

Al-Qaeda:

A Whole Different Ball Game

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Brief Analysis

Thirty months after the massive World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, al-Qaeda is a significantly different organization, thanks to the successful efforts of the U.S.-led war on terror. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the threat of "global jihad" posed by al-Qaeda has diminished just because the organization itself is weakened. More accurately, al-Qaeda has adjusted to the relentless assault on its leadership structure by devolving into a set of regional networks -- each with its own political agenda and operational schedule, as a whole lacking a distinct command center.

Success in the Hunt

The Afghanistan war effectively removed al-Qaeda's safe haven, forcing it on the run and in search of an alternative operational area. The northern Iraq-Iran border area, where Ansar al-Islam (a local Kurdish fundamentalist group closely affiliated with al-Qaeda) was based, might have provided temporary refuge, but since that area has also been taken over by American troops, the network is now essentially without a solid footing.

The global hunt orchestrated by the United States (and assisted by many countries, including Arab states) for al-Qaeda's operational and logistical leaders has yielded impressive results. Many central members of the organization's pre-September 11 command have been arrested or killed: Mohamed Atef, Osama bin Laden's deputy, killed in November 2001; Khaled Shaykh Mohamed, September 11 mastermind and head of al-Qaeda's operational division, arrested in February 2003; Abu Zubaydah, a senior operative, arrested in March 2002; Ramzi bin al-Shibh, a central member of al-Qaeda's Hamburg cell, arrested in September 2002; Abu Yasir al-Jazairi, a senior logistics operative, arrested in March 2003; and Tawfiq bin Attash, an operative, arrested in April 2003. Hundreds of additional al-Qaeda activists have also been arrested or killed, among them Ali Qaed Sinan al-Harhi, head of al-Qaeda activities in Yemen; Abed al-Rahim al-Nashiri, an operations commander; Riduan Isamuddin (also known as Hambali), operational head of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Southeast Asia, also responsible for the October 2002 Bali attack.

Key al-Qaeda operatives still active include Osama bin Laden himself; his son Saad; Ayman al-Zawahiri, a top al-Qaeda deputy; Fazul Abdullah Mohamed, operational head of al-Qaeda's East African arena; and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a senior operative responsible for the November 2002 assassination of American diplomat Laurence Foley in Amman. Zarqawi is a rising star in al-Qaeda, even though he was not among the first-tier leadership at the time of the September 11 attacks. In allowing Zarqawi, once considered a negligible figure, to gain considerable power, al-Qaeda portrays itself as an organization under pressure, adjusting to new circumstances. Indeed, Zarqawi's promotion suggests that anyone capable of carrying out terrorist attacks against U.S. interests is welcome in the organization and will be provided with sufficient funds to carry out those objectives.

Current Trends

Despite convincing war-on-terror dividends, al-Qaeda's overall survivorship poses a real challenge to the United

States. The network currently operates in two parallel trajectories, one dedicated to conducting effective terrorist attacks on high-priority American or Western targets, and a second focused on Iraq, an attractive objective because of the strong U.S. presence there. Although al-Qaeda has failed to carry out a significant attack against a target in the United States since the hunt for the group's leaders was set in motion, the network will continue to prepare for major, September 11-style attacks. Al-Qaeda funding is still flowing, and its logistical activity is still functioning effectively. Given that the network has lost most of its strategic assets in Afghanistan and other arenas, and that its operational leadership is now isolated, the group will find it more difficult to carry out mega attacks. Nevertheless, al-Qaeda remains capable of producing scenarios such as exploding commercial Western aircraft or suicide bombing in civilian environments (similar to the recent attack in Madrid). Moreover, the highly fragmented nature of the organization, its decentralized leadership, and the elimination of definable targets will make it nearly impossible for the United States to retaliate militarily.

In the meantime, Iraq is emerging as the main operational arena for international terrorists, as Islamists around the world are called upon by Osama bin Laden to join the jihadist crusade against American troops there. Iraq serves as a relatively convenient arena because of its geography, radicalized culture, lack of a stable regime, and heavy U.S. presence. Indeed, hundreds of activists from mujahedin networks associated with al-Qaeda have entered Iraq to actively participate in terrorist operations alongside the Zarqawi apparatus and Ansar al-Islam. Additional arenas where the al-Qaeda network has the potential to flourish are Southeast Asia, Africa, and Chechnya, mainly because of the preponderance of fragile regimes in those regions; and Western Europe, where terrorist groups can take advantage of the freedoms offered by comparatively open societies.

Prospects

Despite U.S. achievements in weakening the structure of al-Qaeda, the complex realities in Iraq along with other rising threats against the United States could eclipse those gains. In his February testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee, CIA director George Tenet emphasized that "the steady growth of Osama bin Laden's anti-U.S sentiment through the wider Sunni extremist movement, and the broad dissemination of al-Qaeda's destructive expertise, ensure that a serious threat will remain for the foreseeable future -- with or without al-Qaeda in the picture." Indeed, Tenet's testimony suggested that a "growing number of jihadists [are] interested in attacking the United States . . . [in] the homeland." The successful American pursuit of al-Qaeda leaders has effectively eliminated a tier in the organizational chain of command, creating a gap between Osama bin Laden and lower-level activists. But bin Laden's ideology has not been vanquished. It is alive and well, spreading to local groups that seek to carry out the legacy of "global jihad." These groups remain fixated on destroying America and its Western values -- a reality that will perpetuate the war on terror indefinitely.

As al-Qaeda continues to serve as an inspirational model, it will, more than ever, come to depend on local organizations operationally. In addition, state sponsors like Iran will continue to act by proxy and sponsor sleeper-cell networks in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other states with American interests. Iran and Syria possess different strategic options than al-Qaeda or the Taliban, a reality that would challenge the United States should it decide to dismantle the weapons-of-mass-destruction or terror infrastructures of these state sponsors by military action.

The effort to preempt Islamist terror will be strengthened by continued close cooperation between the United States and other countries. Without this synergy and dependence on local intelligence and law enforcement capacities, it will be almost impossible to effectively eradicate the local terror networks aspiring to grow beyond their indigenous operating environments.

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