

## Assessing Progress against the Global Jihadist Threat

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### Brief Analysis

In April 2009, the U.S. State Department and the European Union released their annual terrorism reports, which paint a varied picture of international counterterrorism efforts to date, with clear progress in some areas and deterioration in others. The reports also illustrate how the rapidly evolving terrorist threat presents an ongoing and significant challenge to the United States and its allies, as terrorists continually adapt to international pressure. One positive aspect of the reports is that Americans and Europeans appear to have similar views on the threat posed by international Islamist terrorism, which may offer opportunities for the Obama administration as it attempts to improve transatlantic ties.

### The Threat

According to both the State Department and Europol, the EU's law enforcement organization, the major terrorist threat to the West now emanates from the tribal areas in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda's leadership is safely ensconced. The numbers released by the National Counterterrorism Center for the State Department's report demonstrate markedly the growth of the terrorist threat within Pakistan. In 2008, at least 1,839 terrorist incidents in Pakistan killed 2,293 people, a dramatic rise from 2007, when 890 incidents claimed 1,340 lives. What may be even more disturbing is the expansion of attacks beyond the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into other parts of Pakistan. While attacks rose in FATA from 61 to 321, incidents in the North West Frontier Province rose from 28 to 870.

Although the situation in Pakistan is extremely dire, the U.S. government has portrayed al-Qaeda's core as an organization in decline. Usama bin Laden's terrorist group continues to "lose ground, both structurally and in the court of world public opinion," according to the State Department. This echoed the comments of Adm. Dennis Blair, the director of national intelligence, during congressional testimony in February. Admiral Blair noted that in 2008, "al-Qaeda lost significant parts of its command structure. . . in a succession of blows as damaging to the group as any since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001." Some of al-Qaeda's affiliates are also hurting, according to the State Department and EU reports. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has been particularly damaged by international efforts and poses far less of a threat today. The capabilities of Jemah Islamiyah, an Indonesian-based organization, have also been markedly reduced through Indonesia's successful counterterrorism campaign.

Both reports make clear, however, that not all al-Qaeda affiliates have been weakened. In Somalia, for example, al-Shabab, an al-Qaeda-linked organization, has "overrun" parts of the country, creating a safe haven for a number of al-Qaeda operatives. Al-Qaeda in Yemen remains a threat and has been able to launch several attacks in the past year, as the government lacks both the political will and capability to crack down effectively on the organization. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has also become more dangerous since its 2006 merger with al-Qaeda "central." For example, according to the EU report, the organization conducted more suicide attacks in Algeria in 2008 than it did in the previous year.

### The Evolution

Assessing overall progress in combating the international terrorist threat is difficult because it continues to change, often in response to U.S. and international efforts. As Washington and its allies make progress in one area, they lose ground in another. For example, as the situation in Iraq improves, and AQI weakens, many prospective jihadists are choosing to go elsewhere. The EU report observes that Afghanistan and Pakistan have now replaced Iraq as the preferred destination for prospective jihadists, including Europeans. Saudi Arabia is another example. While the Saudis have taken aggressive steps over the past several years to defeat al-Qaeda networks in the kingdom, the Saudis are now facing a serious threat from cells operating out of Yemen.

Even terrorist recruitment has changed, primarily because terrorist groups seek to avoid detection by law enforcement and intelligence agencies. According to the EU report, terrorist and extremist groups are, generally speaking, no longer using mosques as a venue to radicalize and recruit new members. Since recruiting efforts have been driven underground, radical imams -- many of whom are known to governments -- are no longer playing as big a role. Instead, other "activists" have stepped up their efforts to get the message out and bring in new recruits. For example, Muhammad Sadiq Khan was the ringleader who recruited and trained the cell responsible for the July 2005 London transport bombings. Terrorist groups are also increasingly taking advantage of the internet to further these efforts, since face-to-face recruiting has a higher risk of compromise.

The reports also point to a worrying trend: global jihadist groups have been able to expand their pool of prospective suicide bombers. The growing use of women in suicide bombing has been well documented, but another development that may be even more troubling, from a national security perspective, is the increase in suicide bombers from the West. In 2008, the first German-born suicide bomber conducted an attack in Afghanistan. Closer to home, in October 2008, an American citizen of Somali origin, apparently radicalized and recruited in the Minneapolis area, participated in what the FBI believes is the first instance of an American suicide bomber anywhere. In Minneapolis, the FBI reports, "there has been an active and deliberate attempt to recruit individuals -- all of whom are young men, some only in their late teens -- to travel to Somalia to fight or train on behalf of al-Shabab."

The threat posed by global jihadist groups is likely to continue evolving rapidly in the years ahead. In the United Kingdom's new counterterrorism strategy report, released in March 2009, the British project that the threat will look very different in three years than it does now. In the UK's view, al-Qaeda is likely to fragment and may not survive in its current form. Instead, smaller, "self-starter groups" will likely grow stronger and more prominent. Admiral Blair offered a slightly different perspective on how the situation could evolve, speculating that al-Qaeda could relocate to the Persian Gulf, Africa, or elsewhere in South Asia should their Pakistan-Afghanistan safe haven be eliminated.

### Reading the Same Page

During his April trip to Europe, President Obama spoke of the need to improve transatlantic ties and forge "common solutions to our common problems." An examination of the State Department and Europol reports suggests that there may be opportunities for the Obama administration to strengthen ties with Europe in the counterterrorism arena, given how similarly the United States and Europe appear to view the threat posed by global jihadist groups.

The EU report, for example, refers to Afghanistan and Pakistan as "the central front" in the fight against al-Qaeda, a sentiment often expressed by President Obama. Yemen, Somalia, and Algeria are highlighted in both reports as emerging areas of concern, while both the United States and Europe view AQI as a terrorist group in sharp decline. Perhaps most importantly, both the Americans and Europeans are very concerned about the situation within Europe itself, even though there was only one Islamist terrorist attack in Europe in 2008, a failed bombing in Exeter, England. The EU's report makes clear that the threat within Europe has not diminished, pointing to a number of other indicators, such as arrests, to make the case that the threat level remains high.

The United States may find particularly fertile ground for cooperation with the Europeans in the counterradicalization arena. A number of European countries, including the UK and the Netherlands, are developing counterradicalization strategies and programs, the success and effectiveness of which could have direct implications for U.S. national security. A better understanding of the radicalization process -- particularly in terms of preventing and even reversing it -- will be key for both the United States and its European allies. With the recent

American suicide bomber in Somalia, the Europeans' experience in this area may even offer critical lessons for the United States.

Michael Jacobson, a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=template02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/template02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=template02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr>), previously served as a senior advisor in the Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. He was a co-convenor of the recent Institute Presidential Task Force resulting in the report [Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=311) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=311>). ❖

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