



-Public Lecture-

The Current and Future Status of Al Qaeda and Associated Movements: Implications for Southeast Asia

Mr. Thomas Sanderson

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About Thomas Sanderson

Thomas Sanderson is deputy director and senior fellow in the CSIS Transnational Threats Project. His work focuses on terrorism, intelligence, and information sharing; U.S. national security policy; and global threats and trends. He is a regular media commentator and serves as a terrorism course instructor and private consultant for the U.S. government and the private sector.

Sanderson was formerly a defense analyst with Science Applications International Corporation, where he conducted extensive studies of terrorist groups for the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Office of Counterterrorism Analysis.



The Current and Future Status of Al Qaeda and Associated Movements: Implications for Southeast Asia¹

**1 November 2011 (Tuesday)
Pisces & Aquarius Room, Level 1, Marina Mandarin Hotel**

Thomas Sanderson presented the findings of the recently-published Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report *Confronting an Uncertain Threat*. According to the report, Al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) have transformed from a centralized hierarchical organization in Afghanistan to an increasingly diffused security threat, which is growing in prominence. To counter this threat effectively, counterterrorism efforts must be more anticipatory.

The report aimed to fill this need for anticipatory knowledge and assist in the development of improved counterterrorism policies and strategy by providing policymakers and practitioners with critical information on where and how future AQAM threats are likely to emerge. Sanderson also noted that the report's findings had implications for Southeast Asian counterterrorism efforts.

The key elements of the report's methodology included a baseline assessment of AQAM, case studies, field research, and the expertise of a Senior Advisory Group. The chosen case studies included Al Qaeda core, Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Shabaab, Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf Group, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals. Sanderson explained that the final product consisted of four components: future environment; future paradigms; strategic surprises; followed by the conclusion and policy recommendations.

In trying to understand how the future of AQAM would develop, Sanderson pointed out several external drivers that would influence global change in the future: demographics, scarcity of natural resources, shifts in the global balance of power, technological innovation, interconnectivity, and changing perceptions of personal identity. These global factors would not only increase the challenge of governance but could also impact AQAM in a myriad of ways.

In the second component an inductive approach was used to explore five potential paradigms, each describing a distinct vision of AQAM's evolution through 2025. The paradigms are as follows: (1) AQAM as a core-driven movement; (2) AQAM as an affiliate-driven movement; AQAM as a movement driven by lone wolves; AQAM becomes a state actor; or AQAM collapses. Sanderson shared that the intent behind each scenario was not to describe the exact future of AQAM but to provide

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policymakers and practitioners key factors that might drive a future manifestation of the movement along a similar track.

The third component explored strategic shocks, in other words discontinuities that might fundamentally alter the geopolitical landscape. Among the strategic shocks noted were: AQAM detonates a nuclear device; Pakistani and Saudi Arabian governments fall to radical forces and pose a dual threat to the global system; right-wing extremists foment widespread violence against Muslim communities in Europe; Israel and Iran go to war; Palestinians achieve statehood and Arab states recognize Israel; the dissolution of OPEC combined with advances in hydrocarbon technology marginalize key oil- and gas-exporting states; and AQAM strikes China. These potential departures from the broader assumptions about the future environment could alter any one of the projections of AQAM's evolution.

In the conclusion, the analytical inputs from the first three components were distilled to produce the key factors most likely to impact the broader AQAM movement through 2025. These key factors – charismatic leadership, availability of safe havens, success in networking among different AQAM-affiliated groups, rapid and continued growth of information and communication technology, and success in maintaining the groups' ideological resonance – were accounted for in the formation of policy recommendations.

Taking into consideration the futility of attempting to predict accurately and specifically what AQAM would look like in 2025, the report recommended multifaceted policies sufficiently flexible to address a highly uncertain future. As curbing the spread of radicalization was understood to have a limiting effect on the spread of terrorism, recommendations also focused on countering not only terrorism but violent extremism as well.

Among the steps suggested to undermine the AQAM's operation capabilities and its ideological message, was the concept of global over-watch. This strategy would involve increasing operational and analytical education and training, particularly in-country, of U.S. regional experts across a wider range of countries, in order to maximize policy options that can address emerging threats and concerns. Denial of leadership by apprehending and neutralizing key leaders along with denial of networking by targeting, deterring, dissuading, and even co-opting the external networks AQAM relies on should remain important components of any counterterrorism strategy. Localized reforms to deny safe havens and strategic measures to deny AQAM's toxic narrative need to be in place. Lastly, Sanderson noted the importance of regional frameworks and non-traditional partnerships as well as the need to craft counterterrorism policies that are both effective and cost-efficient.

Discussion:



In response to the question on whether the threat of Al Qaeda and associated movements have increased or decreased, it was pointed out that ten years ago the threat essentially came from one group. Today Sanderson believes the threat has increased as it is diffused, dynamic, and the lone wolves are almost impossible to stop, as they need to make really significant mistakes for them to not succeed. He observed that these affiliates are quite self-sufficient and carry out very disruptive activities locally. Conversely, Bin Laden may have been able to weave in the hybridization of global jihad, but ultimately these are local battles and there will be local solutions to them.

Replying to a query on the impact of state response to terrorism, Sanderson noted that in the case of the U.S. in Iraq, despite excellent work in degrading or stopping different terrorist groups or individuals in their activities the state has made some real mistakes, which has contributed to the creation of more terrorists. However on a more positive note, he pointed out that the U.S. view and response towards the threat had become more refined especially towards the end of the Bush administration and continues to improve under the Obama administration.

There was interest in how a Palestine and Israel two state solution would affect AQAM, to which Sanderson replied that the challenge for AQAM would lie in what their next move should be if leading Arab Muslim states start recognizing Israel as well as the impact on AQAM's key narrative that the "Palestinians are stateless" and hence Israel should not be recognized.

Asked to rank the five potential scenarios through 2025 in order of likelihood, Sanderson shared that notions of a resurgent Al Qaeda core or AQAM as a quasi state-like actor are less likely. AQAM dissolving as a network would be in the middle in terms of probability. He believed that the lone wolves and the affiliates leading the movement were most likely scenarios.

Queries were raised on one of the recommendations, namely to deny AQAM's narrative. Sanderson replied that as the U.S. in particular becomes more involved in constructive international engagement, the notion of the U.S. and its allies as hegemonic is gradually waning. By supporting the Arab Spring the U.S. has shown that their values match their national security priorities and interests: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, transparent voting, gender equality, and this becomes very powerful against AQAM's narrative. On the point of whether the best way to defeat AQAM's narrative is through internal encirclement of the Al Qaeda global jihad ideology, Sanderson noted that having groups or individuals within the worldwide Muslim communities lead the denial of the AQAM narrative is another significant way to counter AQAM's narrative.