The political and military environment facing al-Qa’ida has changed dramatically since 9/11. As the United States and its allies have become more adept at combating terrorist tactics, al-Qa’ida’s senior leadership has decentralized to reduce its vulnerability. While the reach of the network has spread, its regional leadership has become more diffuse and its affiliated groups have diverged in their messaging. More importantly, the Arab Spring has presented ideological challenges to al-Qa’ida and its affiliates, which threatens their political relevance.

My analysis, based on propaganda items collected by my counterterrorism practicum, concludes that while al-Qa’ida has established the ideological framework for the global movement, the organization’s operational control and doctrinal unity with its four official nodes al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI), al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Al-Shabaab has diminished.

Al-Qa’ida’s prestige among the community of jihadist organizations has allowed it to heavily influence the vocabulary of its satellite groups. However, based upon the content, syntax, and themes of regional propaganda campaigns, it can be concluded that these satellites have since diverged to pursue their own parochial agendas. As such, disrupting AQC would likely have little impact on the ideological survival of its affiliates at this stage**.**

The advent of the Arab Spring attests to the increasing autonomy of the nodes and their intent to focus on local objectives. This may be an unintended byproduct of AQC’s core ideology, which is remarkably pliable and allows the nodes to craft region-specific messages while maintaining alignment with al-Qa’ida’s core doctrine - albeit to varying degrees.

Presently, AQC’s direct operational capabilities are significantly reduced, and its actions are generally confined to producing propaganda and protecting the reputation of the al-Qa’ida “brand.” This brand is a valuable jihadist commodity and its protection should not be underestimated - AQC is the gatekeeper to the al-Qa’ida name, and since it determines membership, it ensures nodes remain relevant in the jihadist community. Affiliated nodes are members of the al-Qa’ida network by mutual consent, with each node receiving the benefits of association with al-Qa'ida’s prestigious reputation and al-Qa’ida central in turn receiving operational capabilities and attentions worldwide. The fundamental ideological messages distributed by al-Qa’ida Central (AQC) no longer play a highly influential role in determining the ideologies of its regional nodes.The relationship between AQC and its nodes can best be understood as a weak confederacy. AQC exerts minimal direct control over its nodes in their daily operations and propaganda. Instead, the nodes are al-Qa’ida members by mutual choice and control their own messaging. Al-Qa’ida nodes align themselves with AQC to exploit a mutually beneficial relationship. Nodes receive the prestige and recognition of the al-Qa’ida brand, and AQC gains kinetic capabilities and a wider geographic presence.

Each node has placed an increasing importance on the immediate concerns and constraints of its area of operations, and the Arab Spring has challenged the traditional message of AQC, prompting the nodes to craft disparate responses.

While AQC applauds the Arab Spring protesters for overthrowing dictatorial governments, it warns against the establishment of democratic systems which it equates with secularism. AQC has claimed its actions—specifically 9/11—as the primary catalyst for the uprisings.

Over time, AQI has paid less deference to the global ambitions of AQC, while remaining highly focused on its immediate concern of setting up an Islamic Caliphate in Iraq. Regarding the Arab Spring, AQI only tangentially acknowledges its existence, largely ignoring AQC’s current focus on it.

AQIM’s superficial deference to AQC has, since its inception, existed mainly for recruitment and prestige purposes. Based on the propaganda as well as the context in which it was produced, it is evident that AQIM sees the primary utility of AQC is the use of its brand name, with most of its propaganda efforts focused on immediate regional interests. In direct contrast with AQC, AQIM has avoided criticizing the local democratic trajectory of the Arab Spring.

AQAP is primarily focused on undermining the Yemeni government. Although it appears to be the node most ideologically in sync with AQC regarding the Arab Spring, it remains more focused on regional concerns.

Al-Shabaab is likewise characterized by two tracks of messaging. In the first track, it pays deference to the global al-Qa’ida narrative, while the other track focuses solely on regional concerns. The distinction between the two narratives is quite salient, as its propaganda can be clearly divided between high production value material designed for an international audience, and less polished material meant for domestic distribution.

AQC and its nodes constitute a weak confederacy.Similar to a political confederacy, each node has sworn allegiance to a central body, but retains the autonomy to determine most of its own actions. The nodes have their own distinct decision-makers, and are members of al-Qa’ida by mutual consent.

While AQC is universally acknowledged as the leader of the al-Qa’ida movement by the nodes, it exerts minimal direct control over them.They all accept the general principles of the founding al-Qa'ida ideology, but the ideas manifest differently for each group.

Each node defines “the West” differently. AQC and AQAP define the West as the “Zionist-Crusader alliance.” AQIM also talks about America, but often refers to France as the embodiment of the Western advances into Muslim territory. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq focuses primarily on America and the apostate Shiite regime as the “Crusader-Rejectionist alliance.” Al-Shabaab focuses on the African Union and regional African armies occupying its areas of operation.

AQCemphasizes its objective as the establishment of an Islamic caliphate across the entire Middle East, and while all the nodes support this goal in principle, they apply it uniquely to their local circumstances. Each node makes it clear in its propaganda that it desires to form a local Shariah-based government within its own localized national or sub-regional boundaries.

Some of the nodes have a closer relationship with AQC than others. The differing statuses and circumstances of the nodes for aligning with AQC only further clarify the nature of their relationship as a weak confederacy. An analysis of thematic correlations (or lack thereof) between the different nodes’ propaganda releases, the frequency and timing of pledges to AQC, and statements made by the organizations’ leaders themselves suggest there is only minimal uniformity in nodes’ propaganda distribution. At the present time their actions do not generally follow the lead of AQC’s propaganda. Beyond their agreement on these general principles, there is a clear sense that while they share the al-Qa'ida name, AQC does not and cannot compel the nodes to change course. While the nature of our data prevents us from doing a statistical correlation test, there is nevertheless substantial quantitative and qualitative evidence to support this point.

AQAP is the most closely aligned node to AQC, and its leadership actively and consistently seeks guidance from AQC. Despite this, AQAP's message differs from AQC's because its primary focus is on local concerns in the Arabian Peninsula and not on the global jihad.

This relationship is highlighted by the captured Abbottabad letters. In a message dated August 2010, Bin Ladin responds to a request from Nasir Adbel Karim al-Wuhayshiasking him to remain the leader of AQAP in place of the insurgent Anwar al-Awlaki. Bin Ladin requests that al-Wuhayshi "...remain in his position where he is qualified and capable of running the matter in Yemen," and goes on to request that al-Wuhayshi provide, "...more information from the battlefield in Yemen...to make the most appropriate decision to either escalate or calm down." This letter demonstrates AQAP has sought guidance from AQC on leadership issues in the past, and that AQC, in turn, has requested information from its partner.

Evidence also suggests that, despite this apparent unity, AQAP does not comply with Bin Ladin’s directives when they diverge from its own local concerns. For instance, in another Abottabad letter, Bin Ladin recommended to AQAP that, “In spite of this regime's [Yemen’s] mismanagement, it is less dangerous to us than the one America wants to exchange it with… On the contrary, the Salafists and the jihadist Salafists were able to take advantage of his regime and target America from Yemen..." Despite this request from Bin Ladin, no evidence indicates AQAP messaging has ever opposed bringing down the Yemeni government as AQC has recommended. AQAP may ask for AQC’s guidance, but they are not controlled outright.

AQIM’s Emir Abdelmalek Droukdal explained their decision to merge with al-Qa’ida in 2008 by noting “Why shouldn’t we join Al Qaeda? God ordered us to be united, to be allied, to cooperate and fight against the idolaters in straight lines…. The joining was a legitimate necessity…. It was a mindful necessity imposed by the actual reality and the international system.” While AQIM echoes similar anti-Western themes to other al-Qai’da branches, it is tailored to meet the specific circumstances of North Africa. France is more commonly identified as the primary Western adversary than the United States or Israel. In only sparse and superficial cases does AQIM reference the other nodes or their operations in their messages.

While AQI had a closer relationship to AQC in the past, it has recently distanced itself from direct affiliation. In 2010, Bin Ladin lamented the growing distance between their leadership. Much of the 2006 language involves grandiose references to Al Qaeda’s long-term strategic mission as well as a pledge of allegiance from al-Qa'ida in Iraq: “He [Usama Bin Ladin] will see from his soldiers in Iraq what pleases him and gives comfort to his heart, God willing.” Al-Qa'ida in Iraq makes occasional references of Bin Ladin’s death, but there is little substance to these references. Instead their focus intensifies on the rejectionist, apostate regime currently governing Iraq.

Based on the propaganda and open source research, Al-Shabaab does not appear to ever have had a close public relationship with AQC. In fact, secondary material suggests that its membership in the terrorist network was originally rejected by AQC’s leadership. Moreover, although al-shebaab was actie in Somalia beginning in 2008, the propaganda analyzed for this report found that it was not officially accepted into the al-Qa’ida organization until the winter of 2012. This further substantiates the conclusion that the alliance with al-Shabaab may have been an uneasy or reluctant one.

In February 2012, Shaykh Ahmed Abdi Godane announced that Al-Shabaab would formally join al-Qa’ida. Godane stated in his February 9 video, “On behalf of the soldiers and the commanders in al-Shabaab, we pledge allegiance to you. So lead us to the path of jihad and martyrdom that was drawn by our imam, the martyr Osama.”

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al Qaeda responded, "today, I have glad tidings for the Muslim Ummah that will please the believers and disturb the disbelievers, which is the joining of the Shabaab al-Mujahideen Movement in Somalia to Qaeda al-Jihad, to support the jihadi unity against the Zio-Crusader campaign and their assistants amongst the treacherous agent rulers." Despite the general lack of correlation in subject matter focus, one particularly noteworthy point of unity between all of the nodes and the core was the death of Usama Bin Ladin - they all eulogized him to various degrees.This was a singularly unique event, and a rare exception to their usual lack of message coordination.

There is only a limited pool of individuals with jihadist sympathies from which nodes are able to recruit. Propaganda suggests one of the motives that drive these groups to join al-Qa’ida is the prestige and recruitment assistance official membership provides. Jihadist organizations, like any other organization, compete with similar groups for attention and membership. This is an assumption not extracted from the source material, but relevant to understanding al-Qa’ida’s motives. If a node’s local goals were no longer mutually aligned with the ambitions of AQC, it would not be in their interest to remain affiliated to the Core.

AQC also benefits significantly from having a collection of affiliated allies. Since its kinetic capabilities are significantly degraded today, having nodes that can carry out jihadist activities in its name provides AQC with a way to show that they are still relevant and active in the struggle against the West.

AQC commonly references the activities of the nodes in its propaganda, often using their attacks as proof of their own prowess. For example, in the August 2012 issue of AQC’s magazine *Vanguards of Khorsan*, AQC notes that, “It [America’s inability to defeat al-Qa'ida] can be seen in the failure of the Crusader powers and agents in Somalia [al-Shabaab] and Yemen [al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula] in particular to defeat the mujahidin of the Al-Qa'ida Organization despite their material and human support and the international strict measures imposed on the mujahidin.”

Each node prioritizes the immediate concerns of its own area of operations. The unique circumstances presented by the Arab Spring and the disparate reactions of each al-Qa’ida branch underline the autonomy of the nodes.While AQC applauds the Arab Spring protesters for overthrowing long-entrenched autocrats, it warns against allowing these protests to proceed towards democracy. In addition, AQC has attempted to integrate the Arab Spring into its pre-existing narrative by attributing it to their 9/11 attacks as the original catalyst for the uprisings.

Al-Qa’ida has been unable to articulate a clear alternative to the Arab Spring. Instead, Ayman al-Zawahiri has placed an emphasis on continuing past democracy and installing Shariah law in the affected nations. As he states, “My Muslim brothers in Egypt, a corrupt ruler has been deposed, yet corrupt rule remains. The intended goal is not merely to reach power… Rather, the goal is Islamic rule...” Zawahiri also states that “Absent the supreme dominion of the Shariah, no reform can be accomplished and we will remain stuck in the same swamp of corruption that we have suffered for nearly two centuries.”

In his criticism of democracy, Zawahiri asserts, “A democratic government must be secular, or in other words atheist, because governance and authority is not the sole right of Allah Most High, but rather subject to the desire of the majority.” This criticism has been a consistent theme even before the Arab Spring. In 2008 Usama Bin Ladin called democracy a “wrong, misleading approach, which is against God's law and which inhibits fighting for His sake.”

AQC has attempted to co-opt or otherwise inject the al-Qa’ida narrative into the events of the Arab Spring. Zawahiri asserts, “…[We], by the grace of God, wage with our Ummah one battle against the greatest criminals and their agents in our countries. Every victory for the mujahidin is a victory for the Ummah…” In a message to Egypt Zawahiri also insists, “This undermining started with the blessed raids on Washington, New York, and Pennsylvania and continued by means of the robust jihadist resistance that confronted the American insolence in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

While the Arab Spring comprises the main theme of AQC propaganda during 2011, the response from the nodes has been largely disparate, providing a unique case study in the autonomy of each.

Over time, the Islamic State of Iraq has paid less deference to the global ambitions of al-Qa’ida, remaining highly focused on establishing an Islamic Caliphate in Iraq. In their propaganda, al-Qa’ida in Iraq only tangentially acknowledges the existence of the Arab Spring, largely ignoring AQC’s focus on it.

An analysis of AQI propaganda suggests that the node is not reliant on AQC’s leadership for its contemporary ideology. While the ideological roots of AQI are historically based in Bin Ladin’s doctrine, we have witnessed a decrease in parallel rhetoric. This trend suggests that AQI has diverged from AQC ideology since 2005.

An examination of propaganda releases from 2006 and 2011 reveals the change in rhetoric associated with AQC. Much of the 2006 language involves grandiose references to al-Qa’ida’s long-term strategic mission as well as a pledge of allegiance from AQI: “They renewed their allegiance to the leader of Al-Qa'ida Organization Abu-Abdallah, Usama Bin Ladin, may God preserve him. He will see from his soldiers in Iraq what pleases him and gives comfort to his heart, God willing.” Conversely, there is very little of this submissive language toward Zahwahiri or any other AQ central leader during 2011. AQI makes occasional references of Bin Ladin’s death, but there is little substance to these references. Instead their focus intensifies on the rejectionist, apostate regime currently governing Iraq.

AQI references the Sunni-Shia conflict in 88 documents out of 180, often drawing from the same Koranic verse, “God will complete (the revelation) of His Light, but the Crusaders, the rejectionists, the apostates and their companions know not.” Meanwhile, AQC only mentions the Sunni/Shia conflict 16 times, reaffirming the notion that sectarian conflict is not a primary theme on AQC’s agenda. Eight months before the bombing of the Golden Mosque, Zarqawi defends his antagonism towards the Shia.

The sheikh has shown his reservation about our decision to fight the "Rafidhah" (Shia who slander A'isha,( the wife of the prophet), curse the companions, and hold their Imams as infallible) . . . As to fighting the Rafidhah, we have indicated many times that we did not start any conflict with them, but it was them who started a campaign to liquidate all Sunni, disperse them, confiscating their Mosques, etc. Not to mention their alliance with the crusaders. Does he expect us to watch all this and do nothing?

While the Arab Spring is pervasive in AQC’s 2011 propaganda, AQI references the event only once, and even then uses it to reframe its own sectarian concerns. The political crime lies in that the Magus Rejectionists today want a general authorization from us for a crime that is being plotted against us and aims to kill and divide us in the name of democracy and elections. The Magus have exploited their enormous media apparatus to deceive the Sunnis into believing that the elections are their salvation, and that they will solve all their problems.

AQIM’s superficial deference to AQC is mainly for the purposes of recruitment and prestige. The content of their propaganda efforts focuses on the pursuit of their regional interests. In contrast with the clarity of AQC’s statements, AQIM has avoided criticizing the democratic trajectory of the Arab Spring.

Between 2007 and 2012, only 14% of the AQIM statements collected make direct reference to the AQC narrative. These references are predominantly employed as stylistic flourishes, most commonly used in the context of recruitment. While the alliance with AQC has brandished AQIM’s image and allowed it to expand its focus outside Algeria, the target audience remains North Africa.

Although AQIM has stressed the strategic importance of the merger with AQC, AQIM propaganda patterns show that they are not under the direct control of AQC but instead are motivated by their own, local agenda, as exemplified by AQIM’s unique response to the Arab Spring.

While AQC did not hesitate to denounce the democratic theme of the revolts within weeks of their onset, AQIM avoided criticizing democracy for nearly two years. Fourteen of its propaganda releases directly reference the Arab Spring. Nearly all of them were positive with no mention of democracy, “The battle, intended to uproot oppression, maintain justice, liberate the Muslim lands from the conquerors, dismiss their apostate quislings, and implement the Shariah is one battle.”

It was not until September of 2012 that AQIM’s leadership distinguishes itself from the newly-established governments in Tunisia and Libya, claiming that, “the Tunisian people are still far from achieving the goals of the revolts.”

The fact that AQIM operates in North Africa and relies upon its population for recruits and resources makes it far more sensitive to the region’s political developments and popular movements. AQIM risked marginalization with the local population by criticizing the widely popular movements, and chose to evade the subject of democracy in its propaganda messages.

AQAP is primarily focused on overthrowing the Yemeni government. The removal of President Ali Abdallah Saleh has not changed this. Although it appears to be the most ideologically aligned with AQC regarding the Arab Spring, AQAP’s primary focus remains on local issues.

In 318 pieces of AQAP propaganda analyzed, Bin Ladin is mentioned 104 times. By contrast, Yemen and President Saleh garner 810 and 270 mentions respectively. In its propaganda, the running themes are all regionally focused. The Yemeni-American alliance, criticism of the Saleh regime, and exploitation of the local grievances all present themselves as common themes to the propaganda. To a lesser extent, verbal attacks of the Huthis and scholars in Yemen occur as well. In 2010, Anwar al-Awalaki discusses Yemen in a video stating that, “In Yemen, poverty and illiteracy are on the rise, as is sedition among the tribes, which leads to Muslim bloodshed…All this comes along with the government's unabashed cooperation with America.”

Qasim al-Rimi then reiterates the views of AQAP leader al-Wuhayshi, stating, “[It is] useless to topple a tyrant only to replace him with another.” These statements demonstrate AQAP’s adaptation of AQC doctrine to local concerns. While the stated end goal is to establish rule by Shariah, AQAP’s main concern is governance in Yemen.

The precedent of a focus on the near enemy remains intact. Of the 213 pieces of pre-Arab Spring propaganda produced by AQAP, 45% targeted Yemen. Of the 105 post-Arab Spring propaganda pieces, 43% targets Yemen. Pre-Arab Spring propaganda contained anti-Yemeni government elements 39% of the time as compared to 36% of the time in post-Arab Spring sources. Propaganda containing negative views of the West occurs in 42% in the post-Arab Spring pieces and 45% of the pre-Arab Spring pieces.

AQAP calls the power transition in Yemen a charade, and states the the “American project,” or the Hadi administration in Yemen will not succeed. In a June 2012 interview, al-Rimi derides Hadi as a Western agent as AQAP historically derided Saleh. Furthermore, he states that both Saleh and Hadi waged a war against proponents of Shariah law. Al-Rimi reinforces the local implications of the Arab Spring stating, “Let us all be careful and not to ignore that the chance of toppling a tyrant is the beginning of a greater tyrant who is more hypocrite, a stronger agent and fighter against Islam and its people.”

Al Shabaab is an especially dichotomous organization, which provides perhaps the clearest case of a regional insurgency painting itself as an al-Qa’ida front.Its propaganda can be clearly divided between high production value material designed for an international audience, and less polished material meant for domestic distribution. Al-Shabaab propaganda makes no mention of the Arab Spring, suggesting that the organization has recently turned its attention almost exclusively to local matters in Somalia.

Al-Shabaab has adopted two major “tracks” of messaging to accompany its regional and global foci. The original track has consistently focused on the internal conflict in Somalia against foreign forces occupying the country.

In late 2008, Al-Shabaab established a second track of propaganda focused on the larger al-Qa’ida global narrative. In response, Anwar al-Awlaki congratulated al-Shabaab on, "giving us a living example of how we as Muslims should proceed to change our situation . . . if my circumstances would have allowed, I would not have hesitated in joining you and being a soldier in your ranks." From this point forward, experienced foreign fighters dominated the global messages as Al-Shabaab began formally “auditioning” for al-Qa’ida membership, which it attained in 2012.

In 2011, Al-Shabaab launched HSM Press, the first highly active Twitter account by an al-Qai’da affiliate. Al-Shabaab quickly became a prolific user of the site, focusing on battle updates and addressing the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces in Somalia. While not exclusively regional in focus, tweets regarding local interests far outweigh the al-Qai’da global narrative.

On February 9, 2012, Shaykh Ahmed Abdi Godane announced in a video that al-Shabaab would formally join al-Qa’ida. Ayman al-Zawahiri responded, "Today, I am bringing the glad tidings to our Muslim Ummah that shall delight the believers and embitter the lives of the Crusaders. Namely, the Mujahid Youth Movement in Somalia will hereby merge into al-Qa’ida.” Al-Shabaab has to date failed to release any propaganda statements which clearly reference the Arab Spring. The lack of al-Shabaab commentary, in light of previous cross-talk with AQC, reiterates the divergence occurring between the groups.

During a tribal council meeting in Baidabo, Somalia that led al-Shabaab to the rejection of the al-Qa’ida name, the organization abandoned elements of its global strategy and refocus on a domestic agenda. Sheikh Aweys stated, "Al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda are merely a small part of the larger Islamic group and al-Qaeda's ideology should not be viewed as the sole, righteous path for Islam.”

In March of 2012, the divide between the foreign, al-Qai’da aligned fighters and the militia-elements worsens when Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki releases a video that intimates that other members of al-Shabaab want to kill him. In September 2012, Hizbul Islam announced a split from al-Shabab, asserting that political changes and a recent release of anti-Hizbul Islam propaganda by al-Shabaab led to the split.

In summary, al-Qa’ida is a vastly different organization than it was immediately following the attacks of 9/11. It has become more diffuse than ever before, a trend illustrated by the nature of the propaganda its members have released.

The al-Qa’ida network has adapted to survive in an increasingly hostile environment, and in its current incarnation represents a loosely-correlated front of nodal insurgencies. While some nodes are likely to decline in relevance, other nodes may continue to sprout in new locations as political circumstances ebb and flow. Al-Qa’ida has consequently lost tight centralized control over its affiliates, but gained increased durability due to its diffusion.