



“AQ Core” is no more: the changing shape of Al Qaida

Summary

For the first time, AQ’s top leader has appointed a deputy from beyond the Afghanistan/Pakistan based “AQ Core”, from Yemen based AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQ-AP). This geographical spread at the top mirrors the spreading threat posed by the wider AQ Movement which has already been underway for four years. It means that we should stop calling Af/Pak based AQ figures “AQ Core” since they do not necessarily have a higher standing than any of the other AQ groups - the top leadership is multi-national and in that sense “AQ Core” is no more.

Detail

The leader of the AQ Movement¹, Ayman al-Zawahiri, recently appointed a new deputy manager, Nasir al-Wuhayshi. This role has traditionally taken the form of a second-in-command of the AQ Movement – responsible for making decisions in Zawahiri’s absence, managing the day-to-day activity of AQ and its affiliates, and, crucially, replacing Zawahiri in the event of his death or arrest. **This is the first time that the AQ Movement’s top leadership succession plan has included an individual outside of AQ’s ‘Core’².**

Who is Nasir al-Wuhayshi?

Nasir al-Wuhayshi is by no means an outsider: he was a close associate of Usama bin Laden and Zawahiri. When AQ relocated to Afghanistan in 1996, Wuhayshi was picked to lead one of the group’s four training camps³ and was often referred to as bin Laden’s personal secretary. In 2001, Wuhayshi was allegedly part of the small group that stayed with bin Laden during his escape from Tora Bora in Afghanistan. Many of AQ’s senior leaders subsequently took up residence in the tribal areas of Pakistan but Wuhayshi and others travelled to Iran, from where he was later extradited to Yemen and subsequently imprisoned. After escaping in a 2006 jailbreak, Wuhayshi helped form and was elected leader of AQ in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴ This is a role he has continued to hold ever since, albeit experiencing a slight wobble in confidence in 2010.⁵

¹ The AQ Movement is the umbrella term used to describe AQ in Afghanistan/Pakistan (previously known as ‘AQ Core’), its five global affiliate groups (in Syria, Iraq, the Sahel, East Africa and Yemen) and any sub-affiliate groups adhering to the same goals and ideology.

² AQ Core is the name given to Ayman al-Zawahiri and the group of around 250 other AQ members currently based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

³ In his 2010 memoir, *Guarding bin Laden: My Life in al Qaeda*, former bodyguard Nasser al-Bahri wrote that Wuhayshi would often stay with bin Laden in the mornings as he worked in his Tarnak Farms office in the months and years before the September 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S.

⁴ This was the second iteration of the group. The first, AQ-AP’s predecessor, AQ in Yemen (AQ-Y), was formed in 2006. It was later crushed by regional CT action but re-emerged as AQ-AP in January 2009 following an announcement that Yemeni and Saudi terrorists were unifying under a common banner.

⁵ According to an August 2010 letter found during the U.S. raid on bin Laden’s headquarters in Abbottabad, Pakistan, bin Laden politely rejected Wuhayshi’s request for now-deceased Anwar al-Awlaki to be promoted to be the leader of the Yemen affiliate.

Wuhayshi is not the longest serving leader in the Movement and AQ-AP is not the oldest AQ affiliate, but it is the most prominent, and certainly the most persistently internationally threatening. It is the most mature incarnation of the model pioneered by AQ in Pakistan under bin Laden and Zawahiri: national, regional and international agenda (and, unlike the other affiliates, credible and disruptive international operations planning); innovative attack methodology; pioneering media.

Wuhayshi probably got his role for these reasons but more besides: his personal links with Zawahiri (and bin Laden before him); his relatively calm and consensual persona⁶, favoured by bin Laden and Zawahiri; the importance of Yemen and Saudi Arabia in Islamic history, in Islam today, and in prophecy; and the relatively weak competition he faces from other affiliate leaders. He is not a particularly charismatic or inspiring leader – but he is better than the other options available to Zawahiri.

Future-proofing the AQ Movement?

The timing of Zawahiri's decision is odd as AQ have long been under pressure in Pakistan's tribal areas, and Wuhayshi has been the established leader of AQ's most successful affiliate⁷ for over 6 years. So, why the sudden rush to move the deputy leadership role out of Pakistan? There are several possibilities:

- a) **There are not enough credible leaders left in Pakistan.** As commentators have frequently noted, AQ in Pakistan has suffered a near-continuous reduction in its bench of future senior leaders for at least the last 5 years. Clearly none of the remaining leadership contenders in Pakistan are rated as highly as Wuhayshi.
- b) **Concerns about the potential for leadership decapitation and a desire to spread the risk.** Security concerns in Pakistan, perhaps even including a greater awareness of his own mortality, are likely to have played a part in Zawahiri's decision.
- c) **Is the operating environment in Yemen more favourable?** It is plausible that Zawahiri may believe there is greater freedom to operate in Yemen than in Pakistan. But, even if this is currently the case, it is not guaranteed to last.
- d) **Zawahiri (and bin Laden before him) never originally planned for the Movement's senior leadership to always be based in one location.** Established as 'the base' (the translation of al Qaeda) in the 1980s, AQ's emphasis has always been on growing the organisation, spreading across the globe via a network of like-minded groups and taking advantage of any new opportunities. We should not be surprised about AQ's ability to re-invent itself. The latest opportunity to do so has just arisen: the ability to 'relocate' parts of its leadership out of their not-so-safe haven in Pakistan without needing to travel.

An unprecedented development

Wuhayshi's appointment has widened AQ's senior leadership beyond its current Pakistan-Afghanistan base. And so the term 'AQ Core' (as one that is synonymous with a South-Asia based senior leadership of the AQ Movement) now feels out-of-date, and ill-equipped to cover the changing nature of AQ's structure. AQ's structure is now much more decentralised than in previous years, with Zawahiri, Wuhayshi and only a small handful of others sitting at the top of the hierarchy, and the remainder of the 'official' organisations on a level footing

⁶ As shown by files obtained during the raid that killed Usama bin Laden

⁷ This is defined as the group which is perceived to pose the greatest threat to international security.

beneath them: it is only the aspiring AQ groups or sub-affiliate groups who are on a level below.

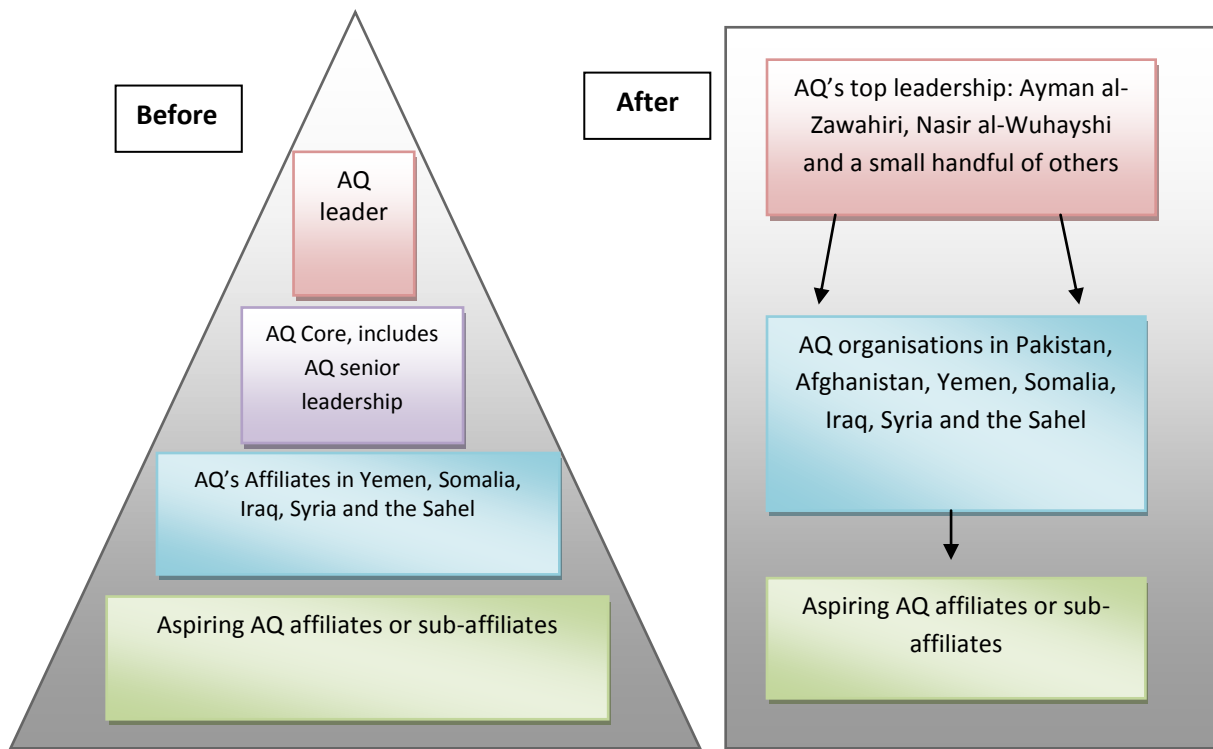


Figure 1: Our previous understanding of the AQ Movement's leadership structure (left) and the current, more fluid structure (right).

This change has impacted most on the group often known as 'AQ Core'. They are no longer the sole source of future top leaders. **The remainder of AQ figures in Pakistan, therefore, should no longer be termed the 'Core' as they do not necessarily have a higher standing than any of the other affiliate groups:** it is only the 'top leadership' (Zawahiri, Wuhayshi and a small handful of other individuals occupying significant positions of authority) who have such a role. The term, **'AQ in Pakistan and Afghanistan'** now seems more appropriate.

Wuhayshi's promotion has shown for the first time that leadership figures can come from within an affiliate. Other leaders of affiliate groups could take on positions of authority within the AQ Movement, should they become available. The top leadership of the AQ Movement has taken the first step towards its relocation, without physically moving. **The geographical spread of the AQ threat has increased significantly over the last four years: the geographical spread of its senior leadership is just beginning.**