

'Franchises' of al-Qaida Pose a Great Threat

Sep 7, 2008



Articles & Testimony

Despite setbacks, al-Qaida remains a potent threat. In mid-August, the U.S. intelligence community's senior ranking terrorism analyst concluded that while increased counterterrorism efforts worldwide have constrained the ability of al-Qaida to attack the United States and its allies, the group "remains the most serious terrorist threat to the United States."

As recently thwarted terrorist plots in Britain, Germany and elsewhere make clear, seven years after 9/11 we remain in a heightened threat environment. But the nature of the transnational threats facing the world today is far different than the ones the United States and its allies faced on 9/11.

While al-Qaida itself remains a formidable opponent -- particularly with its recent resurgence and secure safe haven in northwest Pakistan -- its affiliates and homegrown cells pose a growing threat as well. As of 9/11, al-Qaida was the main threat facing the United States. At the time of the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaida was a centralized, hierarchical organization directing terrorist operations around the world from its base in Afghanistan.

The United States now faces a different -- and in some ways more complicated -- threat than it did on 9/11. This is a threat -- and an enemy -- that continues to evolve rapidly, often in response to U.S. and international pressure. Today, the United States and its allies face a three-fold threat. The first is from the core al-Qaida. While al-Qaida was on its "back foot" from 2004 to 2007, it has now "regained its equilibrium," according to a senior Homeland Security official.

The primary reason for its resurgence is that it has established a de facto safe haven in the tribal areas of Pakistan from which it can direct its global propaganda efforts, and recruit and train terrorist operatives.

Al-Qaida has also successfully expanded its reach through partnerships with other organizations throughout the Middle East and North Africa, described by the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, Dell Dailey, as the "franchising of al-Qaida." These affiliates include al-Qaida in Iraq, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).

Finally, there are more local groups today inspired by al-Qaida, even if they have no direct ties. In fact, there were almost 300 different groups involved in terrorist attacks in 2006 -- most of them Sunni. According to one former intelligence official, more than 40 organizations in all announced formation and pledged allegiance to al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden between January 2005 and April 2007. These groups are located in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Europe, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt, among others.

The shift in the terrorist threat is largely attributable to U.S. and international efforts after 9/11 to crack down on al-Qaida. With tighter border security, document control and financial tracking, al-Qaida recognized that it would be more effective if it used local groups to conduct its attacks. While the al-Qaida core is somewhat resurgent, it is still a far more decentralized model than the al-Qaida of 9/11.

Although al-Qaida and its affiliates may still present the most serious threat to the US, focusing on this group alone would be a mistake. Groups such as Hezbollah, PKK, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad remain terrorist threats,

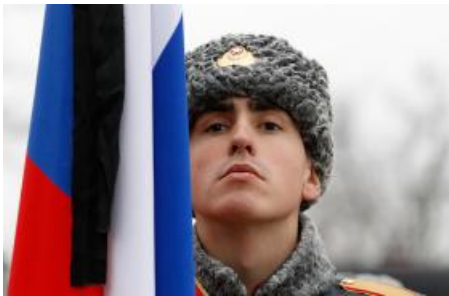
focused not only on their operations at home but also on maintaining their financial and logistical support networks internationally. And, even most disturbing, as Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, the Department of Energy's intelligence chief warns, "the threat posed by nuclear terrorism is much broader than the aspirations of any single terrorist group."

To be sure, counterterrorism will remain a top national security priority for whoever next occupies the White House. Ongoing tactical efforts to capture and kill hardened terrorists, however, need to be better combined with strategic efforts to counter the increasing radicalization of disaffected Muslim youth (particularly in Europe) and to highlight al-Qaida's bankrupt ideology and contest its violent and intolerant message.

We will not be able to say we are defeating al-Qaida and its allies until we are effectively countering their message and narrative, and beating them not only on the physical battlefield, but in the virtual ones as well. ❖

Camden Courier-Post

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

♦
Grant Rumley
(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)