

KSM in Custody

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Articles & Testimony

The capture of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, al Qaeda's operational commander and 9/11 mastermind, demonstrates that the United States can, in fact, walk and chew gum at the same time. The fact that the greatest success to date in the war on terrorism occurred well into the planning stages of the war to liberate Iraq should give pause to critics who said these two wars could not be fought at once. Indeed, the information investigators are already collecting from his interrogation and the materials seized when he was captured, including his laptop, cell phones, "pocket litter," and other documents, to the sudden surge in international phone and e-mail "chatter" officials are monitoring strongly suggests there will be more such successes in the war on terror in the near future.

MANAGING INTEL

Over the past few months, several respected terror analysts have aired the legitimate concern that fighting a conventional war in Iraq would drain precious intelligence resources from the ongoing, more dangerous, and immediate war on terror. And it is true that supporting military action has historically trumped other intelligence functions in times of war. By many estimates, traditional war fighting demands as much as 80 percent or more of the intelligence community's resources to support forces on the ground. But this fails to account for two critical factors: (1) the introduction of highly sophisticated communication and information technologies into combat, and (2) the experience and know-how, built up over the past year and a half, of managing and balancing finite intelligence resources in the war on terror. So, while the military still will require enhanced intelligence support to liberate Iraq, the demand on the intelligence community will be far less draining than in the past. Meanwhile, the intelligence community is better prepared today than it was pre-9/11 to manage its scarce resources -- personnel, technical tools, funding -- to support both the ongoing war on terror and emergent crises like the war in Iraq. Other areas like counter-narcotics and anti-crime may suffer, as they already have since 9/11, but the critical areas of national security like counterterrorism and counterproliferation will continue to function at full capacity. And the arrest of KSM suggests they will be highly successful.

BODY BLOW

Even more significant than the vindication of capturing the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks is the devastating impact the arrest will have on al Qaeda. According to a U.S. law-enforcement official, the arrest of KSM "will hit

Qaeda like a body blow and send shock waves throughout the organization. This is not something they will be able to overcome easily." While al Qaeda truly is a network of loosely affiliated terrorist cells with no clear organizational hierarchy, especially true now that their Afghan operations base has been destroyed, KSM was the one man in a position to know more about al Qaeda's global tentacles than anyone else. This is true not only because of his position as al Qaeda's chief of operations, but because of his personal involvement in practically every major attack attributed to the al Qaeda network since 1993. KSM established many of the front companies supporting these cells and their operations, through which he established personal relationships throughout the al Qaeda network.

KSM's capture brings his international terror career full circle. It started, after going to college in North Carolina and then fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, with the 1993 World Trade Center attack led by his nephew, Ramzi Yousef, and Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the Blind Sheikh. It ended after authorities arrested the Blind Sheikh's son, Muhammed Abdel Rahman, and traced KSM to the home of a senior Pakistani Islamist based in part on Rahman Jr.'s interrogation. Along with KSM, authorities captured Mustafa Ahmed al Hawsawi, who served as KSM's financial intermediary funding the 9/11 hijackers and receiving unspent funds just hours before the attacks. According to the Financial Times, al-Hawsawi held a supplemental Visa cash card in the name of Abdullah al-Fakasi al-Ghamdi. Authorities identified the photo from the Visa-card application as KSM.

KEY NODE IN THE AL QAEDA MATRIX

What sets KSM apart, in the words of a senior U.S. law-enforcement official, is that "he was at the center of everything." For example, after recruiting the operatives to work with his nephew Ramzi in the Philippines, KSM financed the "Bojinka" plot to down a dozen U.S. airliners over the Pacific Ocean through a Malaysian-based import-export company that dealt in Sudanese honey called Konsonjaya. One of the companies' directors was Riduan Isamudin, better known as Hambali, the operational head of the Jemaah Islamiya terrorist network. Though unknown at the time, Hambali is now the "most wanted" man in Southeast Asia for his role in several bombings in the Philippines, the foiled plot to bomb U.S. and other targets in Singapore in December 2001, and the October 2002 Bali bombings.

Authorities stumbled on the apartment Yousef and his associates were using to mix the components for their bombs when their chemistry experiments started a small fire. Investigators searching the apartment discovered the terrorists were also behind the bombing of Philippine Airlines flight PR434 in December 1994 and planned to assassinate the pope during his visit to Manila. They also discussed crashing an airplane into CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, a technique KSM would later employ in his second strike against the Twin Towers. Police also found a note in the Manila apartment which was signed "Khaled Sheikh Bojinka." Investigation later determined that KSM spent time in Manila with the cell led by Yousef, proactively involving himself in the plot's planning and oversight just as he later would for the 9/11 Hamburg cell led by Mohammad Atta.

In fact, KSM and Hambali were both present at the January 2000 planning meeting in Malaysia at which the final touches were put on the plot to bomb the USS Cole (a plot to bomb the USS Sullivans had just failed) and the decision was made to carry out the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Also in attendance at this key meeting were two of the 9/11 hijackers, Nawaf Alhazmi and Khalid Almidhar, Cole planner Tawfiq bin Attash, and others.

KSM is said to have personal connections to terrorists across the globe. The names of people in the United States were said to be found on his person at the time of his capture, his business travels for his front companies took him from Malaysia to Brazil, and in between he even spent time as a Qatari civil servant. Officials note that hundreds of al Qaeda operatives caught since 9/11 admitted under interrogation to having had recent conversations with KSM. In one conversation intercepted by German authorities, Nizar ben Mohammed Nawar, the suicide bomber in the April 2002 Djerba synagogue bombing in Tunisia, called KSM three hours before the bombing with a final status update on the operation. A captured al Qaeda affiliate tied to the kidnapping and assassination of Wall Street Journal reporter

Daniel Pearl implicated KSM in that attack as well.

ONGOING THREAT

From the 1993 WTC attack until his arrest, KSM continued to plot, fund, and coordinate spectacular terror attacks against the United States. Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge noted that KSM was tied to "a significant terrorist plot" planned for the United States that was behind the recent elevated threat warning level. According to several press reports, intelligence analysts feared KSM was planning a large-scale attack in Manhattan, possibly involving fuel tracks, gas stations, and suspension bridges.

KSM was also actively plotting attacks outside the U.S. According to a Canadian Secret Intelligence Service interrogation report obtained by the New York Times and Discovery Channel, Muhammad Mansur Jabarah, the KSM lieutenant and Jemaah Islamiya liaison, confessed that it was KSM who gave him money and instructions for attacks in Southeast Asia targeting "soft" targets frequented by Americans. According to Filipino authorities, "Jabara himself admitted that he was introduced by Osama personally to Mohammed to oversee some terrorist operations in Southeast Asia."

FIGHTING MULTIPLE WARS

The capture of KSM will enable officials to foil ongoing plots and apprehend more al Qaeda operatives. Since his relationships cut across the al Qaeda network, including multiple terrorist groups and commanders and foot soldiers alike, his capture is likely to damage the network of international terrorists like none before him. Supporting the military war in Iraq will not impede the intelligence and law enforcement communities' ability to continue prosecuting the war on terror. Indeed, with all the new lead information gleaned from KSM's capture, one war -- the war on terror -- received its biggest boost to date just before the second war -- the liberation of Iraq -- commences. ❖

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