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HOW THE AL-QAEDA SURVIVES: A YEAR AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

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Al Qaeda Al Sulbah (“The Solid Base”) headed by the Saudi Arabian, Osama bin Laden, is a multinational terrorist group. It has a membership of 3000 and linkages with two-dozen Islamist groups. While Al Qaeda’s training infrastructure was destroyed as a result of the US attacks on Afghanistan since October 2001, the group is far from finished. Post 9-11, Al Qaeda had attempted but failed to bomb US, UK, Australian and Israeli diplomatic missions in Singapore; a US warship at Changi Naval Base; US and British warships in the Straits of Gibraltar; and to poison the water supply of the US embassy in Rome. Besides the attempt by Richard Reid, the shoe bomber, to destroy an airline over the Atlantic, Al Qaeda also tried to bomb the US embassy and American cultural centre in Paris and attack the US base in Sarajevo. An Al Qaeda-Sudanese member fired a surface to air missile at a US warplane taking off from the Prince Sultan airbase in Saudi Arabia in December 2001. To instigate Islamists to strike Jewish targets worldwide, an Al Qaeda Tunisian suicide bomber in a LPG driven vehicle rammed Africa’s oldest Jewish Synagogue, killing 14 German tourists and 5 Tunisians in *Djerba*, Tunisia on April 11, 2002. Al Qaeda’s front The Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Sites claimed responsibility for the attack and Abdel Azeem Al Muhajir, Al Qaeda military commander, confirmed it as an Al Qaeda operation.

Changes in Infrastructure and Network

Although Al Qaeda operational cells have been disrupted in France, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain and in the UK, Al Qaeda support cells disseminating propaganda, raising funds, recruiting members, procuring supplies and mounting surveillance on intended targets are still active. Its collaborators, supporters and sympathisers are filling the leadership vacuum created by the first wave of arrest of Al Qaeda leaders in Europe immediately after 9-11. The post-9-11 Al Qaeda cells are more clandestine, compact and self-contained, and therefore harder to detect and disrupt. Thus, Western societies and their governments will face a long-term continuous threat from Al Qaeda.

Since September 11, the Taliban and Al Qaeda have been able to replace losses in the rank and file by promoting middle level and junior leaders as well as by fresh recruitment. To compensate for the loss of state support of Pakistan for the Taliban, Mullah Omar has established Lashkar-e-Omar - a covert network of support organisations in Pakistan to sustain a low intensity campaign in Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. By instigating its associate groups in Kashmir – Harakat-ul Mujahidin and Jayash-e-Mohammad to intensify the violence in Kashmir, Taliban forced Pakistan to re-deploy its troops from the Afghan border

to the India-Pakistan border. With the increased porosity of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, Taliban and Al Qaeda have re-established lines of communication, supplies and recruits in Pakistan. Both Taliban and Al Qaeda as well as other associate groups are harnessing the Islamist communities in Pakistan and overseas (both territorial and migrant) to ensure a revival in support (encouragement, funds, supplies) necessary for survival and sustenance. Conflicts of “international neglect” where Muslims are suffering – Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Maluku, Mindanao, Algeria and others are ensuring continuity of support. After the first three months of confrontation, there are no signs of mass desertions from Taliban or Al Qaeda indicating the high morale of the rank and file.

Due to the difficulty of operating in the post 9-11 environment, Al Qaeda has delegated many of its responsibilities to other Islamist groups operating under the Al Qaeda-umbrella. Al Qaeda is operating through a number of groups with which it had shared training, financial and operational infrastructure in Afghanistan. This phenomenon is most visible in Pakistan, beginning with the massacre of the Christians in Bhawalpur in the Punjab in October 2001. Al Qaeda associate groups have also staged a number of attacks such as the murder of the US journalist Daniel Pearl and bombing of a church in Islamabad killing a US diplomat’s wife and daughter and suicide bombing of 11 Frenchmen and 12 Pakistanis in Karachi on May 18, 2002. Another suicide vehicle bomb attack by an associate group of Al Qaeda against the US Consulate in Karachi on June 14, 2002, injured one US marine and killed 11 Pakistanis. Using the same type of vehicle, they also targeted President Musharraf on April 26 but the remote control for detonating the explosives-laden vehicle failed to activate.

Objectives

The Taliban-Al Qaeda combined strategy is to install a regime that is friendly to the Islamists in Pakistan, or at least neutral to the Islamists. As such, they are likely to target Musharraf repeatedly until he is killed or removed from office. Al Qaeda also mounted a clandestine operation to assassinate President Hamid Karzai or cabinet ministers. Although both an Afghan and a foreigner in an explosive (Semtex)-laden Toyota were arrested in the centre of Kabul on July 29, 2002 after a traffic accident, this writer had predicted that the group would try a second time. The truck bomb attack in Kabul on 5 September, which killed 30 Afghans, and the attempted assassination of President Karzai in Kandahar the same day, confirmed this prediction.

The United States, which it calls the “head of the poisonous snake,” remains the principal target of Al Qaeda. As Osama said in an interview with Al-Jazeera’s Kabul correspondent on October 21, 2001, “The battle has moved to inside America. We will continue this battle, God permitting, until victory or until we meet God.” Until the US intelligence agencies infiltrate terrorist groups, a task that cannot be accomplished in the short term (1-2 years), it is reasonable to assume that the US is as vulnerable as it was before 9-11. The governments that assist the US in its campaign in Afghanistan as well as the governments that have disrupted Al Qaeda cells on their soil have earned the wrath of Al Qaeda, e.g. Singapore and Pakistan.

Al Qaeda is constrained from launching another large-scale attacks such as 9-11, but is still able to conduct small and medium scale attacks. With unprecedented security, intelligence and law enforcement cooperation and heightened public alertness, Al Qaeda is unable to engage in extensive and long range planning and preparation across more than one

country, a pre-requisite for conducting coordinated simultaneous attacks. Nonetheless, once Al Qaeda identifies the gaping holes in the post-9-11 security architecture, its “super cells” are likely to plan, prepare and execute another mass casualty attack. Other options, from “going to sleep” or hibernating, to taking opportunity targets and tasking other groups, are also being considered. Of the dozen/medium and small-scale attacks conducted by Al Qaeda and its associate groups against US, Allied and Coalition targets worldwide only a fraction has been successful. Al Qaeda has learnt that they have failed due to tighter international especially US security countermeasures and hurried Al Qaeda planning. Nonetheless, Al Qaeda ideology ensures that, like a revengeful and a retaliatory wounded animal, the group is determined to strike back.

Changes in Leadership

Despite having lost its key leaders such as its military commander Mohommad Atef alias Abu Hafs, Al Qaeda still retains a core and penultimate leadership, which provides the strategic and tactical direction that is still intact.

Mullah Omar, the leader of Taliban and the former head of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, has assumed the principal responsibility to fight the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden himself has pledged loyalty and allegiance to his leadership. After re-establishing communication with the scattered units of the Taliban, Mullah Omar regrouped them along secure areas of the 1520-mile long Afghanistan-Pakistan border. With the deterioration of the health of Osama bin Laden, his deputy Dr Ayman Al-Zawahiri is playing a more substantial role in Al Qaeda support and operational activities both inside and outside Afghanistan.

Change in Tactics

Al Qaeda has changed tactics in response to the new situation after its eviction from Afghanistan: To topple Karzai in Afghanistan and Musharaff in Pakistan, Al Qaeda has established networks of collaborators, supporters and sympathisers in both these countries. To coordinate and conduct operations Al Qaeda is seeking to re-establish communication with its associate groups and command cells respectively. Al Qaeda is establishing linkages with its affiliate NGOs and other charities overseas. With the failure of Al Qaeda to strike tactical US, Allied and coalition targets worldwide after 9-11, the group is considering reverting to both tactical and strategic targets. The group is also considering revisiting both the maritime and the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) scenarios, options Al Qaeda considered over the years. For instance, Osama paid USD 1.5 million to a Sudanese military officer to purchase a Uranium canister from South Africa, but the group was sold an externally radiated canister.

Although it still claims to be the “spearhead of Islam” and the “pioneering vanguard of the Islamic movements,” Al Qaeda has instigated a wider constituency of groups and individuals to take on the fight against non-believers. Radical Islamist groups are considering a range of options – arson, shooting, throwing grenades, and exploding Improvised Explosive Devices against Jewish, Christian and Hindu targets. The Islamists continue to inspire and instigate violence against “the enemies of Islam”, “the infidels” and the “unbelievers” both by word of mouth and in over 1000 sites on the worldwide web.

Conclusion

As long as the leadership of Al Qaeda survives, the group itself will survive. Furthermore, the radical Islamist community both in the Muslim countries and in the West that provide the bulk of the recruits, finance and other forms of support, is still unharmed. As the focus of the coalition is largely military, the robust Islamist ideology of Al Qaeda – that has gone unchallenged – is ensuring the survival of the group. Al Qaeda is replenishing its human losses (killed, captured, arrested) and material wastage (weapons and other supplies) both inside and outside Afghanistan. As a result, Al Qaeda's global network – with members drawn from at least 40 countries and active in 94 countries – is still functional, including its operatives in Europe and in the UK.

The Al Qaeda phenomenon demonstrates that the challenge of post-modern terrorism cannot be met only by military means and only by a few committed states. If Al Qaeda as an organisation is to be disrupted, destroyed and degraded, it is critical for the US to build a truly multipronged, multidimensional, multiagency and multinational response.

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