

Structural Devolution: Cell-based Terrorism to Brand Franchising

For extended periods of its history, terrorist organizations were cell-based, which was a way to protect the whole organization while having a certain level of flexibility to carry out operations. The cells however still gravitated around a node and structure based on hierarchy. This is the classic form of terrorist organizations.

In 2004, former CIA analyst and psychologist Marc Sageman wrote in his book *Understanding Terror Networks* about the novelty of the post-9/11 Al Qaida structure, one based on spontaneous, independent groups that were only connected by the M0 and a religious/ideological philosophy, namely a Salafi interpretation of Islam.

This created a nightmare for security forces because the classic methods of intelligence and investigation were not adapted to this new organic form of terrorist cooperation.

As such, the organic structure described by Sageman reflected the new possibilities of the 21st century, that allowed unrelated groups to support each other without necessarily being coordinated or working together. This development truly embodied the notion that a “terrorist will always use the technology and means available to him”, in this case the internet.

In this type of structure, if terrorists shared the philosophy and the M0, they also use the name and the label of the organization when conducting the attack. Which is why “Al Qaida” (AQ) was responsible for various attacks without its perpetrators actually being part of Al Qaida’s core group or

affiliates. In turn, especially if the attack was successful, AQ would not deny the affiliation, for obvious strategic reasons.

Yet as Al Qaida evolved, it was possible to distinguish links between groups and organizations. Yes, the groups were autonomous, but an organic network still provided knowledge and resources in the background, help steer would be terrorists and contribute to radicalization. This led to the consolidation of the AQ affiliates like Al Qaida in Maghreb (AQIM) or Al Qaida in Yemen (AQAP), which allowed improved regional operations, especially as the conflicts in MENA escalated. In turn, this gave security and intelligence personnel the possibility to connect dots, reduce the level of surprise and increase the capacity of pre-emptive operations.

But in the last weeks and months, Boko Haram (BH) and Al Shabaab (AS) have displayed a new type of structure: the franchising of their names.

Unlike the way AQ “franchised” its brand under a set of unofficial philosophical and operational guidelines – that included limiting the death of Muslims – Boko Haram and Al Shabaab are allowing anyone with any purpose to use their name, creating an even more terrifying nightmare. One that is getting worse with each passing day.

How did we get there?

Let's begin with Boko Haram's devolution. BH started as a structured group, hierarchic and based around its former leader Mohammad Yusuf. When Boko Haram developed a paramilitary branch, and when they began their reprisal for the capture and death of Yusuf in 2009, Abubakar Shekau was not able to maintain a centralized structure and the organization devolved to include various factions, the most famous of which is Ansaru, who broke away from BH in 2012. These factions have various philosophies and methods, operate

autonomously and de facto control some territories.

The “third devolution” is where we’ve been since mid-2013, where common criminals, spontaneous groups with no ties to Boko Haram, are free-riding the organization’s reputation and using the chaos created by the conflict to loot, rape, massacre and try to establish a semblance of power. They carry BH flags and sing their chants, but it has nothing to do with Shekau’s organization and everything to do with local grievances and power plays. This accounts for a good portion of the “mad dog” aspect of Boko Haram, and has been only beneficial to Boko Haram to this point, because it increases their reputation for terror, creates more confusion for security forces and above all, increases the media attention they are getting. In short, Boko Haram is franchising thugs.

As the importance of the group and the conflicts in the Sahel grew, combined with massive state instability across central Africa west to east, as well as MENA spiraling into various civil wars since 2011, terrorism based criminal organizations like Boko Haram and Al Shabaab developed a relationship of circumstance, essentially business and logistically based, that also contributed to an exchange of ideas. Hence, not to be undone, Al Shabaab is seeing some of the benefits of the Boko Haram franchise model.

This franchise model was visible last week when self-described Al Shabaab terrorists – waving AS flags and singing their chants – were behind two massacres during world cup public viewing in the town of Mpeketoni on the Kenyan coast. The time-line following the attack indicated that Al Shabaab itself was surprised by the attack, first denying then claiming it. President Uhuru Kenyatta himself has denied Al Shabaab was involved and blamed local politics for the massacre in a region where tribal conflicts have been raging for years.

More importantly, direct intelligence obtained by MOSECON

before Al Shabaab's flip-flopping, confirmed that local criminals were behind the attacks and were not affiliated to the group. They were emulating what is going on in Nigeria and leeching on the reputation of a terrorist organization.

As the reputation of the organizations grow, so does their appeal, and this creates excellent opportunities for criminals to strike and make their power moves. This is visible, again based on intelligence obtained by MOSECON, in the online "trash talking" done by supporters of the groups and how their labels should be used.

What does it mean for security forces?

Even more chaos. Because now they must filter out the false lead from the real one, in a situation where there are even more leads than before. It will create difficulties in profiling an MO and stretch out the conflict region, creating zones that will only distract from where the real focus should be. It also creates problems with the profile of the organization members and who is vulnerable to join or support them.

It also means the quality of the HUMINT must be impeccable because the flood of information obtained via SIGINT or OSINT will take more time to process and investigate, and also because the use of technology to transmit information within these groups is not standard procedure. This creates a whole new level of logistical issues.

Are there any solutions?

The first one would be to limit the media hype. Yes, the public must be informed, but it has to be in a way that reduces the appeal of these groups, limiting the growth of their reputation.

The second is more denunciation from other groups. The Chibok video created an uproar even within other terrorist groups

which led to some of them condemning what Boko Haram did. This will create a situation where the core and factions, for pragmatic purposes, will try to re-establish control and deny the free-riders the use of their name.

The third is putting more focus on HUMINT. Informants can tell security personnel much faster whether or not something is accurate, as witnessed in Kenya. With an improved networks of informants, authorities will be able to process the information faster and manage to sort out the real from the fake much more efficiently and effectively.

Finally, inter-department communication and cooperation must be improved. The sharing of information will allow the anti-terrorism units to focus their efforts on actual terrorist groups rather than waste time and efforts on criminals using terrorist brands as a cover. It will also help decipher the patterns quicker and more accurately.

The durability of the "franchise" is impossible to determine but there is no denying its appeal. We are witnessing imitation and therefore expansion. And with most parts of Africa north of the equator engulfed in turmoil, it's a model that could very well emerge in many other countries, much to the distress of the populations and governments.