

The Status of al Qaeda: The Organization Today and the Outlook Over the Next Five Years

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Al Qaeda Today

It is conventional wisdom that al Qaeda the organization has been largely destroyed and an ideological movement inspired by al Qaeda has replaced it, spawning a new generation of “homegrown” or “self-starting” terrorists that have implemented attacks such as the one in Madrid in 2004 that killed 191 people.

The rapid spread of the al Qaeda ideological virus in the past several years should be cause for considerable concern, but it would be quite wrong to conclude that therefore the central al Qaeda organization is no longer a threat. Such a view underestimates the resiliency of al Qaeda, which is a criminal organization, animated by strong ideological/religious beliefs, which also draws strength from several local insurgencies such as those along the Afghan-Pakistan border, in Kashmir and in Iraq. Because of these ideological/religious beliefs and its ties to vibrant insurgencies, al Qaeda is able to withstand multiple blows to its leadership and infrastructure of the kind that would put an ordinary criminal organization, such as a Mafia crime family, out of business.

In fact, more than at any time since September 11, Osama bin Laden’s deadly organization is back in business.

Evidence for the resiliency of the al Qaeda organization

1. The London attacks of July 2005, and al Qaeda’s alarming reach into the United Kingdom

The London bombings on July 7, 2005 were a classic al Qaeda plot. A British government report published in 2006 explains that the ring-leader, Mohammed Siddique Khan, visited Afghanistan in the late 1990s and Pakistan on two occasions in 2003 and 2004, spending a total of several months in the country. The report goes on to note that Khan “had some contact with al Qaeda figures” in Pakistan, and is “believed to have had some relevant training in a remote part of Pakistan, close to the Afghan border” during his two-week visit in 2003. According to the report, Khan was also in “suspicious” contact with individuals in Pakistan in the four months immediately before he led the London attacks.

Further, Khan appeared on a videotape that aired on Al Jazeera television network two months after the attacks. On that tape Khan says, “I’m going to talk to you in a language that you understand. Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood.” He goes on to describe Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri as “today’s heroes.” Khan’s statements

were made on a videotape that bore the distinctive logo of As Sahab, "The Clouds," which is the television production arm of al Qaeda. Khan's appearance on the As Sahab videotape shows that he met with members of al Qaeda's media team who are based on the Afghan-Pakistan border. In 2006 a similar videotape of another one of the London suicide bombers appeared also made by As Sahab, further evidence of al Qaeda's role in the bombings.

The grim lesson of the London attack is that al Qaeda was able to conduct simultaneous bombings in a major European capital thousands of miles from its base on the Afghan-Pakistan border. While far from a 9/11-style attack, the London bombings showed the kind of planning and ability to hit targets far from its home base seen in pre-9/11 al Qaeda attacks such as the one mounted on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000. Al Qaeda has therefore recovered sufficient strength that it can now undertake multiple, successful bombings aimed at targets in the West.

Similarly, the plot that was foiled in the U.K. in August 2006 to bring down half a dozen American airliners with liquid explosives, an event that would have rivaled 9/11 in magnitude had it succeeded, was directed by al Qaeda from Pakistan, according to the January 2007 testimony of Lt. General Michael Maples, head of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency.

On November 5, 2007, Jonathan Evans, the head of Britain's domestic intelligence service MI5, said there were 2,000 individuals in the U.K. that the British government believed to be a threat to security. Evans noted that the "terrorist attacks we have seen against the U.K. are not simply random plots by disparate and fragmented groups. The majority of these attacks, successful or otherwise, have taken place because al Qaeda has a clear determination to mount terrorist attacks against the United Kingdom....Over the last five years much of the command, control and inspiration for attack planning in the U.K. have derived from al Qaeda's remaining core leadership in the tribal areas of Pakistan."

2. The vitality of al Qaeda's propaganda division, As Sahab

Bin Laden has observed that 90% of his battle is conducted in the media. Al Qaeda understands that what the Pentagon calls IO (Information Operations) are key to its successes. As Sahab's first major production debuted on the internet in the summer of 2001 signaling a major anti-American attack was in the works. Since then, As Sahab has continued to release key statements from al Qaeda's leaders and has significantly increased its output in the last year or so. In 2007 As Sahab released more audio and videotapes than any year in its six year history; at least eighty. These tapes are increasingly sophisticated productions with subtitles in languages such as English, animation effects and studio settings. As Sahab's increasingly sophisticated and regular output is evidence that al Qaeda has recovered to a degree that it is capable of managing a relatively advanced propaganda operation. That operation is unlikely to have a fixed studio location, but it does include a number of cameramen as well as editors using editing programs such as Final Cut Pro on laptops.

3. The continuing influence of bin Laden and Zawahiri

Bin Laden may no longer be calling people on a satellite phone to order attacks, but he remains in broad ideological and strategic control of al Qaeda around the world. An indicator of this is that in 2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the then-leader of foreign fighters in Iraq renamed his organization "Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers" and publicly swore bayat, a religiously binding oath of allegiance, to bin Laden.

Moreover, the dozens of video and audiotapes that bin Laden and Zawahiri have released since 9/11 have reached hundreds of millions of people worldwide through television, newspapers and the internet, making them among the most widely distributed political statements in history. Those tapes have not only had the effect of instructing al Qaeda's fol-

lowers to kill Americans, Westerners and Jews, but some tapes have also carried specific instructions that militant cells have acted upon. For instance, on October 19, 2003 bin Laden called for action against Spain because of its troop presence in Iraq, the first time that al Qaeda's leader had singled out the country. Six months later, terrorists killed 191 commuters in Madrid. And in the spring of 2004, bin Laden offered a three-month truce to European countries willing to pull out of the coalition in Iraq. Almost exactly a year after his truce offer expired, an al Qaeda-directed cell carried out bombings on London's public transportation system that killed 52 commuters. In December 2004, bin Laden called for attacks on Saudi oil facilities and in February 2006, al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia attacked the Abqaiq facility, arguably the most important oil production facility in the world. (That attack was a failure.)

4. Al Qaeda's influence in Iraq

For the moment, Al Qaeda in Iraq is a wounded organization. The number of foreign fighters coming in to Iraq has declined from 120 a month in 2007 to less than 40 today. According to the U.S. military, foreign fighters are now trying to leave the country.

However, future withdrawals of U.S. troops from Iraq will obviously help al Qaeda's ability to operate in the country. Al Qaeda also has a 'paper tiger' narrative about the United States based on American pullouts from Vietnam during the 1970s, Lebanon in the '80s and Somalia in the '90s. American draw downs from Iraq will be seen as confirming this narrative.

5. Al Qaeda continues to attract other militant groups to its standard

In addition to al Qaeda in Iraq stating on several occasions over the past three years that it takes overall direction from al Qaeda central, in September 2006 the Algerian Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) announced that it was putting itself under the al Qaeda umbrella. GSPC is considered the most significant terror-

ist movement in Algeria. Abu Musab Abdull Wadud, the leader of the GSPC explained that "the organization of al-Qaeda of Jihad is the only organization qualified to gather together the mujahideen."

6. The rapidly deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan over the past year is, at least in part, the responsibility of al Qaeda

The use of suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices and the beheadings of hostages—all techniques that al Qaeda perfected in Iraq—are methods that the Taliban has increasingly adopted in Afghanistan, making much of the south of the country a no-go area. Hekmat Karzai, an Afghan terrorism researcher points out suicide bombings were virtually unknown in Afghanistan until 2005 when there were 21 such attacks. U.S. sources say there were 139 suicide attacks in 2006.

Mullah Dadullah, a key Taliban commander gave two interviews to Al Jazeera in 2006 before he was killed, in which he made some illuminating observations about the Taliban's links to al Qaeda. Dadullah said, "We have close ties. Our cooperation is ideal," adding that Osama bin Laden is issuing orders to the Taliban. Indeed, a senior U.S. military intelligence official says that "trying to separate Taliban and al Qaeda in Pakistan serves no purpose. It's like picking gray hairs out of your head." Dadullah also noted that "we have 'give and take' relations with the mujahideen in Iraq."

7. Pakistan

To the extent that al Qaeda has a new base, it is in Pakistan. From there bin Laden and Zawahiri have released a stream of audio and videotapes. Evidence of al Qaeda's growing strength in Pakistan can also be seen in the advice and personnel it is offering the Taliban in its campaign of suicide attacks in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda today clandestinely operates small training camps in Pakistan, "People want to see barracks. [In fact] the camps use dry riverbeds for shooting and are

housed in compounds for 20 people where they are taught calisthenics and bomb making” says a senior U.S. military intelligence official.

The fact that Pakistan is the new training ground for al Qaeda recruits indicates that the organization will continue to be a significant threat. Terrorist plots have a much higher degree of success if some of the cell’s members have received training in bomb making and operational doctrine in person. For example, two of the London July 7, 2005 suicide bombers received al Qaeda training in Pakistan.

The future of al Qaeda over the next five years

1. The leadership

The single biggest variable about the future of al Qaeda is what happens to bin Laden. For six years he has already survived the most intense manhunt in history. It would be wishful thinking to believe that he won’t survive another five years. However, if he were to be captured or killed that would have a devastating effect on al Qaeda.

On several occasions bin Laden has said that he’s prepared to die in his holy war—statements that should be taken at face value. In the short-term, bin Laden’s death would likely trigger violent anti-American attacks around the globe, while in the medium-term, his death would deal a serious blow to al Qaeda as bin Laden’s charisma and organizational skills have played a critical role in its success. However, bin Laden does have eleven sons, some of whom might choose to go into their father’s line of work.

Should bin Laden be captured or killed, that would likely trigger a succession battle within al Qaeda. While Zawahiri is technically bin Laden’s successor, he is not regarded as a natural leader. Indeed, even among the Egyptians within al Qaeda, Zawahiri is seen as a divisive force. The loss of bin Laden would likely challenge the unity of the organization, a unity that al Qaeda’s internal documents indicate has often been fragile.

2. Haven on the Afghan-Pakistan border, and al Qaeda’s ideology and tactics increasingly being adopted by the Taliban

The Pakistani military and its intelligence agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have proven either unwilling or incapable or both of destroying al Qaeda and its Taliban allies in their country.

Unless the Pakistani government takes real action, safe havens that the Taliban and al Qaeda enjoy in Pakistan are unlikely to be extirpated unless there is a significant attack in the U.S. or U.K. that is traceable to the tribal areas, and subsequent intense political pressure from those countries results in the measures necessary to destroy the militant organizations and movements in Pakistan.

This has unfortunate implications for countries with large Pakistani diaspora populations such as the United Kingdom, whose citizens make 400,000 visits to Pakistan each year. A tiny minority of those visitors end up training with terrorist groups in Pakistan including al Qaeda. That problem is less pronounced in North America and Europe where Pakistanis make up a relatively small proportion of the Muslim population, but already in Spain and France, terrorism cases involving Pakistani immigrants are emerging.

In addition, the Taliban on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border are increasingly identified as the true guardian of Pashtun rights, but at the same time they have also increasingly adopted both al Qaeda tactics and ideology. As the Taliban and al Qaeda merge both tactically and ideologically, this could give al Qaeda a political constituency of sorts. This is worrisome as the Pashtun tribal grouping—the largest such grouping in the world—numbers some 40 million people on both sides of the border.

Further, should Afghanistan slide into chaos—at this moment a real possibility—that would also benefit al Qaeda as it would increase the number of safe havens along the border regions.

3. The influence of European militants in al Qaeda

The Islamist terrorist threat to the United States today largely emanates from Europe, not from domestic sleeper cells or—as is popularly imagined—the graduates of Middle Eastern madrassas who can do little more than read the Koran. Omar Sheikh, for instance, the kidnapper of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, is a British citizen of Pakistani descent who studied at the academically rigorous London School of Economics. The 9/11 pilots became more militant while they were students in Hamburg. Indeed, Robert Leiken of the Nixon Center has found that of 373 Islamist terrorists arrested or killed in Europe and the United States from 1993 through 2004 an astonishing 41 percent were Western nationals, who were either naturalized or second generation Europeans or converts to Islam. Leiken found more terrorists who were French than the combined totals of Pakistani and Yemeni terrorists!

Future terrorist attacks that will be damaging to American national security are therefore likely to have a European connection. Citizens of the European Union, who adopt al Qaeda's ideology, can both easily move around Europe and also have easy entry into the United States because of the Visa Waiver Program that exists with European countries.

The most likely perpetrators of another major terrorist attack on American soil come from an unexpected quarter: citizens of the United States' closest ally. Militant British citizens of Pakistani descent are the most significant terrorist threat facing the United States. Most of those arrested in the 2006 plot to bring down American airliners over the Atlantic, for instance, were young British Pakistanis.

4. Tactics and targeting al Qaeda will use in the future

a. Attacking Western economic targets, particularly the oil industry

Since the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda and its affiliated groups have increasingly attacked economic and business targets. The shift in tactics is in

part a response to the fact that the traditional pre-9/11 targets, such as American embassies, war ships, and military bases, are now better defended, while so-called 'soft' economic targets are both ubiquitous and easier to hit.

Al Qaeda and its affiliated terrorist groups are also increasingly targeting companies that have distinctive Western brand names. In 2003, suicide attackers bombed the Marriott hotel in Jakarta. The same year in Karachi, a string of small explosions at eighteen Shell stations wounded four, while in 2002 a group of a dozen French defense contractors were killed as they left a Sheraton hotel, which was heavily damaged. In October 2004 in Taba, Egyptian jihadists attacked a Hilton hotel. In Amman, Jordan in November 2005, Al Qaeda in Iraq attacked three American-owned hotels—the Grand Hyatt, Radisson and Days Inn—killing 60 people. Around the same time a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant was attacked in Karachi killing three.

Al Qaeda attacks on oil facilities accelerated sharply beginning in 2004. Suicide bombers struck Iraq's principal oil terminal in Basra on April 21, 2004. In Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, al Qaeda's Saudi Arabia affiliate attacked the offices of ABB Lummus Global, a contractor for Exxon/Mobil, on May 1, 2004 killing six Westerners. As noted above, in February 2006, al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia unsuccessfully attacked the Abqaiq facility, perhaps the most important oil production facility in the world. Al Qaeda will continue its attacks on oil installations, pipelines, and oil workers for the foreseeable future in both Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the two countries that happen to sit on the largest oil reserves in the world.

b. Attacking Israeli/Jewish targets

Attacking Jewish and Israeli targets is an al Qaeda strategy that has only emerged strongly post-9/11. Despite bin Laden's declaration in February 1998 that he was creating the "World Islamic Front against the Crusaders and the Jews," al Qaeda only started attacking Israeli or Jewish targets in early 2002. Since then, al

Qaeda and its affiliated groups have directed an intense campaign against Israeli and Jewish targets, killing journalist Daniel Pearl in Karachi, bombing synagogues in Tunisia and Turkey, and attacking an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, which killed thirteen. At the same time as the attack on the Kenyan hotel, al Qaeda also tried to bring down an Israeli passenger jet with rocket propelled grenades, an attempt that was unsuccessful. In the future, al Qaeda will likely intensify its campaign of attacking Jewish and Israeli targets.

5. Tactics that al Qaeda is likely to deploy in the next five years that it has hitherto not used successfully

There are two tactics that al Qaeda might successfully deploy in the next five years that for differing reasons would have significant detrimental effects on American interests. Both tactics are well within the capabilities of the organization so they do not represent Chicken Little scenarios (such as the use of nuclear devices).

The first tactic is the use of RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades) or SAMs (Surface to Air Missiles) to bring down a commercial jetliner. As mentioned above, al Qaeda already attempted such an attack against an Israeli passenger jet in Kenya in 2002. That attempt almost succeeded. A successful effort by al Qaeda to bring down a commercial passenger jet anywhere in the world would have a devastating effect on both global aviation and tourism.

The second tactic would be the deployment of a radiological bomb attack, most likely in a European city. Such an attack would have a much greater ability to terrorize than the small-scale chemical and biological attacks that terrorists have mounted in the past, as it would seem to most observers that the terrorists had “gone nuclear” even though, of course, a radiological bomb is nothing like a nuclear device.

6. Al Qaeda’s strategy over the next five years

As al Qaeda’s number two, Ayman al Zawahiri, explained shortly after 9/11 in his autobiographical *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, the most important strategic goal of al Qaeda is to seize control of a state, or part of a state, somewhere in the Muslim world. He writes, “Confronting the enemies of Islam, and launching jihad against them require a Muslim authority, established on a Muslim land that raises the banner of jihad and rallies the Muslims around it. Without achieving this goal our actions will mean nothing.” Such a jihadist state would then become a launching pad for attacks on the American homeland. We have seen al Qaeda do this once before in Afghanistan. Now the goal is to establish a jihadist mini-state in Iraq, in the heart of the Middle East, rather than on the periphery of the Muslim world as al Qaeda was able to do under the Taliban. This will be al Qaeda’s main strategic goal for the next few years.

Another key goal will be to maintain their base on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Al Qaeda seeks a safe haven that replicates some of the features of its Afghan haven before the fall of the Taliban. The tribal areas along Pakistan’s western border are proving a congenial place for al Qaeda to regroup.

Al Qaeda’s aim in the next five years will also be to stay relevant and to stay in the news. The organization will be opportunistic in spinning hot-button issues for Muslims around the world for their purposes, as they did during the Danish cartoon controversy and the month-long conflict in Lebanon in 2006.

It is possible that al Qaeda may also seek to aim more attacks at Christians in the coming years. Attacks on the Pope both verbal and literal should be expected.

The situation in Darfur is also likely to be a flashpoint. Al Qaeda seems to view western humanitarian interventions in Darfur in the

same way as it viewed the humanitarian mission in Somalia in the early '90s—as a western attempt to colonize Muslim lands. Al Qaeda fighters are likely to become embroiled in the Darfur conflict in the next few years.

7. Will al Qaeda (rather than “homegrown” terrorists) be able to attack the United States itself in the next five years?

In my view it is a low-level probability that al Qaeda will be able to attack the U.S. in the next five years.

In the past, when al Qaeda terrorists have tried or succeeded to launch attacks in the United States they have done so only after arriving from somewhere else. Ahmed Ressaam for instance, who lived in Canada before he tried to blow up Los Angeles International airport in December 1999, was an Algerian who had trained with al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Similarly, the nineteen 9/11 hijackers hailed from countries around the Middle East. Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind of the first World Trade Center attack in 1993 that killed six, was a Pakistani who had also trained in an al Qaeda camp. None of these attackers relied on al Qaeda “sleeper cells” in the U.S. and there is no evidence that such cells exist today. Moreover, the U.S. is a much harder target than it was before 9/11, and the ability of an al Qaeda terrorist to enter the country and mount a successful operation has been greatly diminished by U.S. government actions, the heightened awareness of the American public, and the weaker state of al Qaeda itself. This is not, however, to imply that American homegrown terrorists inspired by al Qaeda might not carry out a small-bore terror attack inside the United States in the next five years.

Of course, al Qaeda itself remains quite capable of attacking a wide range of American economic interests overseas, killing U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, and targeting U.S. diplomatic facilities in Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East.

8. Al Qaeda’s long-term strategic weaknesses and the extent to which they may weaken the group over the next five years

a. Al Qaeda keeps killing Muslims civilians

This is a double whammy for al Qaeda as the Koran forbids killing civilians and fellow Muslims. Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia lost a great deal of support after its campaign of attacks in 2003 that killed mostly Saudis. Ten percent of Saudis have a favorable view of the al Qaeda terrorist network, according to a survey released in December 2007 by Terror Free Tomorrow, an international public opinion research group based in Washington. Similarly, in Indonesia where Jemaah Islamiyah, the al Qaeda affiliate, has killed mostly Indonesians in its attacks over the past four years the militants have lost any vestiges of support they once enjoyed. Popular revulsion also followed al Qaeda in Iraq’s 2005 attacks against the three American-owned hotels in Amman, Jordan that killed mostly Jordanians.

b. Al Qaeda has not created a genuine mass political movement

While bin Laden enjoys personal popularity in much of the Muslim world that does not translate into mass support for al Qaeda in the manner that Hezbollah enjoys such support in Lebanon. That is not surprising—there are no al Qaeda social welfare services, schools, hospitals or clinics. Even al Qaeda’s leaders are aware of the problem of their lack of mass support. In a 2005 letter from Zawahiri to Zarqawi, al Qaeda’s number two urged the terrorist leader in Iraq to prepare for the U.S. withdrawal from the country by not making the same mistakes as the Taliban, who had alienated the masses in Afghanistan.

c. Al Qaeda’s leaders have constantly expanded their list of enemies

Al Qaeda has said it is opposed to all Middle Eastern regimes; Muslims who don’t share their views; the Shia; most Western countries; Jews and Christians; the governments of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Russia; most news organizations; the United Nations; and interna-

tional nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It's very hard to think of a category of person, institution, or government that al Qaeda does not oppose. Making a world of enemies is never a winning strategy.

d. Al Qaeda has no positive vision

We know what bin Laden is against, but what is he really for? If you asked him he would say the restoration of the caliphate. In practice that means Taliban-style theocracies stretching from Indonesia to Morocco. A silent majority of Muslims don't want that. An interesting poll in Saudi Arabia in 2003 gets to this. In that poll 49% of Saudis admired bin Laden, while only 5% wanted to live in a bin Laden-run state. Many Muslims admire bin Laden because he "stood up" to the West. That doesn't mean they want to live in bin Laden's Islamist utopia. Sudan under Turabi, Afghanistan under the Taliban, and Iran under the ayatollahs don't look very attractive to most Muslims.

The four strategic weaknesses of al Qaeda I have just considered have already led to declining support both for bin Laden and for terrorist attacks on civilians in a number of Muslim countries. However, although these long-term tragic weaknesses will damage al Qaeda over time, they are unlikely to have a significant impact on the group over the next five years because al Qaeda is drawing energy, support and new recruits from insurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan—conflicts that are likely to go on for longer than five years. In an authoritative study of 91 insurgencies in the past century, Seth Jones of the Rand organization found that it takes 14 years for the government to win against the insurgency, and 11 years for the insurgents to win against the government. Either way, we are in for protracted conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Those conflicts will energize and fuel al Qaeda over the next five years.