

Al-Qaeda's Safe Havens

Mar 1, 2010



Brief Analysis

On February 25, 2010, Seth Jones, Andre Le Sage, and Thomas Krajeski addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute regarding al-Qaeda safe havens in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Dr. Jones is a political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct professor in Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. Dr. Le Sage is a senior research fellow for Africa at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. Ambassador Krajeski is senior vice president of the National Defense University and former U.S. ambassador to Yemen. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Seth Jones

The current situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is extremely complex. Although the media often use the catchall term "Taliban" to describe the main source of unrest in the two countries, the facts on the ground point to a complicated series of insurgencies waged by factions with different agendas.

To begin with, there is a range of insurgent groups such as the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Various tribes and tribal factions have allied with the insurgents and proven essential to their local operations. Additionally, many foreign fighters have infiltrated the region, mostly from the Arab world and Chechnya. A variety of illicit trafficking organizations operate in the area as well, from poppy smugglers to gem traders. Government officials from Iran, Pakistan, and even Afghanistan also play a significant role.

Al-Qaeda has been able to embed itself within this broader series of networks. Although its direct role in Afghanistan is minimal, the organization has provided funding, training, and expertise to other groups operating there. At the same time, however, it has learned from its mistakes in Iraq and is leaving most of the fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the locals.

In general, al-Qaeda is in a weaker position than it was two years ago. Its funding is down, and it faces increasing internal complaints. As seen in the use of improvised explosive devices and suicide bombings in Afghanistan, however, al-Qaeda's methods and expertise are still present.

Suppressing the violence in this region will require a number of measures. A population-centric approach is key, one that keeps the security of local communities at the forefront. The insurgent groups face significant opposition on the ground, and supporting such resistance at the local village level could prove essential to long-term success.

Pakistan's role will likely be crucial as well. Although Islamabad has provided longstanding assistance to many militant groups in the region, its arrest of Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar is a step in the right direction. Both the Pakistani government and the military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have shown a willingness to cooperate with the United States. Accordingly, Washington should push for reconciliation talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, working with Pakistan to boost their prospects for success. Islamabad's strategic interest could ultimately determine whether Afghanistan and Pakistan remain al-Qaeda safe havens in the future.

Andre Le Sage

Somalia is the epitome of a failed state, having gone without a true central government since 1991. Over the years, it has served as a rear base for al-Qaeda, particularly the group's East African branch. More recently, it has witnessed an Islamist insurgency against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Created in 2004, the TFG entered Mogadishu after a 2006 Ethiopian military intervention that removed the Union of Islamic Courts from the capital. It was widely unpopular since its inception, sparking a complex insurgency involving a number of different Islamist groups.

There have been two major insurgent groups: Hizb al-Islam and al-Shabab. Hizb al-Islam, a collection of four smaller movements, is led by an older generation of Somali jihadists and is widely viewed as being on the decline. Al-Shabab is a local al-Qaeda affiliate composed of younger Somali jihadists, many of whom received practical training in Afghanistan. The group is the TFG's greatest threat, and brutal enforcement of its extreme vision of sharia law in Somalia has drawn worldwide attention. Although it did not emerge until late 2003 or early 2004, its cadres have a history of supporting and harboring members of al-Qaeda's East African cell, most notably those involved in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

Al-Shabab's current relationship with that cell is not entirely clear, however. Some view the cell as essentially a part of al-Shabab. Others argue that the Somali organization's efforts to engage senior al-Qaeda leadership point to an eventual merger between the two groups. At present, they appear to operate independently but with parallel goals. And despite its proclaimed support for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shabab has seemed unwilling to provide foot soldiers for al-Qaeda's other fronts, preferring to retain them for the fight in Somalia.

Although al-Shabab remains a formidable force, with approximately ten to fifteen thousand fighters, there are signs it may be weakening. It currently suffers from internal divisions between a hardline faction allied with al-Qaeda and a more moderate faction that may be amenable to negotiations with the TFG. The leadership is divided as well, as some have global jihadist goals while others are more concerned with local conflicts. In addition, public support for al-Shabab is bottoming out as the population becomes fed up with the group's draconian ways. The recent emergence of several new groups in Central Somalia opposed to al-Shabab is certainly a positive sign. As is always the case with Somalia, however, observers legitimately fear that these groups will fracture and simply end up fighting each other.

Thomas Krajewski

Yemen faces enormous challenges today. In addition to being one of the poorest countries in the world and suffering from a massive water shortage, it continues to battle two separate insurgencies as well as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Unlike Somalia, Yemen does have a functioning central government. It is weak and corrupt, however, and thus ill equipped to deal with any of the above problems.

Following the 2000 USS Cole bombing and the 2002 al-Qaeda attack on a French tanker, Yemen received an influx of U.S. assistance and guidance aimed at bolstering its security capabilities. The local battle against al-Qaeda has been lackluster, however -- Washington and Sana suffer from mutual distrust, with each accusing the other of not doing enough. Both governments placed the al-Qaeda issue on the backburner, with Yemen concentrating on its insurgencies and the United States devoting resources to Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington has stepped up its efforts recently, though, in response to the attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound airliner in December 2009 and the earlier announcement that al-Qaeda in Yemen had merged with AQAP. Sana is now receiving large quantities of U.S. funds, personnel, and resources.

Although AQAP will likely be broken within a few years, preventing its eventual reemergence will be a major challenge. Once the group buckles under U.S. and Yemeni pressure, there must be a sustained effort to keep it

disabled. In other words, Yemen is a long-term project, and Washington must follow up on its good short-term intentions by making the requisite long-term commitment. Suppressing AQAP is not solely a U.S.-Yemeni responsibility, either; regional countries must be involved as well, with Saudi Arabia at the top of the list. The hope is that consensus will emerge on how to disable the group permanently so there is no need to confront it again five years from now.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by David Bagby. ❖

Policy #1636

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