Terrorist 'Frenemies'

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Articles & Testimony

What al-Qaeda, ISIL, and the Paris attacks can teach us about the jihadi divide.

Pop Quiz: What's the difference between Al Qaeda and ISIL? Answer: Less than you might think.

Many questions persist about the attacks in Paris last week, not least the relationship of the attackers with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group (ISIL). In truth, both organizations encourage jihadi attacks; on that issue, their commonality is more important than their differences.

It now seems clear that one or both of the brothers who attacked the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, Cherif and Said Kouachi, had some years ago traveled to Yemen for training from the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). And while AQAP issued a statement claiming responsibility for the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, it remains unclear whether the group played any operational role in attack or merely trained and funded the brothers earlier. Amedy Coulibaly, who took Jewish shoppers hostage at a kosher market as authorities closed in on the Kouachi brothers, claimed to have coordinated with the Kouachis but proclaimed his own affiliation with ISIL. And the AQAP statement did not take responsibility for Coulibaly's attack, describing it instead as a laudable "coincidence."

Evidence suggests there were ties between the two sets of perpetrators, including significant telephone contact between their wives, but the competing claims of affiliation has many people confused, given the pitched battle between Al Qaeda and ISIL back in Syria and Iraq. Understanding how these two groups may or may not work together -- now or in the future -- is key to thinking about how the threat of terrorism is evolving and changing 14 years after the September 11 attacks. But first we've got to back up a little bit -- to an era where there was just one Al Qaeda.

There have always been multiple wings of radical Islam -- just as there are multiple wings of other radical religious movements -- but there was once just one Al Qaeda. Founded by Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s, the group only really got the attention of counterterrorism officials with its 1996 declaration of war against the United States and its

allies. Since 9/11, though, that once-unified Al Qaeda network has splintered and globalized under military, political, and financial pressure from the west. As its been increasingly unable to launch attacks on its own, it's created affiliates and aligned itself with various terror groups on multiple continents, helping disparate groups from Chechnya to Bosnia to Afghanistan to Somalia to Yemen to coalesce into a de facto global jihadist movement. This shift toward foreign jihadi wars began to attract Westerners to join fights far from home.

Back in the mid-2000s, the Kouachi brothers were part of a network of radical Islamists in France that served as a pipeline for French Muslims to go fight in Iraq against American and coalition forces. The Buttes-Chaumont Group, named after the Paris park where they engaged in physical training, was busted by French authorities in 2005. At the time, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) -- one of several regional Al Qaeda affiliates at the time -- was the dominant insurgent organization opposing coalition forces in Iraq. Today, the group that once called itself AQI has become the core of what is now the Islamic State, or ISIL.

ISIL was eventually disowned by Al Qaeda in 2013, leaving the group Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) as the official Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria. ISIL and JN have since battled it out in Syria, with numerous failed reconciliation attempts between their respective leaders. Regardless, it is quite possible that adherents and supporters outside the theater of war may cooperate. After all, thanks to the shared history of the two groups, many who proclaim themselves followers of one group or another have connections from the early and mid-2000s. Coulibaly and the Kouachis were one such example, having originally met through the Buttes-Chaumont Group, when ISIL -- then AQI -- was still part of Al Qaeda. Given such pre-existing relationships and common extremist sentiments, it should not surprise that no few ISIL supporters praised the Paris attacks on social media. Investigators will eventually unravel the whole story behind the Paris attacks, but no one should be surprised if it turns out that partners in an earlier AQI foreign fighter facilitation network later went slightly different ways -- one with AQAP and another with ISIL -- only to draw on their shared history together to collaborate on a coordinated set of Mumbai-style terror attacks in Paris a decade later.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

While ISIL, as it is now known, first caught the world's attention in a significant way with its sudden rampage through Iraq last June, its origins date back some 15 years. The notorious Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi formed a jihadist organization in 2000, naming it Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Zarqawi's group carried out attacks not only on coalition forces, but on local, non-Sunni Iraqis as well, especially Shi'ites.

In October 2004, Zarqawi officially declared allegiance to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, renaming his group as Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, or Al Qaeda in Iraq. Later, in January 2006, it announced a purported coalition with half-a-dozen other jihadist organizations under the Mujahideen Shura Council. It went through another renaming several months later, becoming the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006, again consisting of AQI and several other groups. Although Zarqawi was killed in June 2006, his successor was named within days and AQI continued its operations. The name remained ISI until April 2013, when current leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi attempted to forcibly merge Jabhat al-Nusra into the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham." Despite periodic setbacks, the organization has survived and is currently in a position of strength in Iraq and Syria. One report from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point attributes its present situation in part to its "extensive operational history...[and] a significant history of managing and dealing with finances as well." While various factions of AQI may have gone different ways, it is clear that not all the relationships were severed.

FACILITATION NETWORKS

Then, as now, the networks running foreign fighter pipelines moving jihadists from Europe to the Middle East ran through Syria and Iraq. The facilitation network in France through which Coulibaly and the Kouachi brothers first

met was hardly the only one of its kind, even in Western Europe. Today's foreign fighter flows dwarf those of earlier conflicts, but the facilitation networks that move jihadi fighters to Syria and Iraq today have much in common with those that did the same a decade ago.

In 2003, the Italians investigated foreign fighter recruiters operating out of their country. Prosecutors on the case noted that "Syria has functioned as a hub for an al Qaeda network" funneling Europeans to Iraq. Transcripts of operatives' conversations "paint a detailed picture of overseers in Syria coordinating the movement of recruits and money" between cells in Europe and training camps in northern Iraq run by the Al Qaeda-affiliated Kurdish group Ansar al-Islam. The cell's leaders in Syria facilitated the recruits' travel and provided their funding, while the European members gave false travel documents to recruits and fugitives and monitored their travel. Some of the recruits traveling to the Ansar camps stayed at the Ragdan Hotel in Aleppo for some time, and later stopped in Damascus. Indeed, the Italian investigation revealed that Zarqawi's operatives in Europe acted on the instructions of his lieutenants in and around Damascus and Aleppo, including Muhammad Majid (also known as Mullah Fuad), described as the "gatekeeper in Syria for volunteers intent on reaching Iraq," and two men referred to as "Abdullah" and "Abderrazak."

THE TIES THAT BIND

As Coulibaly's statements of support for the Kouachi brothers demonstrates, yesterday's European facilitation networks helped establish connections between jihadists that persist to this day. One of the French facilitators, Boubaker al-Hakim, was in the process of getting Cherif Kouachi to Syria in 2005 when the Buttes-Chaumont network was rolled up. Al-Hakim is now fighting for ISIL. He has been "actively recruiting and building a network of fighters across Northern Africa and in European immigrant communities in recent years." Furthermore, although the Buttes-Chaumont pipeline seemed to have been ended with the arrests in 2005, members' relationships remained intact, and the group became the vehicle for bringing together the Kouachis and Amedy Coulibaly.

True, the upper echelons of AQ and ISIL are locked in a deadly struggle now playing out in Syria and Iraq. But for self-directed foot soldiers like Coulibaly and the Kouachis, the war between ISIL and Al Qaeda for supremacy of the global jihadist movement is neither a driving factor nor an impediment to tactical cooperation. Al Qaeda disavowed ISIL when the latter expanded from Iraq into Syria, and with the establishment of its self-declared Islamic State ISIL appears to have had the upper hand in the competition over recruits and resources over the past year. But among like-minded Islamist extremists far away from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, the relationships among trusted fellow travelers may remain enduring and reliable.

Both Al Qaeda and ISIL have issued calls for followers and supporters to carry out attacks when and where they can, meaning that identifying these relationships will prove critical to countering this latest threat. Articles in AQAP's *Inspire* magazine enable this militant entrepreneurship not only by radicalizing individuals to engage in violence but by empowering them to do so on their own with articles like "How to Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom." Meanwhile, ISIL's magazine, *Dabiq*, praised the perpetrator of last month's Sydney siege not for making the journey to fight in Syria but rather for "acting alone and striking the *kuffar* [non-believers] where it would hurt them most -- in their own lands and on the very streets that they presumptively walk in safety."

To be sure, organized terror attacks are still being planned against the West; the head of Britain's MI-5 noted that three plots targeting the UK alone were thwarted in the last few months, and well over 30 since the 7/7 attacks. But as recent attacks in Ottawa, Montreal and Sydney make clear, one of the most pressing threats now comes from local individuals or cells working on their own with little more than inspiration from formal groups like Al Qaeda or ISIL. Such attacks may be less spectacular, but they are also more difficult to identify and disrupt.

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