Intensify the Hunt

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

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The bomb attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca, the warnings in East Africa and Europe and the heightened threat level at home are sober indications that al-Qaida still has global reach despite the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan and the war on terrorism.

This should not come as a shock. Al-Qaida continues to be a threat because it has always had a fluid and decentralized operational structure. In other words, al-Qaida may be on the run, but it never stopped running.

FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III notes that "well in excess of 100" terrorism plots against U.S. targets were attempted even after Sept. 11. While many attacks were thwarted, successful attacks were scored all over the world, including the carnage at the Bali nightclub in October, the assassination of an American diplomat in Jordan the same month and the bombing of a Kenyan hotel in November.

Before the fall of 2001, al-Qaida appeared to work in a top-down, "corporate" structure. Senior operatives, such as Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, reportedly hatched the most deadly plots against U.S. and Western targets.

It was, therefore, a victory when authorities arrested Mr. Mohammed and other key al-Qaida lieutenants, such as Ramzi Binalshibh and Abu Zubayda. But al-Qaida has long been known to farm out its work to local, low-level operatives who fought in Afghanistan or graduated from its training camps. They are the ones who frequently carry out attacks, not those closest to Osama bin Laden and his henchmen. Thus, the core leadership is still important, but not essential.

Today, the network is franchised. It operates from leadership directives (as was likely the case in Saudi Arabia, where militants received orders from Saif al-Adel in Iran), but also from the initiative of semi-autonomous cells and affiliate groups (as was likely the case in Morocco).

Rohan Gunaratna, a leading al-Qaida expert, says the vacuum in leadership created by the allied operations in Afghanistan forced the network to "rely heavily on the infrastructure of its associate groups." Al-Qaida now "shares expertise, transfers resources, discusses strategy and even conducts joint operations" through cells and regionally based groups that have ties to bin Laden's network. These groups provide "leadership, recruitment, training and logistics to the global network, allowing the organization to function largely undisturbed."

But looking back, al-Qaida appears to have planned for this day in 1997 and 1998, when U.S. spy agencies began to intensify their operations against it. Bin Laden, who likely realized that his organization would have to adapt, brokered a number of alliances that al-Qaida now enjoys with various affiliate groups worldwide.

In February 1998, he announced an organization called "the Islamic World Front for the Struggle Against the Jews and the Crusaders" (when he implored believers to "kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military" wherever they were to be found). Under this banner, bin Laden boasted he had several affiliate groups, including Egypt's al-Gamaa al-Islamiya and al-Jihad, the Jihad movement in Bangladesh, and Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan.

Five years later, al-Qaida's affiliates still represent a significant part of the network. They include: Ansar al-Islam (Iraq), Armed Islamic Group (Algeria), Asbat al-Ansar (Lebanon), Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Algeria), Islamic Army of Aden (Yemen), Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Philippines) and Abu Sayyaf (Philippines), among dozens of others.

These groups and others were listed in President Bush's Sept. 23, 2001 Executive Order No. 13224 calling for the freezing of their assets and labeling them threats to national security.

Since then, steps have been taken to stymie the growth of these groups and their front organizations, both by the United States and their host countries.

For example, the Philippine military, with U.S. guidance, has severely weakened the threat of Abu Sayyaf. U.S. forces have also worked closely with the Yemeni military to track down al-Qaida operatives. And the United States helped Kurdish forces destroy Ansar al-Islam's enclave during the Iraq war.

But many other al-Qaida affiliates continue to operate virtually untouched because they are largely regarded as a local threat and are off the radar of the average American. For example, little has been done to weaken Asbat al-Ansar, the al-Qaida affiliate in Lebanon that recently bombed American fast-food restaurants and tried to assassinate the U.S. ambassador.

If the war against al-Qaida is to be fought and won, the United States must continue to hunt down al-Qaida's lieutenants. But with the Iraq war behind us, we must now also focus our attention on working with local governments to dismantle local affiliates as well as the more clandestine cells.

If we don't, al-Qaida will maintain its decentralized bases of operation and the means to attack Western targets in their host countries, and around the world. ❖

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