

A Major Blow to al-Qaeda

May 5, 2005



Articles & Testimony

Yesterday, Pakistani authorities announced the capture of the third-ranking leader of al-Qaeda, a native Libyan named Abu Faraj al-Libbi (alias Dr. Taufeeq). Al-Libbi, along with five other foreign al-Qaeda operatives, was captured following a shootout in the village of Fatami, 30 miles northeast of Peshawar in northwestern Pakistan. Authorities had long been searching for al-Libbi, who reportedly rose to a senior position within al-Qaeda shortly before the Taliban were removed from power in 2001. According to Pakistani officials, Al-Libbi joined al-Qaeda in the early 1990s and served as a trainer at the al-Farooq terrorist camp near Kabul.

Al-Libbi is commonly described as the third in command of the inner core of al-Qaeda, following Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. He took over operations in Pakistan after the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in March, 2003. In December, 2003, he orchestrated two failed bombings aimed at assassinating Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

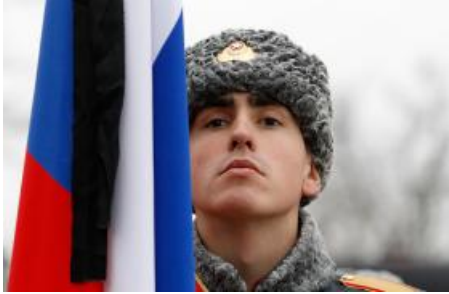
Al-Libbi commanded a particularly dangerous network of al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan, including Amjad Hussain Farooqi, a leader of the Pakistani al-Qaeda affiliate group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, who was killed by Pakistani forces last September. Farooqi was considered an al-Qaeda operative and recruiter and was involved not only in the plots to kill Musharraf but also the 2002 beheading of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl.

Pakistani officials asserted last year that an e-mail communication intercepted from an al-Qaeda operative revealed that al-Libbi had been coordinating efforts to carry out an attack in the United States prior to the 2004 presidential election. He had been also been communicating with operatives in Britain on attacks there. The impact of al-Libbi's capture on al-Qaeda will likely be considerable. While al-Qaeda is more dispersed than it was before 9/11, arrests of senior al-Qaeda leaders do undermine the group's activities. Lacking comfortable safe-havens and training grounds, al-Qaeda must increasingly rely on affiliated groups. Recent attacks in Casablanca, Riyadh and Istanbul, while deadly, demonstrated a far lower level of competence than attacks of al-Qaeda past. Denied Afghan training camps, al-Qaeda operatives have been forced to train a new generation of terrorists on the fly.

Arrests of key leaders like al-Libbi also present critical opportunities to collect actionable intelligence for future counterterrorism operations. Officials will quickly begin the process of interrogating al-Libbi and those detained with him -- in fact, according to press reports, Pakistani officials have already arrested 11 more al-Qaeda operatives following al-Libbi's arrest. But interrogations are time consuming and require vetting information obtained in each interview and returning for waves of follow up interviews. Therefore, the most productive intelligence will likely come from exploiting al-Libbi's computers, cell phones and the files investigators were sure to have found in his safe-house and on his person. (These are commonly called "pocket litter.") All this material will be run against intelligence culled from prior interrogations, creating an exponentially useful cache of information with leads for further hideouts, phone numbers and e-mail accounts to tap.

Al-Libbi's capture will not necessarily foil the next al-Qaeda attack. But it is nonetheless the latest in a series of counterterrorism successes that undermine al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The global jihadist movement has suffered a major setback. ❖

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