

The War on Terror in the Shadow of the Iraq Crisis

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Brief Analysis

BRUCE HOFFMAN

As al-Qaeda has weakened, it has been forced to focus on "softer" (i.e., more accessible) targets rather than "hard" targets such as embassies or military installations. Nevertheless, the organization remains remarkably flexible, and its core leadership is still alive and at large. Moreover, Osama bin Laden has a corporate succession plan in place as well as a tremendous reservoir of jihadists.

Al-Qaeda functions at multiple levels. At the top is a professional cadre of dedicated, well-funded individuals who are responsible for the September 11 attacks, the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000, and the planning of the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa. Next are the trained amateurs such as Richard Reid (accused of attempting to detonate "shoe bombs" aboard American Airlines Flight 63 on December 22, 2001) or Ahmed Ressam (convicted for his December 1999 attempt to bomb Los Angeles International Airport), who are given little to no operational direction and minimal funds. Third are the local groups who are sympathetic to and motivated by al-Qaeda's message and who are actively seeking to carry out attacks. Some of these groups attempt to make contact with al-Qaeda for funding or logistical reasons, but others carry out attacks in the name global jihad without any formal connection to al-Qaeda. Indeed, al-Qaeda often provides support to like-minded insurgent groups throughout the Muslim world in order to further the goal of global jihad and to create local cadres that could provide logistical support to the organization.

Bin Laden has a tremendous capacity for patience and planning. Given the estimated two-year planning cycle witnessed in both the September 11 attacks and the Cole bombing, it is likely that some operation put into motion in mid-2001 could be coming together only now. In the future, however, "Why hasn't this happened more often?" might be a more important question than "What could happen?" That is, focusing on measures that have prevented

additional terrorist attacks would provide insight into the operational and logistical requirements of terrorist organizations as well as their level of training. For the most part, terrorists change their tactics only when forced to do so. Lately, many terrorist organizations have been deprived of physical sanctuary and training facilities, so they will likely strike out in new ways in the future.

DANIEL BENJAMIN

Al-Qaeda is using the period leading up to a confrontation in Iraq to underscore its position as the champion of the interests of the Islamic world. This strategy was evident in bin Laden's recent reappearance as well as in al-Qaeda's first direct action against Israeli interests. Both Iraq and al-Qaeda have a strong interest in showing that Israel and the United States are bound to each other and to the supposed world crusade against Islam.

Future al-Qaeda operations could include local Islamist groups that the organization has long supported. In addition to fostering terrorist activity in countries with strong anti-American sentiments and moderate Islamic regimes, al-Qaeda could also instigate a spike of activity against Israel. History shows that every deployment of U.S. military forces in the Islamic world has galvanized al-Qaeda and its followers. The Gulf War was a pivotal moment for the organization, as was U.S. involvement in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Somalia. It is difficult to predict what kinds of attacks al-Qaeda might launch in the wake of a new war in Iraq, but U.S. military personnel would be an irresistible target. Force protection in Iraq would be a great challenge for the United States, alongside the difficult tasks of preventing WMD proliferation and securing regional and domestic Iraqi stability. Nevertheless, transferring intelligence resources to the Iraqi theater may not be wise in light of the increased terrorist threat on U.S. soil. These resources are limited (especially in seemingly minor areas such as translation) but essential. Fortunately, given the scope of the threat posed by al-Qaeda, most countries worldwide are committed to fighting the organization at the level of intelligence and law enforcement.

MATTHEW LEVITT

The war on terrorism cannot be put on hold while another war is fought in Iraq. In fact, terrorist groups would likely see U.S. distraction as an opportunity to increase their level of operations. This could include attacks by al-Qaeda and other groups on both hardened installations and soft targets, all of which would have a devastating impact on U.S. efforts in Iraq. International terrorism is a web linking many disparate groups. Even those groups that are not operationally linked (e.g., al-Qaeda and Hamas) often have critical logistical and financial links. For example, senior U.S. and European officials have noted that although Hizballah and al-Qaeda do not appear to share operational support, they have engaged in logistical cooperation on an ad hoc and tactical basis, as well as cooperative training. Hence, concentrating on only one part of the web of militant Islamist terror is not a good strategy; the war on terrorism will be ineffective if action is taken only against al-Qaeda, to the exclusion of other parts of the web such as Hizballah. In particular, support networks are a key part of the matrix of relationships among terrorists. For example, over the past year, evidence has shown that the al-Taqwa banking network -- which was shut down shortly after the September 11 attacks in light of its ties to al-Qaeda -- was a preferred conduit for transferring funds to Hamas and a host of North African terrorist groups, in addition to being established with seed money from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Moreover, state sponsors of terrorism continue to be active. For example, Syria has provided a great deal of assistance against al-Qaeda, but is nevertheless believed to be supplying rockets directly to Hizballah. Damascus should be told in no uncertain terms to direct its counterterrorism cooperation against all terrorists. Tehran continues to support Hizballah and Palestinian terrorist groups as well, and there is evidence that senior al-Qaeda officials have been given sanctuary in Iran, where some have been told that they will be called upon at some point to repay Iran for this hospitality.

Over the years, reports have also indicated that Saudi Arabia has funded groups directly or indirectly with the tacit understanding that they would operate only outside Saudi borders. For the sake of the war on terror, it is crucial that the Saudi government shut down groups that intentionally finance terrorism and ensure that funds slated for legitimate humanitarian causes are not diverted to terrorists. If the Saudi government follows through on its recently announced regulatory measures (e.g., requiring all charities to report to the foreign ministry in a transparent manner), it may do much to improve its counterterrorism credentials.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Katherine Weitz.

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