

Al-Qaeda and Taliban Status Check: A Resurgent Threat

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Counterterrorism Lecture Series \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series)

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How does the United Nations view the current threat of the Afghan Taliban and of al-Qaeda?

On September 29, 2009, Richard Barrett, coordinator of the UN's al-Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team and member of the secretary-general's Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force, addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute as part of an ongoing counterterrorism lecture series sponsored by the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. Mr. Barrett advises the UN Security Council on threats posed by al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and monitors the implementation and effectiveness of the UN's sanctions regime. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

[Read a transcript of this event \(PDF\). \(/media/5895\)](/media/5895)

Al-Qaeda's Status Today

Over the past few years, the pace of attacks perpetrated by the al-Qaeda network has slackened, due to internal challenges to al-Qaeda and improvements on the national security front. Most critically, intelligence collection -- in particular the ability to penetrate terrorist networks and gather human intelligence -- has steadily improved. Counterterrorism officials today have learned from past mistakes, have better intelligence, and have a clearer understanding of the threat.

Today, fewer individuals engage in terrorism, and new recruits are often not as skilled or ideologically committed as before. For al-Qaeda, today's key audience comprises young adults in their late teens and twenties for whom the September 11 attacks were less a personal experience than a learned historical moment. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's international image has deteriorated significantly.

Groups that subscribe to al-Qaeda's ideology are increasingly preoccupied with parochial concerns that are local, not global. Al-Qaeda's emphasis of global issues is becoming dated, as local affairs begin to play a more substantial role. Public opinion, moreover, has turned against al-Qaeda for the most part. Surveys indicate that although anti-Americanism has not decreased dramatically in recent years, support for al-Qaeda and its tactics has dropped. This demonstrates that one does not need to be pro-American to be anti-al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda's Challenges

Al-Qaeda's most pressing concern today may be its credibility. To realize its primary goal -- instilling terror and fear on a large scale -- al-Qaeda must mount enough attacks to maintain its image as a legitimate, working organization. Thankfully, al-Qaeda has failed to meet the high standard that it set in September 2001.

In addition, the network's relevance has decreased considerably. The nature of Usama bin Laden's appeal has not changed sufficiently to match the agendas of al-Qaeda's new supporters and potential recruits. Moreover, al-Qaeda's exploitation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as its *casus belli* has been only rhetorical: its action in Israel or the Palestinian territories is minimal, and Bin Laden's emphasis on fighting Israel and the United States -- miles away from Israel and Palestine -- considerably undermines his group's claim to relevance.

Al-Qaeda's justification for attacks has also weakened. Many people, even those in al-Qaeda's leadership, have criticized group attacks that have killed Muslims. Additionally, the group's ultimate goals are vague and unappealing -- fragile at best. Al-Qaeda has no policy beyond that of restoring the caliphate. To forestall a further decline, al-Qaeda would need strategic, realizable, and appealing goals -- none of which it possesses or seems liable to adopt.

Since President Obama's speech in Cairo, al-Qaeda has acknowledged the need for public diplomacy, but it has failed to connect with and inspire its audiences and usual followers. In the age of a "leaderless jihad," people will certainly be available as potential recruits, but not as initiators. Leadership is important, and al-Qaeda's leadership has proven to be out of touch with reality, causing a severe loss of credibility, relevance, and self-justification.

Survey of al-Qaeda's Global Presence

Despite these problems, al-Qaeda's affiliates continue to operate in areas throughout the world, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Middle East. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the most active of al-Qaeda's branches at the moment, but it has failed to achieve one of its key objectives: igniting support in Europe. Although money and equipment are sent from Europe to AQIM, the group has not yet been able to conduct attacks. Somalia, too, remains a local battle. It is still unknown whether people are moving from Somalia to Europe to mount attacks or merely to relocate.

In nearly every sector of the Middle East, al-Qaeda has a presence. Due to its inability to garner as much direct support as it did in the past, al-Qaeda sees financial support as key to maintaining its status. Al-Qaeda believes, and rightly so, that donating money increases a person's commitment to the group's cause. Indeed, Kuwaiti officials recently stopped two cash couriers in the Gulf who intended to enter Iran and deliver the money to al-Qaeda. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has sent a clear message to both al-Qaeda and the Taliban, seeming to strike a balance. The UAE will tolerate the groups' meetings and fundraising efforts, but if they carry out operations within the country's borders, the government will certainly act.

In Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda has demonstrated its presence with the recent bomb attack on Prince Muhammad bin Nayef in August. Although the attack failed -- killing only the attacker and leaving Prince Nayef slightly injured -- it illustrated al-Qaeda's capacity to acquire new strike capabilities with frightening potential consequences. It was also a propaganda victory, illustrating that al-Qaeda was willing to attack senior regime leaders in the Middle East -- a first in a long time. Nonetheless, the al-Qaeda threat seems to be under control in Saudi Arabia; in an effort to fight

terrorism, the kingdom has made many arrests and instituted a terrorist rehabilitation program.

In contrast, Yemen is a country where the al-Qaeda threat is gaining ground. In fact, many al-Qaeda supporters have moved from Saudi Arabia to Yemen. As a whole, the country is unstable, plagued by the al-Houthi rebels in the north and the separatist movement in the south. Moreover, Yemen's population is young, poor, unemployed, and armed. In a country of approximately twenty-two million people, a worsening economy and drop in oil production has spurred al-Qaeda's determination.

As for Iraq, al-Qaeda has lost all real political influence. Al-Qaeda affiliates tend to be local groups preoccupied with sectarian violence and the fight for local resources. In Iran, al-Qaeda and Jundallah, the Baluchi separatist movement, are working together, but this seems confined to a local level. Egypt will be a "powder keg" in the upcoming years, and its educated middle class has the potential to provide leadership to various terrorist movements. In Gaza, Hamas surely will continue its strong stand against al-Qaeda. Overall, the Middle East is a patchy picture of stability and instability, but the terrorist threat within the region is generally under control.

Al-Qaeda's Role in Afghanistan and Pakistan

How events play out in Afghanistan and Pakistan may determine al-Qaeda's future. Although the Taliban and al-Qaeda maintain an alliance in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban desires a complete consolidation of power. If the Taliban were to successfully takeover Afghanistan, it would probably not allow al-Qaeda free reign over the country. The Taliban regard the September 11 attacks as a mistake that resulted in their loss of power -- a mistake they will not be likely to repeat.

Iran also takes an interesting view of al-Qaeda. The Taliban and al-Qaeda are threats to Iranian security, but Tehran is currently more concerned about drug trafficking and U.S. intentions near its borders. Today, Iran supports insurgent elements in Afghanistan -- to keep the United States busy -- but this is no indication that Iran wants the Taliban or al-Qaeda as neighbors in the future.

It is important to note that the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban differ in their attitudes. Both groups see international forces in Afghanistan as targets, but their loyalties differ. Historically, the Afghan Taliban has had a close relationship with the Pakistani government, and consequently has problems with the Pakistani Taliban's opposition to the government. The Pakistani government looks to the Afghan Taliban for control of the Pakistani Taliban, further sustaining their relationship. This enmeshment continues to present serious security challenges to the region's geopolitics and the international forces present in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda is clearly a weakened organization. It has suffered a severe loss of legitimacy, relevance, operational capability, and credibility. With these losses, and its dependency on a failed leadership, al-Qaeda has been unable to attract the support it needs to sustain itself in the long term. At the same time, however, it is necessary to maintain a watchful eye on al-Qaeda's propaganda coups. Recent developments concerning radicalization in the United States, al-Qaeda's recent activity in Saudi Arabia, and the group's continued ability to gain financial support indicate the risk of resurgence is still present.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Stephanie Papa. ❖

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