

Al-Qaeda's Armies:

Middle East Affiliate Groups and the Next Generation of Terror

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INTRODUCTION

America's "War on Terror" has completely consumed the attention of U.S. foreign policy analysts. Countless man-hours have been expended in the pursuit of sensible policies for what will undoubtedly be a protracted and asymmetrical war. Surprisingly, many analysts have yet to come to the inevitable conclusion that this war is inappropriately named. As I wrote with analyst Daniel Pipes in the New York Post on April 8, 2002, "Since September 11, America has waged war against a tactic. When President Bush declared a 'war against terrorism,' he ignored the real enemy -- militant Islam, a brutal, totalitarian ideology."

The United States is not battling terrorism, because no military can win a war against a tactic. America is not battling Islam (as some wrongly asserted in the wake of the 9/11 attacks), because one monolithic Islam cannot be extracted from the numerous offshoots, branches, and sects that make up the world's estimated population of 1.3 billion Muslims. Islam is just as ideologically, religiously, and politically fractured as the other two monotheistic faiths: Christianity and Judaism.

It can, however, be established that we are fighting against the forces of militant Islam, an expanding minority outgrowth of the faith that exudes a bitter hatred for Western ideas, including secularism, capitalism, individualism, and consumerism. It rejects the West and much that it has to offer (with the exception of weapons, medicines, and other useful technologies) seeking instead to implement a strict interpretation of the Quran (Islam's holy book) and shari'a (Islamic law). America, as radical Muslims see it, is the primary impediment to building an Islamic world order.

How this radical offshoot grew within Islam is worth briefly noting. The history begins with the birth of Islam in the year 610, when the prophet Muhammed received his divine mission and accepted Allah's instructions for a new religion that commanded belief in one God. For the next 22 years, Muhammed served as a transmitter of Allah's message, and his Muslim empire grew to encompass most of the Arabian Peninsula. After the prophet's death, the Muslim empire continued to expand until the 17th century, when Muslims were unquestionably the world's greatest military force, having conquered extensive territory and converted millions throughout the Middle East and Southern Europe. Islam had also achieved unmatched advances in architecture, art, law, mathematics, and science.

During this period, with the exception of battling Christian Crusaders, most Muslims had little to do with the West.

Ottoman Turkey, the dominant Islamic power in the 16th century, viewed the West as an inferior culture with inferior religions. By the 17th century, however, the West achieved military superiority. In 1769, the Russians handed the Turks their first sound defeat, pointing to a new and difficult road ahead for Islam. Instead of conquering, the Muslims were the conquered.

The empire soon unraveled. In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte led his expedition into Egypt. In 1830, the French seized Algeria. Nine years later, the British co-opted Aden (in modern Yemen). In 1881, the French occupied Tunisia, and in 1882 the English tightened their grip on Egypt. In 1911, Russia captured parts of Persia. That same year, Italy announced the annexation of Tripoli, leading to the eventual creation of the modern state of Libya. In 1912, the French extended their influence to Morocco. By the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire had lost the Middle East, as France and England carved up the Muslim empire as spoils of war. The Muslim world could do little more than look on helplessly.

The Muslim world today is painfully aware of their losses and the subsequent ubiquitous influence of the West. This includes advancements in practical and physical sciences, modern weaponry and military reform, mass communication, law, and political reform, not to mention shopping malls and fast food. These Western concepts and institutions, when transplanted to the Muslim world, were often destabilizing. They threatened the status quo, and were often too radically different to fit comfortably within a deeply rooted, traditional, and generally static Muslim culture.

While many Muslims adapted to the fast-paced changes common to Western industrialization and modernization, many also rejected them. The rejectionists created a rigid ideology imbedded in the traditional values and laws of the Koran. This is the phenomenon known today as militant Islam. While there may be some merit to the notion that the radicals fight the West because they oppose Western policies, that explanation ignores the fact that adherents to this fundamentalist ideology have long struggled to return to the glorious days when Islam reigned supreme. Their ideology represents a yearning for the return of "pure" Islam as practiced by the prophet, and the return of Islamic power.

The forces of radical Islam have been attacking non-Muslims for centuries. More recently, they have been attacking the United States, its interests and its allies since the late 1970s. The Tehran hostage crisis of 1979, Hizbullah's suicide bombing of a Beirut Marine barracks in 1983, the first World Trade Center bombing of 1993, the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in 2000 are just some of the more salient examples. These terrorist attacks were carried out by different actors (the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hizbullah, al-Qaeda, etc.), but they all shared a utopian vision of Islamic power.

Thus, when the U.S. government responded to the attacks of 9/11 by declaring a "war on terror," it used the wrong nomenclature. Washington was right, however, to focus most of its energies on al-Qaeda, the terrorist network founded by Osama bin Laden. Al-Qaeda is responsible for the lion's share of the high-profile attacks against America since 1992. On December 20, 2002, the U.S. government issued a report of nearly 900 pages ("Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001"), citing intelligence that demonstrated how al-Qaeda planned and executed the September 11 attacks.

But just as the word "terrorism" is an oversimplification in defining America's war, so is the primary target known as "al-Qaeda." Many Americans are under the false assumption that if U.S. Special Forces caught al-Qaeda's top leaders, the terrorist threat would simply dissipate. The reality, however, is much more complicated. Al-Qaeda has become more of a phenomenon than an organization. Its stubborn and continuing existence lies in the fact that it has long relied upon small and local groups as "subcontractors" for its major terrorist attacks. The network's resiliency stems from its ability to rely on clandestine cells, as well as "affiliates," which are larger, homegrown, organic Islamist terror groups that later became part of the al-Qaeda matrix. Al-Qaeda may have started as a small core, but an ever-

expanding force now fights in its name. The challenge now is to defeat this growing network of affiliates and cells -- what amounts to "al-Qaeda's Armies."

This book examines al-Qaeda and its affiliate phenomenon, and attempts to provide an in-depth look at several of the more active -- but lesser known -- affiliates operating specifically in the Arab world. These groups, located in Lebanon, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, and Iraq, are unquestionably al-Qaeda's representatives in the region. Open sources in English and Arabic, as well as some sources in French and Turkish, make up the bulk of this book's source material. Face-to-face interviews in Washington, Baghdad, Sulaymaniyya, Sanaa, Aden, Cairo, and Tel Aviv were also very helpful. Area experts, as well as current and former government officials, who were kind enough to speak with me off-the-record, also helped to fill in the blanks.

A few words of caution are necessary, however. As a Middle East specialist, I did not feel qualified to examine the affiliates of Southeast Asia, which has become another hotbed for groups in al-Qaeda's orbit, and is deserving of increased attention. Good work has already been done in this area by academic Zachary Abuza of Simmons College, journalist Maria Ressa of CNN, Rohan Gunaratna, who authored *Inside al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (Columbia University Press, 2002), and several others. Such studies, coupled with this one, can provide a more global and comprehensive view of the al-Qaeda affiliate phenomenon.

Furthermore, the accounts in this book are far from definitive. They represent an earnest attempt to document stories still being told. It is my hope that this work, along with its sources, can serve as a helpful primer for future study by other scholars and policymakers. More optimistically, this work might arm decision makers with information that is helpful in the dismantling of Middle Eastern al-Qaeda affiliates, so that future studies might constitute a post-mortem, rather than a contemporary analysis.

Interestingly, one of the affiliates in this study -- Ansar al-Islam -- became a target of the U.S. military during the 2003 Iraq war. While that group continued to execute attacks against the U.S. in post-war Iraq, the assault against it was not a wasted effort. Nor was Cairo's battle against Egypt's al-Jihad and al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya, for that matter, despite the fact that many of their members are today seen as al-Qaeda's core. Military action against affiliates in any form equates to an attack on the sources from which al-Qaeda draws its fighters and therefore diminishes the future strength of the al-Qaeda phenomenon.

Military targeting alone, however, will not be sufficient to destroy al-Qaeda's affiliates. In examining each affiliate in this book, it became clear that the groups were able to spawn and prosper by exploiting areas of weak central authority. In light of this trend, the danger of al-Qaeda's affiliates presents Washington with an opportunity. In keeping with its resolve to promote stronger ties with Middle Eastern states, the U.S. can work to build more robust relationships with states willing to fight their local al-Qaeda affiliates and to help stabilize the problematic areas under their sovereignty.

Failure to assist in the dismantling of local al-Qaeda affiliates, which equates to harboring terror, should result in penalties and sanctions. Conversely, successes should result in increased U.S. assistance to countries that clearly need it. If each relationship is structured carefully, the U.S. could play a supporting role in helping Middle East states weaken their al-Qaeda affiliates, while also helping those governments to project authority in the territories where they need it most.

Finally, it is important to note that the thesis of this book, which emphasizes the threat of al-Qaeda affiliates and the need to strengthen areas of weak central authority where terrorism thrives, is shared by a number of influential analysts who have come to similar conclusions. Former director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on February 24, 2004, about the threat of al-Qaeda's "loose collection of regional networks that operate more autonomously...." In that same testimony (excerpts of which are

reprinted at the end of this book in Appendix C), Tenet warned that "places that combine desperate social and economic circumstances with a failure of government to police its own territory can often provide nurturing environments for terrorist groups, and for insurgents and criminals. The failure of governments to control their own territory creates potential power vacuums that open opportunities for those who hate."

As Tenet's testimony in 2004 shows, the study of al-Qaeda affiliates and their enclaves is of growing importance. Tenet's job was not to create policy, but to present information that would be useful to policymakers. As such, he provided an overview of the information, but declined to recommend how policymakers should move forward. This book provides detailed case studies and a deeper explanation of the challenges that Tenet identified, as well as some policy considerations as we look toward the future.

- **222 Pages**



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