Middle East Affiliate Groups and the Next Generation of Terror

by Jonathan Schanzer **(/experts/jonathan-schanzer)**

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Brief Analysis

On December 1, 2004, Jonathan Schanzer and Daniel Benjamin addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Schanzer, who just completed a Soref fellowship at the Institute, is author of Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups and the Next Generation of Terror **(templateC04.php?CID=135)** (co-published by the Institute and SPI Books, November 2004). Mr. Benjamin, former member of the National Security Council staff, is a senior fellow in the Center for Strategic and International Studies International Security Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JONATHAN SCHANZER

Groups affiliated with al-Qaeda are a threat not only in the countries in which they operate, but also at the global level. Al-Qaeda's presence throughout the Muslim world comes largely in the form of these groups; attacks in Bali, Yemen, Casablanca, Iraq, and elsewhere have been linked to such affiliates.

Al-Qaeda affiliates have several characteristics in common. First, they are all independent local groups with local aims. Second, they consist of fighters who fought for al-Qaeda in foreign locales. Many were trained in Afghan camps, though Iraq is the current training ground for some. Third, affiliate groups prosper in places where there is weak central authority.

Until recently, the U.S. focus has not been on these affiliate groups. In order to counter the global terrorist threat, it is imperative that more resources be devoted to these groups. To be sure, they are, individually, smaller than the main body of al-Qaeda, but when considered together, they pose a formidable threat. Currently, there are approximately twenty-four active groups with a total of 300-500 fighters affiliated with al-Qaeda. Victories against any of these affiliates weaken the broader al-Qaeda network.

Such victories can also provide a much-needed boost to public morale. The war on terror is fought in the shadows, and much of the public hears little about it save coverage of large-scale attacks and fatalities. Counterterrorist victories are underreported, especially in Arab media. Unlike many intelligence operations aimed at foiling terrorist actions, the battle against affiliate groups can be publicized, serving as a visible evidence that progress is being made against terrorism. Such efforts also give the United States an opportunity to work with local governments in developing their terrorism and security policies.

Perhaps the most important reason to target affiliate groups is that it will help the United States win the hearts and

minds of the Muslim world. Affiliate groups are the low-hanging fruit of the war on terror, and the populations of the countries in which they operate will support action against them. Muslims around the world need to see that the United States is working for them, not against them.

The argument that these groups are only acting locally and hence are already contained is not valid. As evidenced by the increasing amount of affiliate activity related to some of al-Qaeda's recent large-scale attacks as well as to insurgent violence in Iraq (e.g., via cells led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi), members of these groups are becoming more savvy through experience. This fact increases the potency of their local activities and makes them a potentially global problem. The appropriate response, then, is to eliminate them entirely; merely weakening them will not stem the rising tide of local and international terrorist violence.

In developing counterterrorism tactics, the United States must adopt different strategies that fit each individual group. The initiative against Ansar al-Islam in Iraq, for example, would have been much more successful if it had been a surprise attack. Because the group was given advance notice via the media, most of its members escaped before the campaign against them had officially begun. In other situations, however, a light footprint is needed. Working with local and neighboring governments is often necessary, especially in cases where borders need to be sealed or monitored more closely. Indeed, counterterrorism planning requires a detailed understanding of each affiliate organization's unique context if it is to be effective.

DANIEL BENJAMIN

Al-Qaeda's Armies does an excellent job of detailing a very important aspect of the future of terrorism: affiliate groups. A historical perspective on the jihadist movement is helpful in understanding al-Qaeda's approach to its affiliates. Osama bin Laden has long invested in jihadist groups in order to build a network of like-minded individuals and organizations through which he could disseminate his particular jihadist ideology. His plan was to hit a faraway enemy, the United States, as the first part of a multi-step approach to victory against governments of Muslim-majority countries. He hoped to hit America hard enough that it would withdraw its support for local offending governments, which he thought would then fail. This patient approach was initiated well before September 11. As those attacks showed, bin Laden wanted to do more than just work with affiliates; he also wanted to initiate attacks on his own. He knew he needed large-scale propaganda victories, which he achieved beginning with the 1998 African embassy bombings and, most definitively, with the September 11 attacks.

Al-Qaeda leaders anticipated the American response to September 11 and took advantage of it to further convey their jihadist message. This was seen clearly when the United States attacked Afghanistan and bin Laden loudly proclaimed that Americans hated and sought to destroy Islam. Al-Qaeda's affiliates were thereby galvanized, and other groups previously unrelated to bin Laden quickly became affiliates themselves. Soon, bin Laden's ideas were influencing more advanced organizations. Al-Qaeda's Armies analyzes this confusing combination of galvanizing and splintering among terrorists, pointing out that the most likely future trend will be more small cells and loose networks. Indeed, although bin Laden was the instigator and figurehead, at this point the affiliates would continue their terrorist activities even if al-Qaeda disappeared from the scene.

The strategy for countering these groups needs to be carefully attentive to local situations. There has been too much focus on Iraq at the expense of other avenues, such as the State Department's Antiterrorism Assistance program. Washington must cooperate with local governments interested in developing counterterrorism plans, particularly in those countries actively being targeted by terrorists. Capacity-building is the key. Local populations need to see their governments' counterterrorism efforts as home-grown, with the United States cooperating and offering support. If they feel empowered, they are less likely to oppose counterterrorism efforts that benefit both their own and U.S. interests. Until the United States is more publicly reciprocal with other countries, its actions will be perceived as assertions of hegemonic power. In addition, Washington must find a better balance between military and

intelligence efforts. The global war on terror is too militarized at present; most of the burden should fall on the intelligence community.

Europe is an area of considerable concern because the jihadist movement is migrating there. On this front in particular Washington must employ diplomacy and intelligence rather than the military. Any surveillance conducted must be compatible with European ideas of civil liberties. The challenge is to halt the radicalization that has already begun. Offering support and intelligence to Europe serves the same long-term strategic aim as enabling reform in Iraq -- namely, disproving jihadists' arguments and thereby eroding their support in the Muslim community. Currently, many Muslims believe that the United States is a malignant presence in their countries and an enemy of Islam. As long as this perception holds, bin Laden will be preferred over America.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Deanna Befus. ❖

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