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Al Qaeda: The Evolution of the Long War and the Rise of Homegrown Terrorism

The word “terrorism” has taken on an escalated menace as Islamist militant groups have engaged in terrorist operations to cause high casualty rates in complex, well-orchestrated attacks. Attacks such as September 11, the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2004 Madrid bombings, the 2005 London bombings and the 2008 Mumbai siege were all catastrophic in terms of physical damage and loss of life. These events also became massive media events that ensured that the Islamic extremists behind the attacks remained in the spotlight for months, if not years — which effectively publicized their ideologies and objectives.

However, attacks do not have to be on a colossal scale to be considered acts of terror. In a telling statement from the October 2009 Echo of Battle, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leader Nasir al-Wahayshi advocated using simple attacks against a variety of targets. This is not a novel idea, but it is significant that al-Wahayshi supported this concept at this time when the al Qaeda core was perceived to be unraveling. Since that time, al-Wahayshi’s group has been linked to Major Nidal Malik Hasan and the Fort Hood shooting, the attempt to destroy Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on December 25, 2009, and the June 1, 2009 attack against a United States armed forces recruitment center in Little Rock, Arkansas. The recent arrests of Colleen LaRose, a.k.a. “Jihad Jane,” and New Jersey resident Sharif Mobley — both accused of terrorist activities in support of al Qaeda — highlight the emerging trend of homegrown al Qaeda affiliates. This issue of The Lipman Report® will examine the evolution of al Qaeda’s “Long War” against the West and discuss the rise in the “Lone Wolf” and homegrown affiliate threats.

A History of Domestic Terrorism

Contrary to popular perception, the phenomenon of terrorism does not belong to any set ideology or group. Nor did it arise from foreign insurgents, such as al Qaeda. In fact, the majority of terrorist attacks within the United States over the past century were organized and carried out by domestic groups. These attacks were mainly small, non-catastrophic events that were often no more violent or consequential than a common criminal act. What defined them as terrorist attacks was the fact that they were politically motivated.

Domestic militants are just as dangerous as al Qaeda, and their “Lone Wolf” activities are equally difficult to uncover prior to an attack. Timothy McVeigh, who bombed the Federal Building in Oklahoma City — killing

168 people — was a “Lone Wolf” who belonged to no organization but carried out the most damaging terrorist attack on American soil prior to 9/11. The Black Liberation Army, the Earth Liberation Army, anarchist groups and anti-abortion groups have also been frequent perpetrators of terrorist attacks within the United States. And in April 2009, the Department of Homeland Security produced a report warning of a rising threat of right-wing terrorism, citing factors such as economic troubles, the election of an African-American president and perceived threats to United States sovereignty. One example is the recently indicted paramilitary entity called the Hutaree, part of a group of apocalyptic Christian militants who plotted to kill law enforcement officers in the hopes of sparking an antigovernment uprising. These “patriot” movement groups are race-based “hate” groups, extremist anti-immigrant groups, Christian militants and other variations. They are predisposed to violence, as recently witnessed by anti-government, right-wing militant Joseph Stack, who flew his airplane into an IRS building in Austin, Texas, on February 18, 2010, and similarly motivated John Patrick Bedell, who launched a one-man attack on the Pentagon on March 4, 2010.

Al Qaeda and the Long War

Although terrorist attacks do not need to have foreign associations, most that occurred around the world over the past two decades have been linked to radical Islamists based in the Middle East and South Asia. “Takfiri Hiraba,” or “terror insurgency on society” — the basis of al Qaeda’s existence — seeks to destabilize, wear down and capitalize on Western patience and expenditure of capital. Osama bin Laden has termed this endeavor the “Long War” — signifying that he views his insurgency as a multi-decade war.

While the physical war surges forward, the war for the hearts of millions of new recruits is being waged on the battlefield of the mind. Alarming, the overt and covert communications strategy of al Qaeda has been excellent. Radical extremists have promoted their missions and goals with clear, simple examples of sacrifice and stories of romance to their local and international constituency. Bin Laden realized the vision of creating a radical community of militants and was fully aware of how his predecessors — such as Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid and Mohammed Qutb, and Ayman al-Zawahiri — had dramatically influenced many young men in the Muslim world. Bin Laden set about using the kind of street level

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communications popular in Islamic missionary work, such as university lectures, public speeches and cassette tape recordings of speeches and readings. In the mid-1990s when the Internet was new, many audio clips and voiced-over videotaped recordings were converted to digital files and posted publicly on Web sites in English, Arabic and Urdu. Some became extremely popular with international students and adventurers who desired the romantic life of the hard-grizzled Afghan resistance fighter. It is in this arena that al Qaeda and Islamic fanaticism have been inarguably successful — with new recruits surfacing one way or another on an almost weekly basis.

Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda aim to re-establish a New Islamic Caliphate. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ended the last Islamic Caliphate — stewarded by the Ottoman Empire — in 1924. Bin Laden's ultimate aim is to fight for and create a New Islamic State, centered in Afghanistan and Pakistan and in possession of nuclear weapons. A future New Islamic Caliphate with Pakistan's atomic weapons could dramatically speed up the process of creating the bin Laden version of a new Islam.

Recent History of the Evolution of Modern Terrorism

The modern iteration of the jihadist phenomenon that resulted in the formation of al Qaeda was conceived in the rugged mountainous area along the Afghan-Pakistani border. This was a remote region — not only filled with refugees and militants from all over the globe — but awash with weapons, spies, fundamentalist Islam and intrigue. This area proved ideal for the formation of modern jihadism following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989. However, the region was soon convulsed with Muslim-on-Muslim violence and civil war, and in 1992 — in the midst of this chaos — al Qaeda began to move many of its people to Sudan, which had a heavy Islamist bent following a 1989 coup. During this period, al Qaeda continued operating established training camps in Afghanistan. The group also maintained its network of Pakistani safe houses in places like Karachi and Peshawar, used to direct prospective jihadists from overseas to training camps in Afghanistan. Following the June 1995 attempt to assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, an attack linked to Egyptian militants and al Qaeda, the international community — including Egypt and the United States — began to place heavy pressure on the government of Sudan to either control bin Laden and al Qaeda or eject them from the country. Consequently, bin Laden and his followers

returned to Afghanistan in 1996, fortuitous timing as the Taliban were then preparing for their final push on Kabul, bringing Islamic stability to the Afghan region.

The remote region of eastern and northeastern Afghanistan, bordered by the Pakistani badlands and a long way from the ocean and the reach of American power, provided a fertile ground in which to operate. Al Qaeda's stay in Afghanistan was briefly interrupted by a United States cruise missile attack in 1998, following the bombings of two United States embassies in East Africa that killed 223 people. However, this ineffective cruise missile attack only served to demonstrate the limited arm of the United States, and al Qaeda was able to operate largely unimpeded in Afghanistan until the United States invasion of that country in October 2001. During its time in Afghanistan, al Qaeda was able to provide basic military training to tens of thousands of men who passed through its training camps. The camps also provided advanced training in terrorist tradecraft to a smaller number of selected students.

In 2001, however, when Afghanistan once again became a place of active combat, the training camps there were destroyed or relocated across the border to the mountains of Pakistan. Many jihadists fled to their countries of origin, while others followed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Iraq. Pakistan's rugged Pashtun belt proved a welcoming refuge for jihadists, but then United States air strikes turned this area into a dangerous place. Al Qaeda became fractured and hunted. Many important operational leaders were killed or captured, while others went deep underground to stay alive.

Finding a New Jihadist Base

The borderlands of Pakistan continue to be a focal point for jihadists, but increasing pressure from United States and Pakistani military operations have forced many foreign jihadists to leave this region for safer locations, such as Algeria, Yemen and Somalia. Al Qaeda's central leadership continues to lie low, and groups such as the Taliban, AQAP and the Maghreb have taken over the leadership of the jihadist struggle on the physical battlefield. Yemen became a destination owing to its conservative Muslim tradition and tribal and warrior culture. Abu Musab al-Suri, a well-known jihadist strategist and so-called "architect of global jihad" tried unsuccessfully in 1989 to convince bin Laden to relocate to Yemen precisely because of its favorable "human terrain." Another destination eyed by jihadists is Somalia, also a conservative Muslim nation with a tribal

and warrior tradition, and a primary and central shipping area — a connector to the Straits of Hormuz. Al Qaeda is reportedly interested in establishing a base in Somalia from which to launch attacks outside the country. The Somali government is unstable and controls little more than a few neighborhoods in Mogadishu. Local violence between Muslims could prove to be detrimental, as occurred in Afghanistan in 1992. However, within Somalia, Salafi jihadist groups have come to power, and one of them — a radical youth militia known as al Shabab — now controls most of Somalia's southern half and has established links with al Qaeda.

A rising concern is the increasing numbers of alienated members of the Somali diaspora that seem to be embracing terrorism. Somali nationals were arrested in Minnesota in early 2009 after returning from fighting alongside al Shabab. In August, two Somalis were arrested in Melbourne, Australia, for planning a major suicide attack on an Australian army installation. And the first known American citizen to carry out a suicide attack actually did so in Somalia in October 2008. Even more recently, in April 2010, it was reported that Somalis with ties to al Qaeda are believed to be plotting to illegally enter the United States after being mistakenly released from custody in Mexico. These isolated incidents are of particular concern in light of the recent arrests of several Americans who were accused of cooperating with various al Qaeda elements around the world.

The Improbable and the Common Denominator

A series of improbable and ominous developments in the annals of al Qaeda activities have occurred since the beginning of 2010. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Leon Panetta voiced these concerns before the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence by stating that worry over the possibility that, "al Qaeda and its terrorist allies and affiliates could very well attack the United States in our homeland" keeps him up at night, and that the "greatest threat is that al Qaeda is adapting their methods in ways that often times make it difficult to detect." Anne Patterson, United States Ambassador to Pakistan, indicated that the administration does not know how many Americans might have disappeared overseas to train with al Qaeda or other terrorist groups. The Ambassador outlined a "nightmare scenario" in which people holding American passports receive terrorist training and return legally to the United States to commit violent acts.

Unfortunately, recent events have given significant weight to these concerns. The arrest in Yemen of a New Jersey man accused of joining al Qaeda is the latest in an alarming string of cases involving radicalized American Muslims. Sharif Mobley, 26, who worked for six years as a laborer at nuclear plants in New Jersey, was arrested in late March 2010 in a sweep of militants tied to the Yemeni branch of al Qaeda and the Somali movement Al Shabab. Mobley had passed background checks and did routine labor and maintenance at five nuclear plants in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland. He was born in the United States, to a Muslim family of Somali immigrants. Mobley, like the Nigerian man accused of trying to bomb a jetliner headed to Detroit on December 25, had been in contact with Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American cleric whose radical sermons have been found on the computers of more than a dozen terrorism suspects in the West. Awlaki had also exchanged e-mail messages with Major Nidal Malik Hasan, the Army psychiatrist accused of killing 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas, on November 5, 2009. On April 6, 2010, it was reported that the United States government has authorized the targeted killing of Awlaki — despite the fact that he is an American citizen.

An even more frightening and telling example of this emerging trend of homegrown terrorism, however, is the March 2010 allegation against "Jihad Jane," Colleen LaRose of Pennsylvania. An American Caucasian in her 40s with blond hair and green eyes, who might have been written off as a mere "jihobbyist," LaRose took unexpected, dramatic action in a desperate bid to prove her total commitment to the cause. She was recruited online and traveled to Sweden to participate in the assassination of a Swedish cartoonist, Lars Vilks. LaRose was arrested in October 2009, but news of her indictment was delayed until after the arrest of seven alleged jihadists in Waterford, Ireland. During her indictment, she boasted that she could go anywhere undetected and that she actively attempted to recruit others for al Qaeda.

The investigation of the plot against Vilks spread to Ireland with the arrest of seven Muslims in the southern Irish city of Waterford: three Algerians, a Libyan, a Palestinian and a Croatian. The seventh of those arrested was an American woman, Jamie Paulin-Ramirez, 31, from Leadville, Colorado. Paulin-Ramirez, an unlikely candidate for terrorism who also allegedly was radicalized online, linked up through the Internet with

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militants overseas. She has been described as a lonely and insecure woman, and consequently a vulnerable target for the charismatic recruiting of Awlaki.

Other recent examples of homegrown terrorism include:

- A Pakistan-born Chicago taxi driver, Raja Lahrasib Khan, was arrested in March 2010 for allegedly attempting to funnel money to al Qaeda and discuss a possible attack on an American stadium. A naturalized American citizen, Khan was also in contact with a well-known Pakistani al Qaeda intermediary, one who also happened to be involved with the peripatetic David Headley and the Mumbai massacre.
- Also in March 2010, Ahmed Muhammed Dhakane — a Somali man with alleged ties to terrorist groups — was arrested and accused of smuggling several East Africans with al Qaeda affiliations through Texas.
- The recent arrest of five young Americans in Pakistan seeking to join jihadists in Afghanistan. These five American citizens — friends from the Washington, D.C., suburbs in their late teens and early 20s — were charged with plotting attacks in Afghanistan, raising money to commit terrorist acts and planning attacks against Pakistani allies. They are originally from places as diverse as Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt and Pakistan. Pakistani authorities claimed the men were encouraged by Internet contacts with a Pakistani militant seeking to wage jihad against American troops in Afghanistan.
- Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan immigrant who worked at a coffee stand in lower Manhattan, pleaded guilty in February 2010 to plotting to bomb the New York subway. American authorities called the case one of the most serious threats since the 9/11 attacks.
- David Coleman Headley, an American citizen of Pakistani ethnicity, pled guilty in March 2010 to charges in connection with the 2008 four-day siege in Mumbai, India, that left 166 dead, as well as a similar attack planned for Denmark. Headley — the product of a typical American upbringing — is to date one of the most unusual and significant American-born terrorists.

Al Qaeda has been calling for Muslims to attack the United States and its interests for many years. Their message has never been clearer or as threatening as it has in the past few weeks since two American al Qaeda affiliates — Anwar al-Awlaki and Adam Gadahn — released audio messages, delivered in plain American English. These messages are obviously targeted towards

jihadists in the United States, United Kingdom and Israel. They indirectly reveal the continued weakening of the al Qaeda core; the group is now asking individual Muslims to conduct “lone wolf” terrorist attacks and follow the examples of Hasan and Mir Aimal Kansi, the Pakistani citizen who conducted a January 1993 shooting at a stoplight outside CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, that killed two CIA employees. Clearly, as long as the ideology of jihadism persists, transnational and itinerant jihadist militants will continue to operate.

Intelligence experts have long been tracking the devolution of the jihadist threat — from one primarily based on al Qaeda the group, to one based upon a wider jihadist movement. This decentralization suggests that grassroots operatives will continue to be an escalating concern. Individuals involved in some of the recent arrests do not fit the jihadist stereotype, illustrating the difficulty of creating a terrorist profile based on race, ethnicity or gender. While the threat posed by the grassroots terrorist is less severe than that posed by highly trained militant operatives from the core of al Qaeda or the regional franchises, grassroots operatives and lone wolves can still wreak havoc and cause numerous casualties. The jihadist Internet messages from Gadahn and Awlaki encourage jihadists to choose targets they are well acquainted with; targets that are feasible to hit and will have a resounding impact. They singled out institutions, installations and mass transit systems and called on jihadists to kill or capture leading non-Muslim figures in government, industry and media sympathetic to the West. For the United States and its allies to effectively counter this dangerous trend, they will have to prioritize their efforts and focus on the more subtle, hidden threat posed by these lone wolves that may appear and act completely Western. They will also need to aggressively target jihadist cells in less obvious places such as London, Brooklyn, Moscow and Karachi, and pay even closer attention to cyber threats and Internet jihadist forums. The “Long War” may be changing in shape and scope, but it is still most definitely being waged. The time for urgency is now.®



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