

TRANSFORMATION OF AL-QAEDA'S STRATEGY IN LIGHT OF THE NEW GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM

The September 11 attacks have changed the world's security environment. The tremendous developments in the wake of this event have resulted in two major wars. The sustained struggle against terror has yielded significant results, but not a foreseeable end to terrorist networks. Although operating in a less conducive environment after the intervention in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda has quickly adapted to new circumstances, mobilizing affiliated organizations to carry out attacks against US troops in Iraq and against its allies, highlighting the new agenda and tactics employed by the Network. This article examines the development of Al-Qaeda, its strategic goals and its global agenda in light of the global war on terrorism.

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Internationalization of terrorism began with the state sponsoring of terrorism in the seventies and the eighties. High jacking international air-flights became the most popular type of terrorist action, because of the simple fact that it was spectacular and therefore received a lot of international attention. Airplanes were also used as a weapon in the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington in 2001. The airplanes, which smashed into the World Trade Center Twin Towers, killed nearly 4,000 people and changed completely the perception of both internal US security and international security.

Bombs and explosives still remain the preferred weapons of today's terrorists. It is not their choice of weapons that characterize developments in the asymmetric struggle since these remain largely unchanged. Rather, the main characteristics of evolving international terrorism are the motivations, organizational structures, technological developments, operational methods and considerations regarding the wider public. Two processes of evolution directly indicate the consequences of these changes: 1. the number of terrorist attacks has decreased substantially, attacks have become deadlier and more destructive, and 2. the threat from terrorism has wider political and geo-strategic influences.

While religion has replaced many of the ideological and nationalistic motivations, terrorists use laterally organized networks rather than limited, identifiable hierarchical groups. Private sponsoring of terrorism has enabled terrorists to create their own agendas, making their attacks more unpredictable, deadlier and making retaliation by victimized groups all but impossible. Aum Shinri Kyo and Osama bin Laden are good examples that reveal the potential power of charismatic religious leaders can wield in turning any political or social grievance into an instrument for religious indoctrination of their followers. In this context, political Islam has been growing in prominence for over a decade, threatening not only the current setting of the international system, but secular government and the secular way of life in countries with majority of Muslim populations.

The information technology revolution, the collapse of the USSR, and the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) have increased the threats from terrorism. Increasing availability of deadly weapons, including WMDs, independent financial resources and know-how, has made real the threat of possible nuclear attacks by terrorists and the undermining of the ability of states to control WMDs. Once in the hands of terrorists, WMDs could cause a global chaos.

On the other hand, counter terrorism is taking an increasingly multilateral character – either through established international institutions, or through inter-state cooperation. Recognition that terrorism is a threat to the whole international system and that no country is immune from terrorists has changed perceptions about cooperation and interdependence in fields which were traditionally left to the initiative of sovereign states.

In addition, counter terrorism, as a legitimate struggle of states, is increasingly taking the form of war, where terrorists are viewed more as powerful enemies, rather than ordinary criminals. Although the focus of counter terrorism in liberal democracies remains intelligence gathering,

policing and judiciary action, military action, including use of air and sea arsenals has become more prevalent in the global war against terrorism. In the new millennium, the framework of NATO has proven to be the most effective framework of cooperative action against international terror. The international intervention in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq were all parts of a wider struggle against terrorists in addition to classical intelligence and special operations. Although military cooperation in the fight against terror is partial and has yet to fully evolve, even within NATO (as shown by the lack of a consensus in the case of Iraq), there is consensus regarding judicial cooperation between states and within the international system. International treaties and UN resolutions, bilateral agreements on extradition, exchange of intelligence and common police databases as well as cooperative border controls have rapidly evolved within the EU, North America and other regions. However, because the complexity of intergovernmental organizations prevents effective counterterrorism efforts, the last decades have been characterized by unilateral actions and limited coalitions led by the US and based on the individual interest of sovereign states.

Background to Islamic Terrorism and Al-Qaeda

When George Bush Sr. spoke about the New World Order following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, he never imagined the emergence of an enemy which would challenge US vulnerability on such a large scale, both on US soil and abroad. September 11 and what is probably the most difficult period in US history since Pearl Harbor was to be the fate of his son, US President, George W. Bush.

With its global network and men who possess the expertise and zeal necessary to execute deadly attacks, Al-Qaeda has become the main security threat of the United States and the international system. Al-Qaeda is currently one of the most powerful non-national global organizations in the world. In fact, its main achievement is the globalization of asymmetric warfare. The religious underpinnings of its agenda has enabled it to have a transnational and multiethnic character and the power to recruit different organizations and individuals which share similar objectives and private financing has provided resources it needs to stick to its own and not some patron's agenda.

There are four underlying processes which gave rise to Islam as a political ideology and hence to Islam as an inspiration for terrorist activities.

After the Six Day War in 1967, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 provided a crucial opportunity for the mobilization of a critical mass of Arabs in a joint cause. In stark contrast to their inability to effectively achieve their goals with regard to how the secular governments in the Middle East managed the crisis 12 years ago and their consequent dissatisfaction, Islamist volunteers were able to do things in Afghanistan on their own terms. The readiness of Arab volunteers to respond to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan on such a large scale suggests that organizations were already established and active on the ground prior to 1979. Their military success against the Soviet troops gave Islamist activists confidence that they could prevail in their own territory against an adversary as powerful as the United States.

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 served as an impetus for the rise of political Islam among Sunnis in Arab countries. Tehran's active support and sponsoring of terrorist groups in Lebanon and Israel empowered nationalist/religious groups vis-à-vis purely nationalist or ideological groups that relied on the support of the USSR.

The emergence of terrorist groups with transcendental agendas changed how the traditional terrorist struggle is viewed. Attacks became more inventive and deadly though the number of attacks decreased steadily throughout the nineties. Intelligence and criminal investigation became more difficult because the organizational nature of the terrorist groups changed remarkably. Instead of small recognizable groups organized in a strict hierarchical manner, the radical groups became a net of loosely connected similarly minded people. The Muslim veterans of the Afghan-Soviet war coalesced around a new cause, which is essentially opposition to their former sponsor, the United States. Islamic militancy is expanding and the worldwide pool of potential recruits for terrorist networks is growing. The so-called amateurs, whose attacks have been no less deadly, supplemented the work of professionals who represent the core of the terrorist structures, a combination that has proved much more difficult to track down.

Osama bin Laden's role in the creation of a global network of Islamic terrorists

Terrorist networks, private financing of terrorism and global proclamations of Jihad against the United States are all issues connected to the name of Osama bin Laden, who was considered "one of the most significant financial sponsors of Islamic extremist activities in the world" by the U.S. State Department's "Patterns of Global Terrorism" in 1997. Bin Laden was linked to the major terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, attacks on U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia and Somalia, bombing of the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the attack on the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen. Following the US invasion of Iraq, Al-Qaeda left its mark with the attacks in Istanbul (November 2003) and in Madrid (March 2004). Bin Laden has bankrolled between \$250 million to one billion worth of support to finance terrorist training camps in Sudan, Afghanistan and the Philippines and to finance the planning and execution of terrorist attacks, as well as to promote his terrorist campaign throughout the world. His role as a financier of terrorism is pivotal, experts say, because he has revolutionized the financing of extremist movements by forming and funding a global terror network running money through companies in the United States, Europe and the Middle East.

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, bin Laden created Al-Qaeda (The Base). Throughout the 1990s, bin Laden worked to spin a web of terrorist organizations around him predominantly composed of various "Afghan veterans." He also initiated an umbrella organization in Pakistan, which united the heads of terrorist organizations in June 1998 under the name "International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders." It included several other organizations such as Egyptian Al-Gama'at Al-Islamiyya, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and the Harakat ul-Ansar. In that meeting, according to bin Laden, a number of fatwas from prominent Islamic clerics and intellectuals from all over the world were issued against Jews and Americans.

Although there is still confusion over the exact character of Al-Qaeda,¹ whether it is the center of political Islam, a simple sponsor of widely dispersed terrorist groups, a private enterprise with wider political ambitions and goals, or an HQ of the global network of militant Islamists, there are several issues, which can be connected to it. In the first place, Al-Qaeda has managed to launch itself as the primary defender of the causes of political Islam. Second, Al-Qaeda has created a cohesive network of terrorists on a global scale, as opposed to regionally based organizations with fragmented agendas and limited operational capacities.

In this context, Al-Qaeda's broad objectives can be summed up as follows:

1. Isolation of the US from its traditional allies in the Middle East and in Europe
2. Disruption of the US led peacekeeping operation in Iraq
3. Prevention or disruption of progress in the Middle East Peace Process
4. Ousting of the US in the Middle East
5. Overthrowing of secular governments in the Arab and other majority Muslim countries replacing them with Islamic regimes
6. Destruction of Israel

9/11, the Invasion of Iraq and Al-Qaeda's Return to Center Stage

The September 11 attacks in New York and in Washington marked the beginning of a new phase in global terrorism. This has also had a crucial impact on the changing of the concept of the war on terror. The removal of the Taliban government in Afghanistan has deprived Al-Qaeda of a safe haven.² In addition to its military intervention in Afghanistan, the US has apprehended thousands of Al-Qaeda operatives, including some of the highest ranking and closest associates of bin Laden. Of the senior Al-Qaeda leaders, operational managers, and key facilitators the U.S. government has been tracking, nearly two-thirds have been taken into custody or killed.³ These efforts against senior Al-Qaeda leaders, including Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, the mastermind of 9/11, and Muhammad Atef, Osama bin Laden's second in command until his death in late 2001, have left gaping holes that the organization has yet to fill.⁴ The global anti-terror coalition that included both Pakistan and the new government in Kabul turned Al-Qaeda leaders into fugitives. This has apparently crippled Al-Qaeda's operational capability. In spite of numerous threats, not a single attack on hard US targets or its allies happened during the war to oust Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Bin Laden's public call for attacks against the Americans on 7 April 2003 fell on deaf ears, suggesting both a decrease in capacity and a change in how Al-Qaeda is perceived among potential terrorists. This boosted optimism that the determined and sustained fight against Al-Qaeda was succeeding.

¹ Bruce Hoffman, *Al-Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism and Future Potentialities: an Assessment* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2003).

² Brian Michael Jenkins, *Countering Al-Qaeda—an Appreciation of the Situation and Suggestions for Strategy* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2002).

³ "The White House Progress Report on the Global War on Terrorism," The US State Department (2003), <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rpt/24087.htm>.

⁴ Ibid.

However, by undertaking suicide bombings in three heavily-guarded Western housing compounds in Riyadh on May 12, 2003, Al-Qaeda made its point that not only was it not losing ground, but it was quickly consolidating its ranks with new recruits that have the same religious zeal as those that carried out the attacks on September 11. Al-Qaeda also showed that it was ready to redirect its attacks from so-called “soft” to the “hard” targets. The Riyadh bombing highlighted new tactics that relied on long-term planning and reconnaissance as well as large suicide assault teams to breach the existing fortifications.⁵

The US led-coalition against Saddam Hussein has created a serious gap within the international community, impacting effective cooperation in the fight against terrorism. The war on Saddam has raised significant controversy within the international community over the legality of the military intervention. A few NATO members and other countries have joined the US in its Iraq campaign, but the intervention has caused a serious political rift within the international system, affecting common action within the UN. The most important US allies are the United Kingdom, Spain and Turkey. In spite of the presence of numerous international militaries, the regime change in Iraq has created a fertile ground for Al-Qaeda’s activity due to the resultant power vacuum. After the ousting of Saddam Hussein, Iraq has turned into a place ruled by chaos, which Al-Qaeda and its affiliates aspire to exploit.⁶ In this new setting, Al-Qaeda has identified a battlefield that could serve as a base for rebuilding following the United States’ successful anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan.

The new strategy of Al-Qaeda, which includes infiltration of its operatives into Iraq, is two-fold. The first one consists of direct attacks against the US troops on the ground. The aim of these attacks is to continuously disturb and intimidate the troops on the ground, thus creating a political environment that sets the stage for wider alienation of the local population following the response of troops against the militants. The second aspect includes intimidation of the US allies by attacking civilian targets in the respective countries, to increase national opposition to support of the engagement in Iraq. While the first aspect of this strategy has a direct tactical impact on the success of the US operation and outside perceptions about the stabilization of Iraq, the second aspect has a wider, strategic and political impact, i.e. alienation of global public opinion against the US and its isolation in the international arena.

The final aim of Al-Qaeda is a repetition of Afghanistan following the Soviet defeat in 1989, when the international community left the war-shattered country to the mercy of post-conflict chaos. This strategy consists of inciting increasing domestic pressure among the US allies to abandon the coalition, weaken the US position and force it to withdraw from Iraq, “leaving the country in the hands of international terrorism.”⁷ The effects of such a strategy were seen to some extent in Spain following the March 11 bombings three days before Spanish Parliamentary elections. The attack was carried out by Abu Hafs Al-Masri, an Al-Qaeda affiliated organization. It is widely argued that the attack had a direct impact on the election results, causing the defeat of the pro-US government of the Popular Party.⁸ The new Spanish

⁵ Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Al-Qaeda after Iraq Conflict,” Congressional Research Service, (2003).

⁶ Fernando Reinares and Oscar Jaime-Jimenez, “Ante los desafíos del terrorismo,” *El País*, 21 March 2004.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Author’s interview with a NATO official, Prishtina, 17 March 2004.

Prime Minister-designate, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero from the Socialist Party announced the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq by June 2004 unless the current coalition acts under the United Nations banner.

Although weakened significantly, current strength of Al-Qaeda remains substantial. Attacked in its base in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia, Al-Qaeda has managed to maintain its decentralized network of affiliated organizations and sleepers who were trained in Afghan camps. The existence of the lateral network has enabled Al-Qaeda to mobilize affiliates such as IBDA-C and Abu Hafs Al-Masri to intimidate US allies worldwide. The number of Al-Qaeda members has been widely speculated upon and is sometimes exaggerated at upwards of 50,000 members. Four thousand members with a presence in Southeast Asia, the Caucasus, Europe, the Mediterranean and the American Continent with cells, either absorbed or affiliated, that are spread over 40 countries is a more realistic assessment of the extent of Al-Qaeda's network.⁹

In an interview with Time magazine at the beginning of 1999, bin Laden proclaimed his intention to intensify efforts to obtain non-conventional weapons. Bin Laden's efforts to obtain non-conventional weapons, in particular biological and chemical weapons, were amply documented in the past. Various reports also suggest that bin Laden has spent millions in his attempts to acquire nuclear weapons or to obtain enriched uranium, as well as to corrupt nuclear scientists.

The combination of a radical religious worldview, which views the conflict as a winner-takes-all game supported by scriptural decree, together with proven conventional, and potential non-conventional capabilities makes bin Laden's vendetta against the Western world extremely dangerous. However, no WMD has been used in their operational repertoire. At least until now, the Islamist groups are keeping to their more conservative methods and operational assets, which have nonetheless proved deadly and spectacular enough to shock the entire world. This suggests that Al-Qaeda is aware of possible consequences of US retaliation in case any kind of WMD is used, but it also indicates its determination to win a long-term goal through a protracted terrorist struggle.

Conclusion

It was reported that the recent joint action on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan between the US, Pakistan, France and the UK almost led to the capture of the founder of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. In spite of the possibility that he would be replaced by Sheikh Al-Zawahiri, we must ask ourselves whether bin Laden's elimination from Al-Qaeda will mean the end to Islamist extremists' global terrorist network. It should be underlined that Al-Qaeda is certainly set for a protracted terrorist struggle. Therefore, the war on global terrorism requires international solidarity, cooperation and other political, economic and peacemaking measures, especially in the Middle East Peace process to prevent the creation of new terrorists. The solution of the Palestinian question should be at the center of these efforts. Currently, the main battlefield against the international terrorism is in Iraq. With no cooperation in Iraq, the international community is risking a blow which is likely to result in

⁹ Fernando Reinares "España, Al Qaeda y el terrorismo global," *El Pais*, 15 March 2004.

the destabilization of the key states in the Middle East. A quick compromise at the Security Council about the transfer of power to a legitimate Iraqi government with the UN recognition and authorization of an international peacekeeping force should be the first step to counter the terrorist efforts for a take over in Iraq. Increased efforts for the renewal of the Middle East peace process by the US and the EU should go hand in hand with the inclusion of Arab countries into the global fight against international terrorism as it relates to militant Islamists. The model of Turkey and partly of Jordan or Indonesia indicate that the sharing of some common civil values regarding the rule of law and secular government might translate into successful cooperation in the fight against terrorism. However, unless the source of terror is resolved, there can be no successful war against international terrorism.