

The Post-9/11 Face of al-Qaeda

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Brief Analysis

Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates

The fight against terrorism has become more complex. In recent years, the U.S. intelligence community focused on al-Qaeda. This strategy paid off; the United States has learned a great deal about effectively countering al-Qaeda proper. The terrorist network has been quick to adapt, however. Currently, there are thirty to forty disparate al-Qaeda subgroups spread across a number of countries worldwide, and U.S. intelligence agencies need to take a closer look at them. These affiliates include Abu Sayyaf, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and Jemaah Islamiya in the Philippines; Lashkar e-Taiba in Kashmir; various Uzbek and Uighur groups in Central Asia; the Armed Islamic Group and Salafist Group for Call and Combat in Algeria; and various Egyptian groups. Each poses a different level of threat.

In keeping with al-Qaeda's founding charter, Osama bin Laden sought to make his organization the vanguard of the Islamist movement. Accordingly, he called on affiliate groups, many of whose leaders had been trained in Afghanistan, to overthrow what he deemed false Muslim rulers and their corrupt regimes. The battle to create Islamic states was costly for the Islamists, however, because the regimes targeted by al-Qaeda's affiliates were strongly repressive. Consequently, bin Laden convinced the affiliates that they must strike the United States, which he considered the "head of the poisonous snake" that was shielding false Muslim rulers.

Al-Qaeda's influence on its affiliates has been manifest in both the timing and execution of their terrorist operations. For example, attacks in October 2002 (in Bali) and May 2003 (in Casablanca) directly followed the broadcast of coded messages recorded by bin Laden. The Jemaah Islamiya bombings in Bali and the suicide operations by Moroccan extremists in Casablanca both mimicked al-Qaeda's hallmark tactic of simultaneous, coordinated attacks (e.g., the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Africa; the September 11 attacks). Moreover, in both cases, the al-Qaeda affiliates acted largely on their own initiative.

Al-Qaeda's Links to Foreign Governments and Groups

Hizballah. When al-Qaeda moved its base of operations to Sudan in 1991, Hizballah evidently assisted in the transfer. Bin Laden met with Hizballah commander Imad Mughniyeh shortly after his arrival in Sudan, and the Lebanese group provided training to al-Qaeda operatives on various tactics. In fact, al-Qaeda's strategy of coordinated suicide bombings was inherited from Hizballah. After bin Laden relocated to Afghanistan in 1996, the relationship between the two organizations declined. There is new evidence that this relationship may have been revived by the U.S. intervention in Iraq; the scope of this renewal is unclear, however.

Saudi Arabia. Currently, any Saudi support to al-Qaeda is more likely the result of carelessness rather than deliberate mischief. Once Saudi money is distributed to charities, Riyadh does not take responsibility for the end user. The Saudis lack good accounting, so the United States must begin holding them and the charities they finance to Western standards of accountability. Ideologically, the Saudis have indirectly supported al-Qaeda through the promulgation of wahhabism, which is similar in many ways to al-Qaeda's own Salafi beliefs. Certainly, a wahhabi adherent can become a member of al-Qaeda very quickly compared to a person who has not been indoctrinated in such beliefs.

The Saudi-funded spread of wahhabism was not intended to promote violent extremism, however, but rather to bolster Saudi influence in the Middle East in response to the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq War.

Iran. Following the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, a number of al-Qaeda operatives fled to Iran, including bin Laden's son Saad. Moreover, in past statements, bin Laden has hinted at collusion between the largely Sunni al-Qaeda and Shi'i Iran. He has claimed that it is a sin to even speak of division between Sunnis and Shi'is, arguing that any differences between the two are subordinate to the fight against their common enemy, the United States.

Palestinian groups. Although al-Qaeda has been able to penetrate a number of Islamist groups, the main Palestinian groups -- Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades -- have resisted infiltration. Only a handful of Palestinians are known to have trained in Afghanistan. Palestinian groups have a strong sense of history; when they saw their Egyptian counterparts being absorbed by al-Qaeda, they resisted operational cooperation. At the support level, however, a number of U.S. and European charities have funded both al-Qaeda and Palestinian militias.

Response to al-Qaeda

Looking back on two-and-a-half years of the U.S.-led war on terror, one can find several clear strengths and weaknesses in the U.S. approach. On the positive side, al-Qaeda has failed to attack the United States, Western Europe, and Australia since September 11. First, heightened public vigilance has made it more difficult to mount large-scale attacks that require long-term preparation. Second, unprecedented interagency and international intelligence cooperation has improved the U.S. government's counterterrorism efforts. Third, al-Qaeda has been aggressively hunted since September 11, putting the group on the defensive. Fourth, the United States has increased security at its hard targets overseas (e.g., embassies and military bases).

The biggest weakness of the U.S. approach has been its inability to target and destroy the core and penultimate leadership of al-Qaeda. As long as the organization's spiritual leader (bin Laden) and principal strategist (Ayman al-Zawahiri) remain at large, its members and potential supporters will receive guidance, and its campaign will continue. In addition, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have adapted their tactics to circumvent existing security measures. Rather than relying on standard weapons, modern terrorists often employ dual-use technologies (e.g., ammonium nitrate fertilizer), which are easier to purchase and transport. Similarly, because the United States and its interests abroad are now more secure, terrorists will increasingly look to attack U.S. allies. They will also seek soft targets, which, given their number, are nearly impossible to defend.

In order to prevent future attacks, the United States will need to enhance its so-called "human intelligence" capabilities. Currently, it is overly reliant on technical surveillance, which is not as effective against clandestine organizations. Washington should also concentrate on achieving intelligence dominance, which requires intergovernmental cooperation. With intelligence dominance, the United States will be able to strike terrorists before they attack, rather than in retaliation. This ability is especially important in Iraq, where resistance is very active.

Moreover, the United States and many of its allies face a difficult challenge in combating terrorism due to the openness of their societies. Terrorist support cells see Western liberal democracies as environments that are most conducive to raising funds, disseminating propaganda, and recruiting operatives. Prior to September 11, Western nations did not seriously target support cells. Countering operational cells alone is no longer sufficient, however, because support cells may mutate and carry out attacks of their own.

Finally, Washington must invest more in public diplomacy, particularly through media outlets, since engaging with the Arab world on a government-to-government basis has proven counterproductive. Many Arab leaders show one face to Washington while offering a very negative image of the United States to their citizenry. Moreover, although some repressive regimes (e.g., in Uzbekistan) have greatly facilitated the war on terror, their human rights record may lead to an Islamist backlash when they fall from power. Hence, Washington must work with nongovernmental

organizations as well as with governments in order to directly counter extremist propaganda.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jeff Cary.

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