

February 15, 2010

Al Qaeda: The Threat, The Risk and The Strategy Does Your Organization Have a Plan?

America's top intelligence officials told lawmakers in January 2010 that it was "highly certain" that al Qaeda or one of its affiliates would attempt a large-scale attack on American soil within the next six months. The recent wave of terrorist plots — including the failed December 25 attempt to blow up an airliner as it approached Detroit — adds a potent credence to this assessment. Moreover, not only has al Qaeda adjusted its tactics to more effectively strike American targets domestically and abroad, it is doing so in ways that often make their planned operations difficult to detect until they come to their violent fruition.

The world will remember the first decade of the twenty-first century for three catastrophic events: the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania and permanently altered the way our nation looked at its own invincibility and security environment; the tsunami in Southeast Asia, which killed 300,000 people and changed the way we look at natural disasters, and the financial meltdown of 2008 and 2009, which transformed the way systemic risks across the world are calculated. Taken as a whole, these three events represent an emphatic clarion call for better and more sophisticated risk analysis that factors in these types of extreme events, the vulnerability of our modern interlinked systems and how normal human behavioral responses can magnify consequences of disasters. Along with an understanding of the various risks, effective emergency response and business continuity plans are also critical for ensuring the highest levels of security and safety through events that will inevitably occur. This issue of The Lipman Report® will analyze the ongoing al Qaeda threat to lives, property and assets, and discuss how American industry can best prepare for a possible terrorist attack.

Jihadism: The Threat Continues

The past year saw numerous attacks and thwarted plots emanating from jihadist actors. Although al Qaeda's central organization continues to represent an ongoing threat, the primary militants involved in carrying out the most recent terrorist attacks and plots were almost exclusively from regional jihadist groups and grassroots operatives employing "lone wolves" and "sleepers." This trend of smaller groups or isolated individuals planning attacks is expected to continue, and it is projected that regional groups will become more involved in transnational attacks — as recently evidenced by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Al Qaeda is considered a global jihadist network rather than a monolithic entity. This network consists of three distinct layers. The first is a core vanguard organization frequently referred to as the "al Qaeda core." The al Qaeda core consists of Osama bin Laden and his small circle of close, trusted associates, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri. Due to intense pressure, this insular core group has been reduced in size and remains relatively small because of operational security concerns. The al Qaeda core is believed to be hiding somewhere along the Afghan-Pakistani border and — unfortunately — represents only a small but dangerous portion of the larger jihadist universe.

Despite the misleading appearance of a lower profile, the al Qaeda core is still unshakable in its determination to launch another attack on American soil, one with a large-scale operation that would cause mass casualties and harm the United States economy. Just last month, Osama bin Laden warned the American people to be prepared for additional attacks. In 2009, Abu Yahya al-Libi — the official spokesman and head of al Qaeda's religious committee — publicly advocated blowing up American military, political, economic and financial institutions, while Shaikh Sa'id al-Masri, al Qaeda's third-in-command, explained that the organization's strategy for the future is similar to its strategy in the past — namely "hitting Americans." Clearly, the West will have no peace until this core is eliminated.

The second layer of the network is composed of local or regional terrorist or insurgent groups that have adopted jihadist ideology. Some of these groups have publicly claimed allegiance to bin Laden and the al Qaeda core and become what is referred to as "franchise groups." Among these groups are al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Other groups, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, the Islamic State of Iraq — the al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq — and Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad in Indonesia may adopt some or all of al Qaeda's jihadist ideology and cooperate with the core groups, but for a variety of reasons maintain their independence. Such groups also include the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI). Some of these regional groups and affiliates have grown in strength and independence over the last two years and have begun to project operationally outside their regions. A few have exhibited a capability to attack inside the United States. LeT, for example, is developing a reach that extends far into the West. Over the past number of

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months, LeT has been placing Western targets in Europe in its sights as demonstrated by the arrest of David Coleman Headley and an accomplice in Chicago for complicity in a planned attack on Jyllands-Posten, a newspaper in Denmark, along with the targeted hotels in Mumbai, India.

Another trouble spot within this second layer are the networks of Islamic extremists in Europe. These networks represent a sizable threat due to their access to fighters and operatives with training in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia. Also, the relative ease with which European nationals can travel to and from the United States is a major concern, a vulnerability certainly recognized and capitalized upon by al Qaeda. Al-Shabaab, the East Africa-based al Qaeda affiliate, recently announced they were joining forces with the “international jihad of al Qaeda” and pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden. Intelligence suggests that this group may direct some Westerners — now training and fighting in Somalia — to the United States.

The third and broadest layer of the network is the grassroots jihadist movement, people inspired by the al Qaeda core and the franchise groups but who have little or no actual connection to these organizations. The destructive ideology that animates the al Qaeda movement is spreading around the globe with a virulence, including — in some cases — to small-town America. Unfortunately, the Internet is proving to be an effective and important tool for these groups to reach out to potential grassroots operatives in every corner of the world. Homegrown zealots, motivated by al Qaeda’s distorted interpretation of Islam, may not yet be capable of carrying out 9/11-style strikes, but they could nonetheless terrorize the nation and cause both fatalities and economic harm. Terrorists prey on vulnerable populations, people who feel humiliated and victimized. Even bright, gifted individuals reared in the West with one foot in the Muslim world may be drawn to al Qaeda ideology, finding their identities by joining these cult-like extremist movements. This is best illustrated by Omar Hammami, whose nom de guerre is now Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki, “the American.” The peripatetic and elusive Mr. Hammami is now 8,500 miles from his hometown of Daphne, Alabama, on the eastern edge of Africa; he has become a key figure in al-Shabaab.

The United States faces an ongoing and extremely dangerous terrorist threat from al Qaeda and others who share its anti-Western ideology. A major terrorist attack

may emanate from either inside or outside the United States. Enhanced offensive and defensive counterterrorism efforts have certainly interrupted or deterred some plotting against the United States, but actionable intelligence on key details of terrorist plots — dates, specific targets, and the identity of the operatives — are often fragmentary and inconclusive thanks to the terrorists’ stringent operational security practices. That our counterterrorist efforts have slowed but not stopped the al Qaeda onslaught is evidenced by the recent terrorist killings in Little Rock and Fort Hood and the failed attack on December 25 over Detroit.

Homegrown Jihadists

Over the past year a small number of American Muslims have surfaced — driven by such motivations as feelings of alienation, exposure to negative Internet-transmitted ideologies or grievances over foreign policy — joined the third level of al Qaeda and engaged in extremist plots at home and abroad. The United States Intelligence Community and law enforcement agencies expect the violence from homegrown jihadists to persist in a sporadic way. A handful of individuals and small, discrete cells will seek to mount attacks each year, with a percentage succeeding in carrying out violence against the homeland.

Prison radicalization is becoming increasingly common in the United States; a recent report revealed that as many as 36 American Muslims who were prisoners in this country have moved to Yemen in recent months, ostensibly to study Arabic, and that several of them have “dropped off the radar” and may have connected with AQAP.

Al Qaeda in all of its layers has seen the advantage of using American citizens for operations when they can. David Headley — of the Denmark newspaper and Mumbai attacks — was born Daood Gilani, and anglicized his name to disguise his Pakistani heritage and Muslim faith while traveling on an American passport to places such as India and Denmark for al Qaeda. The use of an American citizen to conduct surveillance abroad illustrates the importance of focusing on the *how* of terrorist attacks — not simply the *who*. Clearly, our intelligence focus must now be placed not just on nationality or religious creed, but on a subject’s behavior. In an environment where the potential threat is hard to identify, it is important to profile individuals based on their actions, rather than strictly on ethnicity or the appearance of citizenship.

Twenty-Eight Plots and Counting

America is now on heightened alert because of the potential threat from extremists carrying American passports. In the past year, at least two dozen men in the United States have been charged with terrorism-related offenses. They include Najibullah Zazi, the Afghan immigrant driver in Denver who authorities allege was conspiring to carry out an attack against New York City; the aforementioned David Headley; the five young men from Virginia who sought training in Pakistan to fight American soldiers in Afghanistan; a Tennessee man, Abdulhakim Muhammad, who recently pled guilty to killing a soldier outside a Little Rock, Arkansas, military recruiting station and admitted membership in AQAP; and Major Nidal Malik Hasan, who was responsible for the Fort Hood shootings and had contact with Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni imam with al Qaeda ties. *We are seeing American citizens commit terrorist crimes but do not know who in this country are now planning future ones — and they are.*

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's failed attack on December 25 is the 28th publically identified foiled terror plot involving the United States since 9/11. A review of al Qaeda-inspired plots over the past decade gives an overwhelming picture of the magnitude, ruthlessness and tenacity of the enemy. Some additional terrorists and targets — in chronological order — are as follows:

- 2001, Richard Reid: British citizen attempted to ignite a shoe bomb on flight from Paris to Miami.
- 2002, Jose Padilla: Sought to use a radioactive-laced dirty bomb in an attack against apartment houses.
- 2002, Lackawanna Six: American citizens of Yemeni origin convicted of supporting al Qaeda after attending jihadist camp in Pakistan.
- 2003, Iyman Faris: Arrested and accused of aiding al Qaeda and attempting to destroy the Brooklyn Bridge.
- 2003, Virginia Jihad Network: Eleven men from Alexandria, Virginia, trained for jihad against American soldiers.
- 2004, Dhiren Barot: Indian-born leader of terror cell plotted bombings on financial centers in the United States, including the New York Stock Exchange.
- 2004, James Elshafay and Shahawar Matin Siraj: Sought to plant a bomb at Penn Station in New York during the Republican National Convention.
- 2005, Umer Hayat and Hamid Hayat: Californians convicted of attending terrorist training camp in Pakistan.
- 2005, Kevin James, Levar Haley Washington, Gregory Vernon Patterson and Hammad Riaz Samana: Los Angeles homegrown terrorists plotted to attack the National Guard, the airport, two synagogues and the Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles.
- 2005, Michael Reynolds: Plotted to blow up a natural gas refinery in Wyoming, the Transcontinental Pipeline and a refinery in New Jersey.
- 2006, Mohammad Zaki Amawi, Marwan Othman El-Hindi and Zand Wassim Mazloum: Accused of providing material support to terrorists and making bombs.
- 2006, Syed Haris Ahmed and Ehsanul Islam Sadequee: Surveilled and videotaped the United States Capitol and the headquarters of the World Bank in Washington, D.C., for a terrorist organization.
- 2006, Narseal Batiste, Patrick Abraham, Stanley Grant Phanor, Naudimar Herrera, Burson Agustin, Lyglenson Lemorin and Rothschild Augustine: Accused of plotting to blow up the Sears Tower in Chicago.
- 2006, Assem Hammoud: Accused of plotting to bomb New York train tunnels and flood the financial district.
- 2006, Liquid Explosive Plot: Thwarted plot to explode 10 airliners over the United States.
- 2007, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed: Mastermind of September 11 and author of numerous plots confessed to planning to destroy skyscrapers in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. He also plotted to assassinate Pope John Paul II and former President William J. Clinton.
- 2007, Fort Dix Plot: Six men accused of plotting to attack Fort Dix Army base in New Jersey. The plan included attacking and killing soldiers using assault rifles and grenades.
- 2007, JFK Plot: Four men accused of trying to blow up fuel arteries that run through residential neighborhoods at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York.
- 2007, Islamic Jihad Union Plot: German authorities disrupted a terrorist cell that was planning attacks on military installations and facilities used by Americans in Germany.
- 2009, Hosam Maher Husein Smadi: A 19-year-old was arrested on charges that he intended to bomb a downtown Dallas skyscraper.
- 2009, James Cromitie: Led a group of four men arrested in New York after a plot was revealed to blow up two synagogues and shoot down a military aircraft.
- 2009, Tarek Mehanna: Charged with conspiring to kill two United States politicians and American soldiers abroad.

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- Recent information from detainees in CIA custody uncovered an al Qaeda cell that was developing anthrax for terrorist attacks inside the United States.

As we can see from this partial list, jihadists come from many ethnicities and nationalities, plotting against targets that seem both random and unpredictable. There simply is not one single ethnic or national profile that can be used to describe them all. Al Qaeda keeps an eye on changing circumstances and adjusts its plans and actors accordingly to circumvent new security measures. For example, some operatives initially selected for the 9/11 mission were Yemenis and could not obtain visas to the United States. Since Saudis were able to obtain visas more easily, al Qaeda simply shifted gears and decided to use Saudis instead.

The Element of Risk

Risk is defined as a combination of three elements: scenario, probability and consequences. A scenario is a sequence of events that could occur in a particular risk context. Probabilities reflect the likelihood of scenarios, and consequences — such as fatalities, injuries and economic impact — are that which emerges as a result of the sequence of events. Although these three elements are the building blocks of risk assessment, there are complications with translating the traditional risk-analysis paradigm to terrorism. First, a terrorist threat is radically different by nature from a random natural event or technological accident. Unlike the latter two scenarios, terrorism involves an intelligent adversary seeking out vulnerabilities and attempting to strategically cause harm at a time and place where damage is maximized. Furthermore, again unlike a random crisis, an intelligent adversary adapts to our defenses and sometimes uses them to his or her advantage. Consequently, most analysts say that traditional risk assessment analysis should not be applied to terrorism.

A new risk analysis framework has been developed that includes threat and vulnerability. In this updated system, the probability of a terrorist attack is taken into account while consequences are defined more broadly to include not only fatalities, injuries, damage and economic harm, but psychological impact and behavioral changes that occur if an attack is successful. Because terrorists attempt to instill fear and insecurity, behavioral changes are an important part of the analysis of the psychological and economic impacts of terrorism. Studies on the impact of the 9/11 terrorist

attack on air travel behavior found almost \$200 billion in GDP losses due to fear of flying and the resulting ripple effects through the economy. Similarly, a dirty bomb attack on the twin ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach could cost as much as \$26 billion per month due to the fear of radiation and the resulting port shutdown.

Osama bin Laden has threatened to give us no rest, and given such a dire warning, it is essential that management at facilities and organizations throughout the United States develop comprehensive emergency plans to prevent and respond to a possible terrorist attack. While emergency management planning has always been important, it is particularly critical in a world where the possibility of a terrorist attack is an ongoing threat. Above all, Americans need to remember that the al Qaeda core is a patient and determined entity and is even now almost certainly planning more large-scale attacks. While sometimes difficult to imagine in our American enclave, there are groups and individuals both here and abroad who are dedicating their lives to killing as many Americans as they can and wiping out our cultural and financial institutions.

Every organization, whatever its size, should have a plan that addresses the threat of al Qaeda, one that focuses on when, how and where an attack may occur, details which areas are vulnerable and which are not, what is sensitive and what is not, and analyzes the risk and most effective responses — whose clear purpose is the preservation of human life and protection of property and assets. A well-prepared plan not only saves lives, but increases the ability of the company to recover quickly from a business interruption, thereby reducing financial losses. Beyond this vital protection, a plan also enhances the reputation of the organization with its employees, customers and community, helps ensure against possible accusations of negligence that may arise after an incident, and facilitates compliance with government-mandated requirements. The threat is out there, and it is not going away. Strategic, effective preparedness is our single best defense. The time for urgency is now®.



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