSPC, but what is largely missing are concrete signs of an actual ideological change. Even though several mechanisms of ideological influence were acting on the GSPC, this is no guarantee that the Algerians were listening. To determine whether ideological change was the true cause of the decision to join, we must look at the group’s rhetoric and actions to see whether the shift to global jihadism began before or after the decision to join al-Qaeda (which the GSPC made in 2003).

Although it endorsed some of al-Qaeda’s actions and sometimes threatened France, the pre-2003 GSPC placed a much higher emphasis on the near enemy than the far enemy and took no action to support al-Qaeda’s efforts in engaging the U.S. After September 11, 2001, the GSPC issued a statement threatening to attack American and European interests if those countries interfered with its operations or attacked the Muslim world, but this was a relatively defensive stance, and the group never acted on their threats against these countries before 2003.\(^\text{131}\) The GSPC position demonstrated no outright hostility toward al-Qaeda, but it also showed little support. In no way was the GSPC a reliable ally in the global jihad. The transformation of the group into the AQIM is all the more remarkable because it was designed as a signal of unity to accompany the announcement of membership. In this way, the GSPC did not organically “grow into” its role in the global jihad; it simply tacked these obligations onto its

\(^{131}\) Daly, “Algerian GSPC.”
previous operations when it was finally allowed to join. Under the ideological hypothesis, we expect a group to embrace global jihad early on and immediately modify its rhetoric and targeting to reflect the new orientation. We would not expect a group to wait for membership to act on its newfound global ideals, insofar as we are discussing capable, independent groups, which should relish the chance to strike out on a global jihadi adventure, with or without al-Qaeda itself.

Leadership

If the leadership hypothesis is correct, the decision to join al-Qaeda was motivated primarily by the personal interests of the GSPC leaders in charge when the group joined al-Qaeda. The correlation between a new leader taking control and changes in the GSPC’s policy toward al-Qaeda suggests this is a good theory. These new leaders were radical warriors in search of fame and religious glory, not conservative political organizers, and al-Qaeda offered a big name with which to associate themselves and their movement. Sahraoui’s and Droukdal’s personal incentives for joining are strong, so the GSPC case appears to support this hypothesis.

The leadership hypothesis focuses naturally on GSPC Emirs Sahraoui and Droukdal, who presided over the GSPC as it approached and then joined al-Qaeda. Several authors have attributed the GSPC’s membership in al-Qaeda to Droukdal, who put the group through a process of transformation toward the al-Qaeda model once he took over the group in 2004. Although correlation does not prove causation, it follows that if group policy comes from the leadership, a change in leadership should produce a change in policy. This condition holds in this case, since the GSPC’s relationship with al-Qaeda improved each time a new leader came to power.

The GSPC leadership had sufficient motivation to seek entry into al-Qaeda. Committed radicals, both men served in the harsh deserts of Algeria, constantly on the run from authorities. They had little to risk by “escalating” the conflict by bringing in al-Qaeda. They were also ambitious; Droukdal in particular was motivated to rise up in the jihadi ranks globally, and he “worked hard to reach a high profile in the jihadi Internet community.”\textsuperscript{133} Apart from their personal ambitions, the two men had something extra to prove. Following the disgrace of having Hassan Hattab attempt to reach a deal with the “apostate” regime, Hattab’s successors knew that if they wanted to “keep face with the global jihad movement,” they had to strike a hard line and take the group in a radical new direction.\textsuperscript{134}

In addition, dissent within the group against the decision suggests that the decision in favor of al-Qaeda was enforced by individual leaders, not agree upon by the group as a whole. As the GSPC grew ever closer to al-Qaeda, a number of dissidents left the organization. Hassan Hattab clearly opposed joining al-Qaeda, since he had actually pushed for an end to the fighting, and the debate surrounding his efforts suggests that the group was not sufficiently unified to make an organizational decision to join al-Qaeda.\textsuperscript{135}

Conclusion

The case of the GSPC offers the richest study of terrorist groups joining al-Qaeda, because it is a prototypical case of a member organization and because Algeria, despite its war against Islamist elements, has been politically stable since at least 2002. Two of the hypotheses – instrumental and ideological – offer sub-par results, while the other two – organizational and leadership – seem to explain the GSPC’s decision quite well.

\textsuperscript{133} Filiu, “The Local and Global Jihad of AQIM,” 221.
\textsuperscript{135} Tawil, “A Jihadist in the Sand,” 10.
Applying the instrumental hypothesis to the GSPC yields mixed results. On the one hand, membership in al-Qaeda has not been a boon to the local cause, which seems to invalidate the hypothesis. On the other hand, membership allowed the group to continue its attacks on the regime in the face of multiple crises: an increasingly hostile environment, dwindling membership, and scant resources. Under these circumstances, even suboptimal overall results may signal that the group is enjoying substantial benefits of membership. Nevertheless, the GSPC substantially changed its ideology after joining al-Qaeda, adopting far enemy targets and giving global jihadi rhetoric a very prominent place in its propaganda.

Within the ideological school, the GSPC seems to fit all the criteria for ideological change, but the indicators of pre-rapprochement ideological change are absent. As a result, this hypothesis does not appear to identify the correct independent variable for the GSPC’s joining al-Qaeda. We must consider that GSPC ideology may have been significantly closer to that of al-Qaeda before rapprochement, so we should expect more modest ideological changes in the run-up to membership. This theory will be further developed in the Conclusion, applying the concept of cardinal preferences to a discussion that has relied exclusively on ordinal preferences up to this point.

The organizational and leadership schools of thought both do a good job predicting and explaining the correct outcome, the GSPC’s joining al-Qaeda. The organizational hypothesis adequately explains the GSPC’s decision by looking at the group’s weakness and operating environment at the time when it decided to pursue membership. For the leadership explanation, the argument follows quite well but the proof that the two GSPC emirs held a strong preference for joining is based largely on circumstantial evidence related to their ambitions and the course of action they took. Nevertheless, the theory is bolstered by the presence of significant
dissenting voices within the organization, which suggests the leaders' personal power played a role in pushing the group to join.

Next, we will study the case of the LIFG, a group that did not join al-Qaeda and instead repudiated the organization. In this case, we will look to see if the same hypotheses can explain that case as well, or if various factors may come into play in different situations.
Chapter 5: The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group

Jihad has ethics and morals because it is for God. That means it is forbidden to kill women, children, elderly people, priests, messengers, traders and the like.

—Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, November 2009

Since jihadism entered the world stage, analysts have struggled to identify the complex connections among these terrorists. As we have seen, unconfirmed or minor links are often labeled “affiliations,” confusing our understanding of the actual ties among groups and individuals. Most analysts considered the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) to be an al-Qaeda affiliate until its surprise announcement that it is not and never was a part of Bin Laden’s organization. Given the fighting group’s failure to carry out major attacks in the 2000s, its purported affiliation with al-Qaeda is now the primary source of its international notoriety, enhanced by prominent Libyan leaders of al-Qaeda, like Abu Yahya al-Libi and Abu Laith al-Libi, and over fifteen years of informal cooperation. Al-Qaeda announced its merger with the LIFG in 2007, with Abu Laith claiming to represent the LIFG in the move, so it came as a shock when the LIFG’s central leadership recently announced a public repudiation of al-Qaeda and its doctrine of violence. Given the two groups’ close personal ties and al-Qaeda’s announced desire to cooperate, why did the LIFG not join al-Qaeda during the 2000s?

The LIFG from Afghanistan to Abu Salim

The origins of jihadist resistance in Libya can be traced back to a now defunct jihad group formed by Awatha al-Zuwawi in 1982 and disbanded by the regime in 1989. During this time, Libyans inspired by the ideal of jihad began to travel to Afghanistan as “Arab Afghans,” fighting alongside the mujahedeen, training, and planning how to bring the jihad home to

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Libya. In the aftermath of the Afghan War, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (Arabic: al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya al-Muqatila bi-Libya) formed in the mid-1990s. The LIFG coalesced into a viable organization in Afghanistan, with a leadership structure developing in Libya as well, including group leader Abdullah al-Sadeq. They began working covertly within Libya to overthrow Qaddafi, especially by developing "leadership skills of the people in charge of cells and units inside the country." Operating in absolute secrecy, they prepared for a stunning surprise attack against the regime. Knowing the Libyan police state would prove a powerful adversary, the LIFG planned to avoid hostilities they were prepared to take and hold territory. Unfortunately for their cause, lack of discipline within the ranks forced the group out of the shadows prematurely, provoking an overpowering response from the Qaddafi regime.

The LIFG's brief operations within Libya ended in catastrophic failure. Despite years of careful preparation and intense secrecy, a major blunder by low-ranking operatives forced the organization to engage the regime before it was ready. Fighting began in May 1995, when LIFG militants, without the leadership's authorization, broke into a hospital to rescue a wounded comrade. The attack succeeded, but it uncovered the LIFG to Libyan security forces, and Qaddafi promptly ordered a brutal and highly successful eradication campaign. Jihadis mounted a three-year campaign, including numerous attacks and four separate assassination attempts on Qaddafi, presenting the ruler with the greatest domestic challenge he has ever faced. Despite their courage, the jihadis were no match for the Libyan police state, and by 1998, security forces had essentially eliminated the LIFG within the country. Group leaders fled Libya,

with most of the top leadership ending up in exile abroad or eventually caught and sent back up to Libyan jails.\textsuperscript{140}

Qaddafi’s victory all but destroyed the LIFG’s capacity to challenge his regime. According to a former leading figure in the LIFG, quoted in Al-Quds al-Arabi in July 2009, the organization itself has not taken “jihadist action” since the 1990s.\textsuperscript{141} Notwithstanding, the group’s various members have remained active in the global jihad, often under the auspices of al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups. Today, activity by LIFG members is largely restricted to individuals in exile in various countries, including Afghanistan/Pakistan, Iran, and Europe — especially the United Kingdom, where several LIFG leaders were arrested in the terror crackdown resulting from the bomb attacks in London in 2005.\textsuperscript{142} London became a major base of logistical support and fundraising from the mid-1990s, allegedly with the consent of a British government hostile toward the Libyan regime.\textsuperscript{143}

It is likely that current and former LIFG members remain active in terrorist activities but that the organization itself contributes little to these activities. Some analysts believe the LIFG helped the Morocco-based GICM plan the Casablanca suicide bombings in 2003, although this accusation appears to be founded mostly on circumstantial evidence regarding personal contacts.\textsuperscript{144} According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s START project in 2008, “Some allege that LIFG still attacks Libyan security forces, although the frequency and intensity

\textsuperscript{140} Kohlmann, “Dossier: LIFG,” 10.
\textsuperscript{143} Lia, Architect of Global Jihad, 221.
\textsuperscript{144} Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Country Reports on Terrorism, 2007 (United States Department of State, April 2008).
has decreased.”¹⁴⁵ In the post-9/11 security atmosphere, LIFG supporters in the West are “being squeezed by security services that fear the LIFG leaders are part of an al-Qaeda ‘sleeper network,’” pressure that might encourage them to distance the LIFG from al-Qaeda and global jihad.¹⁴⁶ Likely in response to this pressure Abdullah Mansour, an important LIFG fundraiser based in the UK, and a separate, anonymous group of “current and former LIFG members” released statements supporting the recantation document in 2009.¹⁴⁷

Al-Qaeda Connections

With shared origins in the Afghanistan War in the 1980s, the LIFG cooperated extensively with al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations for most of its history. The LIFG maintained loose affiliations with al-Qaeda from the beginning, mostly through personal ties and cooperation on training operations in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁸ Still, its focus has always been staunchly nationalist, fighting to overthrow the Qaddafi regime and establishment an Islamic state in Libya.¹⁴⁹ However deep these affiliations became, the group never became a member of al-Qaeda, preferring to maintain operational independence and focus on fighting the near enemy, the Libyan regime. The group’s repudiation of the global jihad represents a clean organizational break with al-Qaeda, after which remaining LIFG-AQ cooperation has been limited to the individual level.

¹⁴³ Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Terrorist Organization Profiles (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, March 1, 2008), http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data/tops/terrorist_organization_profile.asp?id=4400.
¹⁴⁵ Camille Tawil, “Libyan Islamists Back Away from al-Qaeda Merger in Reconciliation with Qaddafi Regime,” Terrorism Monitor 7, no. 17 (June 18, 2009).
¹⁴⁶ Ibid.
¹⁴⁷ Black, “Al-Qaeda, the LIFG and Jihad in North Africa.”
Developing Ties

Through contact in Afghanistan, some LIFG members have also been active within al-Qaeda. The LIFG has had "high-level connectivity with core al-Qaeda members," which emphasizes the personal (importantly, not organizational) ties Libyan jihadis made with al-Qaeda during years of fighting and training in Afghanistan.150 A number of LIFG members have moved into the upper echelons of the al-Qaeda organization. Abu Laith al-Libi, who commanded what remained of the LIFG contingent in Afghanistan until his death, became a major al-Qaeda leader before he was killed by an American Predator drone in Waziristan in January 2008.151 He had worked closely with other prominent Libyans, including Abu Yahya al-Libi, now a leading religious authority, and Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, thought to be the author of a 2005 letter chastising Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for his bloody tactics in Iraq.152 Libyans now dominate a "second tier" of al-Qaeda leadership, below the mostly Egyptian top level.153 In addition, an unknown number of LIFG members have followed these key leaders into the larger organization, while LIFG members dedicated solely to the Libyan cause have left Afghanistan.

At least until the recent repudiation documents were published, the group's contingent in Afghanistan has continued to claim its LIFG affiliation publicly, even while integrating into the al-Qaeda organization. The Shura committee of the LIFG has not been in operational control since 1998, and these fighters are not coordinated or controlled by the transnational LIFG command structure. Instead, under the leadership of Abu Laith al-Libi, they were largely integrated into the al-Qaeda network.154 "Al-Libi is also believed to represent only a minority..."
within the LIFG,” and his version of LIFG policy with al-Qaeda does not speak to the will or reality of the larger organization, neither in prison nor in exile. At this point, Al-Libi is far more implicated in the al-Qaeda organization than in the LIFG, “leading some to conclude the merger,” which he was instrumental in organizing and subsequently endorsed on behalf of the LIFG, “is less about Libya and more about al-Qaeda shoring up its military command structure.”

This evidence suggests that the abortive LIFG-AQ merger was designed to shore up Abu Laith al-Libi’s position within the cadres of al-Qaeda’s central leadership. Given their national focus, LIFG members tend to get along best with other Islamic nationalists, like the Afghan Taliban and the Uzbek groups in Central Asia. However, Abu Yahya and his fellow Libyan al-Qaeda members now work directly for globalist-minded al-Qaeda, accepting orders and ideology from al-Qaeda’s central command.

These associations were enough to convince most analysts that the LIFG had become an integral part of al-Qaeda. A recent article in the Los Angeles Times exemplifies the most common misperceptions. The article cites Robert Pape, presented as an expert on al-Qaeda, who restates the conventional wisdom: “[The LIFG] was not just related to Al Qaeda. They were in bed deeply with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and later.” Pape does not recognize, or does not mention, the sharp division between the LIFG in Afghanistan and the rest of the organization. The article goes on to tell the story of a typical LIFG fighter, Mufteh Ghunnay, implying that he is a reformed al-Qaeda terrorist. However, Ghunnay’s only connection with al-Qaeda is his alleged attendance at al-Qaeda’s Al Farouq training camp which, as the article reminds us,

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155 Al-Ra’y al-Amm, September 6. Quoted in Black, “Al-Qaeda, the LIFG and Jihad in North Africa.”
156 Ibid.
“produced many of Al Qaeda’s best-known alums,” but also hosted members of many non-Qaida groups.\textsuperscript{159}

The LIFG members now operating within al-Qaeda do not, in fact, represent collaboration between the broader LIFG organization and al-Qaeda. Mostly because of the rhetoric of Libyan al-Qaeda fighters, most analysts considered the two organizations functionally, if not officially, united even before Abu Laith and Ayman al-Zawahiri announced an official merger in 2007.\textsuperscript{160} The decision-making structure of the LIFG organization, however, still rests with the Shura council, most of whose members have renounced jihad from prison or exile, and this leadership has never taken any steps to join or endorse a merger with al-Qaeda. The historical group leadership has generally opposed al-Qaeda, although operational cooperation occurred regularly during training and preparation stages in Afghanistan.

\textit{Leaving the Network}

In 2006, the GSPC became al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a full member of al-Qaeda and a self-declared umbrella group for jihadism in the Maghreb. Soon after, al-Qaeda attempted to bring the LIFG into its franchise, unsurprising given the prominence of Libyan leaders, like Abu Laith al-Libi, within the al-Qaeda organization and al-Qaeda’s desire to increase its operations in the Maghreb. Despite their long affiliation, history of interaction, and shared membership, the LIFG never joined al-Qaeda, but instead renounced Bin Laden’s organization and issued a public repudiation of global jihad in 2009.

Few signs existed that the group had changed course until 2007, when the group’s senior leadership announced it had begun negotiating with Libyan authorities for the release of the

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
group’s members from Libyan prisons in exchange for peace. A reconciliation process began, led by Qaddafi’s son, Saif al-Islam, and resulting in 2009 in the LIFG’s public rejection of al-Qaeda and the publication of a long treatise renouncing violent jihad. London-based newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi* reported in June 2009 that the LIFG believed this dialogue with the Libyan regime would “lead to the release of its jailed leading figures and the creation of an atmosphere of trust.”\(^{161}\) Indeed, over four hundred LIFG members have been released from Libyan jails since the process began, and the government is shutting down the infamous Abu Salim prison where the LIFG leadership was long held captive.\(^{162}\)

The reconciliation process depended on the LIFG’s willingness to sever any existing ties with al-Qaeda and to renounce violence. When the imprisoned leadership of the LIFG published its 417-page refutation of violent jihad in September 2009, the news spread quickly around jihadi internet forums and among analysts of global terrorism. The CNN network made inflated claims about the significance of this new document, calling it a sort of “code” for jihad, and overstated the group’s success as “one of the world’s most effective jihadist organizations.”\(^{163}\) Given that the LIFG has been dormant for a decade, with its central leadership imprisoned by Muammar Qaddafi’s regime in Libya, the group must be understood to play a rather marginal role in the jihadi universe. Nonetheless, scholars infer from the support the document has received that it the work is “quite consequential.”\(^{164}\)

The recantation document and reconciliation process may offer significant insight into the motivations of the LIFG leadership. Group members imprisoned in Libya have reaped substantial benefits from the process, as many have been released. Some members of the

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\(^{161}\) Riahi, “Dialogue with Tripoli.”


\(^{163}\) Robertson and Cruickshank, “New jihad code threatens al Qaeda.”

group’s top leadership – the individuals directly responsible for the decision to repudiate al-Qaeda – have been and will soon be released from prison, on the condition that they abandon the LIFG organization. This condition seems to guarantee the death of the core organization in Libya. Since political parties are banned in Libya and taking direct political action as a group is not a viable option for legally opposing the regime, the freed Islamists will have no viable means of continuing their struggle. Therefore it appears that the LIFG is willing to give up its goal of overthrowing Qaddafi in exchange for the freedom of its members and leadership.

Explanations

This section will test the theoretical framework for groups’ joining al-Qaeda, as discussed earlier, against the case of the LIFG to see which explanations stand up to this negative case. From this analysis, the instrumental and organizational approaches do not seem to explain the LIFG’s behavior, while the ideological and individual explanations do appear to explain the case.

Instrumental

The instrumental hypothesis suggests that a group will join al-Qaeda for the operational benefits, in striving toward its original mission. Since the LIFG was failing to carry out attacks in Libya before the renunciation, joining al-Qaeda should have been an attractive option, so the instrumental school of thought apparently fails to explain why the LIFG renounced al-Qaeda instead of joining. A possible explanation for the failure of this hypothesis is the LIFG’s weakness and very hostile operational environment, which may have convinced the group that attempting to increase attacks through membership in al-Qaeda would be futile.

Within the instrumental school of thought, we must consider the strategic incentives the LIFG may have had for joining al-Qaeda. The LIFG's main strategic objective is the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime, but the group has been unable to mount a serious threat to the regime since the late 1990s. The proposed motivation for joining is to help escalate operations in Libya drawing on improved recruiting and al-Qaeda's financial and tactical support capacity. While al-Qaeda membership is hypothesized to help member groups carry out attacks at home, the LIFG is perhaps beyond help. It has not carried out attacks of any significance in Libya since the 1990s due to effective government repression, so joining al-Qaeda is unlikely to change the equation. Al-Qaeda's inability to reverse the LIFG's fortunes within Libya may explain the al-Qaeda organization's lack of appeal to the Libyans still in Libya.

Joining al-Qaeda might have raised publicity and recognition of the group, with a positive impact on recruiting. As discussed above, the organization is not in a position to make serious progress toward its primary objective at the present time, so it would be quite sensible for the group to focus on raising its profile in Libya, seeking legitimacy and new recruits, to fill out its ranks and again engage the regime in battle. A major component of such a decision would be the assumption that the group would benefit from the support of a sympathetic public. This may be a reasonable expectation given the number of Libyan volunteers for the jihad in Iraq and the fact that even Saif al-Islam, the son of Muammar Qaddafi, admitted in 2006 that Islamists would sweep into power if genuine democratic elections were held in any Arab country today. Still, most Libyan Islamists do not support violence, and Libyans' history of not supporting previous revolts may have discouraged LIFG leaders. The Libyan jihadists should know from past attempts that the Libyan population generally will not rise up in support of Islamist power ploys.

as shown during previous Islamists efforts led by Shaykh Fahkih in 1989 and the LIFG itself in the mid- to late-1990s.167

Organizational

The organizational hypothesis proposes that, faced with imminent failure, an organization will join al-Qaeda to reignite its activities, enthusiasm, and recruiting—in short, to keep itself alive. Since 1998, the LIFG has been a largely dormant organization with few strands holding it up from collapse and little meaningful activity to justify its continued existence. According to the imminent failure argument, the LIFG should have joined in order to benefit from the resultant boost to its recruiting and image thanks to its new association with the al-Qaeda brand name. According to the organizational school of thought, the group’s first priority is self-preservation, so the LIFG should have taken any step possible to maintain its activities. The organizational hypothesis fails to predict this outcome.

The concept of organizational maintenance suggests that jihadi groups will expand their agendas to include new enemies just to prolong the group’s life. Flexible agendas allow them to carry out attacks in more accessible arenas, making their organizations more relevant. Through this process, groups modify their enemy hierarchies, rethinking who they will target. Another factor is improved recruiting as a result of adopting al-Qaeda’s ideology. Thomas Hegghammer proposes that groups hybridize in order to “widen their prospective recruitment base” to those unwilling to fight for the local cause but supportive of global jihad or resentful of the West.168

Contrast this vital lack of support with the revelation that Libyans supply the second most al-Qaeda recruits, and this seems to provide a strong incentive for joining al-Qaeda. Membership would seemingly allow the LIFG to capitalize on the untapped resource of jihadist

168 Hegghammer, “The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups.”
support. In the 2000s, the organization has been weak within Libya and strongest in Afghanistan, where it has done al-Qaeda work. Adopting the popular al-Qaeda brand, then, would encourage aspiring Libyan jihadists to consider joining the LIFG and targeting Qaddafi instead of going to Iraq or Afghanistan to fight. Even if they did simply join the Afghan jihad, they would pass through the LIFG structure and, over time, probably develop stronger ties to the jihad at home in Libya. Since the LIFG passed up these organizational incentives and instead rejected al-Qaeda, the organizational hypothesis is not a good explanation for the LIFG’s decision.

One possible explanation for the failure of the hypothesis is the challenge from LIFG members in Afghanistan. This intraorganizational power struggle may have encouraged the central LIFG leadership to reject al-Qaeda on the grounds that a merger would give the Libyans in Afghanistan a dominant position within the group. Merged into al-Qaeda, the focus of power within the LIFG would have shifted away from the historical leadership and toward the group of now operating in Afghanistan and attuned primarily to al-Qaeda’s, not the LIFG’s, interests. This internal power dynamic may have outweighed the group’s incentive to hybridize and, ultimately, prevented the group from joining.

**Ideology**

Since its founding, the LIFG has consistently maintained a revolutionary Islamist ideology and national focus. Starting from a position of ideological disagreement, the ideological hypothesis predicts that the LIFG will join al-Qaeda only if it undergoes a process of ideological development that brings its goals and strategies into harmony with those of al-Qaeda. Since there is little evidence of such an ideological change, the hypothesis correctly predicts that the LIFG’s opposition to al-Qaeda’s global jihadi doctrine will prevent it from joining.
Despite the affiliation and cooperation between the groups, the ideological division between the LIFG’s revolutionary nationalism and al-Qaeda’s global jihadism remained firm from the early 1990s up to 2010. Even during their time in Afghanistan, LIFG leaders were very close to the Islamist government of Mullah Omar and the Taliban, but they did not become close with al-Qaeda because Bin Laden focused too much on fighting the United States instead of “apostate” Muslim regimes.\(^{170}\) Other than those who have individually joined al-Qaeda, like Abu Laith al-Libi, LIFG leaders have not consistently argued that targeting the U.S. is an effective way to inspire regime change at home. From this policy, we can infer that the LIFG remained uninterested in global jihad and would only join al-Qaeda for other reasons.

To further test this theory, we must examine the LIFG’s ideological positioning in detail. If the LIFG’s refusal to join Al-Qaida really stems from an ideological division, we should expect the group to have maintained a consistent ideological position in opposition to Al-Qaida ideology. This position holds quite consistently through the LIFG’s statements over the period, except for a single case. After al-Qaeda’s 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa, the U.S. carried out airstrikes on suspected training camps in southern Afghanistan, creating a harmful net effect for jihadi efforts. Some analysts identified a pro-al-Qaeda shift in policy when, rather than denounce al-Qaida for targeting the wrong enemy and incurring American wrath, the LIFG responded with support for the operation and denounced the U.S. as “the enemy of the entire Islamic nation.”\(^{171}\) The embassy bombings did not serve any national jihad in the short term, so the LIFG should have considered the attacks a step backward for the jihadi movement, and their support seems slightly at odds with the group’s nationalistic ideology.

\(^{170}\) Kohlmann, “Dossier: LIFG.”  
\(^{171}\) Ibid., 12-13.
However, two factors can resolve the apparent discrepancy. First, there is no author named in the statement, so it may have actually been the Libyan members of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan who released this endorsement. Second, it is actually ideologically consistent for the LIFG to denounce American strikes inside the Taliban’s Afghanistan, because the Libyan Islamic nationalists strongly identified with Afghanistan’s Islamic state and would support retaliation as a matter of defending a model Islamic state. Since the LIFG maintained a consistent ideological position against al-Qaeda’s global jihad, ideology appears to be a good explanation for the LIFG’s refusal to join the al-Qaeda network.

Leadership

The individual hypothesis proposes that LIFG leaders will abandon group preferences in seeking to improve their own status. The premise of this argument is that the leader of an al-Qaeda member organization will obtain a certain level of influence within the al-Qaeda network when his group joins, although this membership may not help the group at all. The personal circumstances of most LIFG leaders would have denied them the benefits of membership in al-Qaeda, so the hypothesis correctly predicts that the LIFG will not join. In addition, we can use a converse form of the hypothesis — that a leader may push his group to denounce al-Qaeda for his personal benefit — to predict the renunciation.

In its general form, this hypothesis predicts that LIFG leaders, exiled or jailed, would push their group to join al-Qaeda if they expected to reap the benefits of a new, more prominent place within the global jihadi movement. Given that the LIFG leaders still dedicated to the group were mostly in prison in Libya or in hiding abroad, they were not in a position to benefit from the merger. Further supporting this logic, the dissident LIFG-turned-al-Qaeda leaders in
Afghanistan were able to improve their standing in their new organization by announcing the merger, so the hypothesis accurately predicts their quiet attempt at a coup d’etat.

In addition to explaining why the LIFG chose not to join al-Qaeda, the leadership theory can also explain the decision to renounce global jihad entirely. The converse of the hypothesis is that a leader may force his group to quit al-Qaeda, even if membership or continued affiliation would benefit the group, if he is able to personally benefit from renunciation. In this case, imprisoned LIFG leaders were engaged in serious negotiations with the regime, and they believed their cooperation would be rewarded with their release from prison. The group’s leaders in hiding in the West also hoped to benefit from the renunciation because it reduced pressure on the group from Western governments bent on destroying al-Qaeda.

Conclusion

Having considered four hypotheses for the LIFG’s renunciation of al-Qaeda, the ideological and leadership theories best explain the decision. Continued ideological disagreement, the individual incentives of the leadership, or a combination of both can explain why the LIFG did not join al-Qaeda. The instrumental and organizational schools are less useful for explaining the decision, since membership would likely have been a better way to keep fighting for the group’s goals and to maintain the group’s integrity.

The long imprisonment or exile of most LIFG leaders’ was a major factor in the decision, since it removed their incentive for restarting violence. The top leadership, imprisoned in Tripoli since the 1990s, may have calculatedly chosen to surrender the organization’s goals for personal benefit. This seems to go against empirical findings that the arrest of group leaders has little
long-term effect on an organization’s activities.\textsuperscript{172} The LIFG’s failure to “move on” in the 2000s demonstrates the unusual effectiveness and totality of the regime’s repression. With so much of the group locked away, it is easy to see how the leaders became too disinvested from the group’s more radical goals to make a significant personal sacrifice to achieve them.

Nevertheless, there was probably no easier way to revive the LIFG than through an alliance with al-Qaeda. Accordingly, we would expect the leaders – whose personal reputations depend on the success of the organization they head – to restart operations, perhaps focusing on surrounding countries and al-Qaeda’s external targets. However, the mass repression and arrest or exile of the LIFG membership helps to explain how the group’s top leaders were able to effectively give up on the organization’s mission, a choice that would be too costly to make, in terms of reputation and group support, under normal circumstances. Personal circumstances, combined with the bleak outlook for the organization’s mission, led the imprisoned Shura committee to surrender the fight. Likewise, it seems that most LIFG leaders hiding in the West supported the decision because it helped them shake off any association with the much-targeted al-Qaeda, thereby reducing their personal risk of arrest.\textsuperscript{173}

Another major factor in the decision was the virtual schism that existed between the main leadership and the LIFG members who became leaders in al-Qaeda. Once integrated into al-Qaeda, these leaders had no real need for the rest of the LIFG organization, and their attempts to bring the entire LIFG with them into al-Qaeda represent little more than a failed coup d’état. Although the merger would have helped shore up the Libyans’ positions within al-Qaeda, they


\textsuperscript{173} Tawil, “Libyan Islamists.”
were already successfully integrated and held leadership positions, so they did not have an incentive to engage in an open rebellion against the LIFG leadership for control of the group.
Chapter 6: Results

Having explored several theories and two case studies, let us now try to answer the question, why do national revolutionary Islamist organizations join al-Qaeda? I have tested four hypotheses against the two most prominent cases from the Maghreb region of North Africa. The results of these tests are summarized in Table 4. The instrumental hypothesis failed in both cases, while the leadership hypothesis held in both cases, and the organizational and ideology hypotheses worked for one case each. These findings suggest that a group’s final membership decision will be influenced by both individual- and organization-level factors. Leaders have proven to be quite important in the decision, with organizational and ideological both having an impact as well.

The leadership hypothesis proved surprisingly useful for explaining group membership. It is a flexible school of thought, allowing for multiple personal motives, and it identified what may be the most important difference between the two cases: whether the main leadership was imprisoned or in exile. However, this school of thought is more than just an observation of the two cases. If this theory proves generalizable, it has important theoretical implications for the role of individual leaders in terrorist organizations and what appears to be their undue influence over the fate of their groups.

Although the ideological explanation worked for the LIFG, the hypothesized pattern did not fit the GSPC case. Rather than approaching al-Qaeda after being sold on global jihadism, the GSPC did not carry out its first global jihadi attacks until after becoming an al-Qaeda member. I will propose as a topic for future research a combined instrumental–ideological hypothesis that may better describe this case. On the other hand, the GSPC case strongly supported the organizational hypothesis, but the LIFG case failed it, so we cannot accept this organizational
theory "as is" either. Instead, I will describe a modified version of the organizational hypothesis that takes into account the ultimate motivation for joining – survival of the group in a recognizable form – and recognizes that some weak groups may not join al-Qaeda simply because they fear being dissolved into the larger organization.

Since both the organizational and ideological explanations for joining produce mixed results, it would be misleading to simply declare that, by process of elimination, leaders are the only deciding factor. I will offer two ways that two schools of thought might interact to create a more accurate explanation than what was tested in this study. One possibility is that the relative preference of one ideology over another affects a group’s receptivity to global jihadi doctrine. Another possibility is that organizations at risk of demise will seek to maintain their organizational structure after a merger, so they will not join al-Qaeda unless the group’s pre-merger leadership and membership are likely to be preserved within the al-Qaeda organization. These hypotheses would be best tested against additional cases, since they were created through inductive reasoning on the original two cases.

**Relative Ideological Preferences**

To further explain why two groups’ ideologies may develop differently under similar circumstances, we should consider each group’s initial receptivity to global jihadism. Although

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School of Thought</th>
<th>GSPC</th>
<th>LIFG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Yes, group in serious decline, adopts global jihadi ideology during rapprochement.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Yes, group isolated from currents of jihadi globalization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Yes, leaders have reputational incentives to join, do face dissent from members.</td>
<td>Yes, leaders have incentive to renounce al-Qaeda.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the both groups had a revolutionary Islamist ideology to begin with, one group may have held a higher opinion of the global jihad than the other. The ideology of any actor – be it an individual, a group, or the national population – can be expressed as a set of preferences. We can model these preferences by assigning each of their policy choices an estimated utility value, as shown in Table 5 below. We see from this example that under the right initial conditions (as with the GSPC in the example) a small increase in the expected utility of choice B could result in a reordering of preferences. This reflects the fact that a group’s original preferences are relative, so a reordering can occur more easily in some groups than in others, depending on the relative utility assigned to each policy choice. If a group has only slightly preferred A over B in the past, it will be receptive to elevating B over A in the future.

Table 5. Expected Utility of Competing Policy Preferences (Target selection)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GSPC Before</th>
<th>GSPC After</th>
<th>LIFG Before</th>
<th>LIFG After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice A</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Near Enemy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice B</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Far Enemy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When they were founded, neither group believed in concentrating on global jihad, but one group may have been more favorable to the new ideology. The political history of a country may affect a group’s receptivity to globalizing its ideology. A country’s political context helps shape a group’s preferences and primes a population to accept certain kinds of arguments. In Algeria, where jihad started as an anti-colonial struggle, jihadis and the population as a whole are more likely to blame external powers for the local regime’s sins. A group in this environment will probably rank attacking the far enemy higher in its preferences, even though the near enemy still ranks first. It may also be possible to consider a hybrid ideology between revolutionary
Islamism and global jihad. Since Algerian Islamists have long targeted European and American interests, they may accept a hybrid or “glocal” ideology more easily.

**Surviving a Merger of Necessity**

With certain improvements, an organizational hypothesis may be a good complement for a theory based primarily on individual leadership. The hypothesis basically assumes that jihadist groups in imminent risk of defeat will attempt to join al-Qaeda. Whether a threatened group will ultimately join al-Qaeda depends on its operational environment and organizational capacity. Under this theory, one weak organization (the GSPC) may join al-Qaeda because doing so will perpetuate the organization. On the other hand, a similarly weak organization whose major leadership and domestic membership are in prison (the LIFG) may not join al-Qaeda because the organization, including its home leadership, membership, and geographic base, would not be preserved after a merger. Likewise, smaller organizations like the GICM and the GCT will approach al-Qaeda for help maintaining their activities, but they will not seek full membership because of the risk of dissolution into a far more powerful al-Qaeda organization.

Modifying the organizational theory in this way may offer a more nuanced explanation for why the LIFG did not join al-Qaeda despite being at obvious risk of defeat for most of the past 15 years. This hypothesis was induced from the LIFG case, and cannot be proven by that case alone. To test the value of this theory, it would be necessary to study other organizations that chose not to join al-Qaeda despite the imminent risk of serious decline. The study should also control for small groups that al-Qaeda is likely to reject as member organizations. If a pattern supporting the theory were found, it would serve to raise the profile of organizational theory within terrorism studies and promote the study of organizations, probably at the expense of networks and other such theories.
Implications

Because of time limitations, this study only looked at two cases from a single region. Future research into similar groups in other parts of the Islamic world would help to confirm the general applicability of the results. With a stronger claim to be able to generalize the results, the findings of this study could have an impact. For example, this paper highlights the importance of individual leaders to the terrorist decision making process. This insight contradicts the now conventional wisdom on terrorist organizations that individual leaders matter little and are easily replaced if killed or arrested.\(^{174}\) If we are able to use this research to identify groups at risk of joining al-Qaeda, such groups can be monitored more closely. Furthermore, this knowledge could be used to tailor counterterrorism efforts could be tailored to convince potential al-Qaeda members not to join.

A secondary finding of this research is uncovering the weaknesses of many accepted journalistic sources related to terrorism. The primary example is the media’s unhesitant and unquestioning acceptance of the history of the LIFG according to Noman Benotman, a former LIFG commander who appears to have provided around half of all publicly available accounts of the inner workings of the organization. The constant parroting of Benotman’s information by the media, government analysts, and researchers demonstrates how much room there still is for improvement in how much we know about terrorist organizations. A first step to improving our knowledge is to take a more critical eye toward affiliations and connections, which we must carefully define and interpret in more nuanced and analytically useful ways.

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\(^{174}\) Langdon, Sarapu, and Wells, “Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements,” 74.
Conclusion

Al-Qaeda’s global spread is usually understood as a virus, emanating from a core somewhere in a cave in Afghanistan and spreading throughout the world’s Muslim population in every direction. Al-Qaeda is indeed a movement, an ideology, and an organization, but when it comes to its global operations, the group’s fate is largely outside of its own control. It is dependent on its regional affiliates and member groups to keep the organization relevant while Bin Laden and his entourage play an eternal game of cat-and-mouse with NATO, Pakistani, and Afghan forces. The affiliates, in many ways, control the larger organization’s agenda and often even its strategy.

This study suggests that, in a terrorist group, individual leaders are very important to the group decision making process, but that organizational and ideological factors also play a role in the decision to join al-Qaeda. This study focused on the national, revolutionary Islamist groups that are (or once were) candidates for al-Qaeda membership. In asking why these groups join al-Qaeda, I have sought to restore a sense that local groups have power in al-Qaeda’s geographic expansion and to draw attention to the unique factors that may lead a violent Islamist group into al-Qaeda and onto the battlefield against the U.S. Illuminating how these organizations’ are related over time helps to disambiguate and disentangle the many jihadi groups and violent non-state actors that operate in weak states and ungoverned territories around the world.

If jihadism exists in all forms and sizes, from large organizations to tiny cells and individual operatives, all linked by a multi-channel network, why do the hierarchies of global terrorism matter? No doubt, Islamic terrorism can and will persist regardless of the strength of jihadi groups’ organizational control and command-and-control hierarchies. Nonetheless, the attacks carried about by small-scale decentralized groups will probably not, in the words of Mark
Sageman, “result in mass carnage, which requires coordination, skills, and resources.” Al-Qaeda’s past and current behavior suggests it will continue maintain a centralized organizational structure in concurrence with widespread, decentralized, and ad hoc cells, and insecurity in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region offers an opportunity for this kind of regrouping. Consequently, a better understanding of jihadi terrorism’s more formalized command structures will continue to be relevant to terrorism studies and counterterrorism efforts.

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