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2005

# Al-Qaeda's Operational Evolution: Behavioral and Organizational Perspectives

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## Al-Qaeda's Operational Evolution: Behavioral and Organizational Perspectives

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**Al-Qaeda is widely regarded by the military, law enforcement, diplomatic, and intelligence communities as being the foremost threat to U.S. national security and safety. The nature of this threat, however, has changed since al-Qaeda first emerged in the late 1980s. This article describes the emergence of a new form of transnational terrorism and details al-Qaeda's progression from being an organization to an ideological movement. Drawing on a theory of social movements, we analyze its trajectory and the levels of influence. We also offer a behavioral perspective in explaining how al-Qaeda has adapted as a learning organization with new leadership, tactics, and patterns of recruitment and training. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.**

Within a span of less than 15 years, the transnational terror network of al-Qaeda has created the foremost threat to U.S. national security and safety. Consider the following testimony on “Current and Projected Threats to US National Security” given before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on 24 February, 2004:

“Al-Qaida remains the greatest terrorist threat to our homeland . . . Despite 25 months of sustained pressure, al-Qaida continues to demonstrate it is an adaptable and capable threat.” Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency.

“The greatest threat remains international terrorism—specifically Sunni extremists, including al-Qaida. . . Al-Qaida's flexibility and adaptability continue to make them dangerous and unpredictable.” Robert S. Mueller, III, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“The steady growth of Usama bin Laden's anti-US sentiment through the wider Sunni extremist movement and the broad dissemination of al-Qaida's destructive expertise ensure that a serious threat will remain for the foreseeable future—with or without al-Qaida in the picture.” George Tenet, Director, Central Intelligence Agency.

These assessments convey two consistent themes: (1) that al-Qaeda and its affiliated networks are resilient and adaptable and (2) that al-Qaeda's anti-Western

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ideology, as a force unto itself, has transcended its own organization. In the sections that follow, we describe the emergence of a new form of transnational terrorism; how al-Qaeda was created as an organization and has evolved into an ideological movement; how its path, in some ways, parallels that of other social movements; and how it has adapted as learning organization with new leadership, tactics, and patterns of recruitment and training.

## EMERGENCE OF THE “NEW TERRORISM”

The emergence of al-Qaeda was coterminous with the emergence of an international shift in extremist activity toward what has come to be known as the “new terrorism” (Hoffman, 1999; Laqueur, 1999; Simon, 2003). The first generation of modern terrorists<sup>1</sup> was mostly composed of social revolutionaries and nationalist-separatists. They sought to influence the policies and behavior of powerful state governments by inducing fear among their representatives and adherents. The groups’ ultimate objective, clearly stated, was to free themselves from control by a government that, in their view, did not appropriately represent persons with their own collective religious, ethnic, or cultural identity. The contingency-based terrorism of that era was violent and challenging, but from an operational perspective the structure, planning, and actions of first generation modern terrorist groups were more comprehensible; their militancy was more bounded and restrained; and solutions were more amenable to traditional interventions of force and/or diplomacy (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, Gelles, & Shumate, 2004).

Al-Qaeda and the transnational terrorist groups of the present, however, are motivated and operate very differently from the first generation groups (Byman, 2003; Hoffman, 2003; Raufar, 2003). Al-Qaeda has spawned numerous diasporas with cells represented in dozens of countries worldwide (Gunaratna, 2002). While the size and capability of the transnational network have fluctuated, their actions are not contingency based, but are consistently asymmetrical and aimed at destroying the West. The ideology that motivates their behavior abhors the Western lifestyle, seeing it as corrupt and evil (Elliott, 2004).

Targets continue to be selected with varying degrees of discrimination, from symbolic to economic to opportunistic, and the tactics are chosen to increase the magnitude and scope of lethality (Corbin, 2003). While the primary goal is to attack symbolic targets that reflect the secular decadence of Western life, many attacks are conducted against secondary and tertiary targets due to greater accessibility and vulnerability. Importantly, killing is no longer the incidental outcome of an attack, for which the primary goal was to command attention; it is now the central purpose of the attack. The objective is to feed on the growing perception of terror and fear that is instilled in communities throughout the world where Western interests are present (Chauhan, 2003).

Al-Qaeda’s founding leaders were the pioneers of the “new terrorism.”<sup>2</sup> As the ethos of worldwide extremist actions and of international relations was changing,

<sup>1</sup>Roughly spanning a period from the end of World War II through the end of the Cold War.

<sup>2</sup>“Several recent works focus on a ‘new’ terrorism that is motivated by religious belief and is more fanatical, deadly, and pervasive than the older and more instrumental forms of terrorism the world had grown accustomed to (e.g., Laqueur, 1999). This emerging ‘new’ terrorism is thought to differ from the ‘old’ terrorism in terms of goals, methods, and organization (see Hoffman, 1999)” (Crenshaw, 2001).

al-Qaeda was also changing—evolving from a relatively small cadre of recruiters and supporters for a localized Afghan resistance to a fully developed transnational terrorist network, and ultimately to an ideological movement that would inspire tens of thousands of Muslims worldwide (Burke, 2004; Raufer, 2003; Smith, 2002). Here, we trace the progression of al-Qaeda's evolution, with particular attention to changes in the organization and its tactical and strategic operations.

## THE BIRTH OF AN ORGANIZATION

In 1979, against the backdrop of the 'Cold War,' the initial seeds were being sown for what would become the next major threat to the security of the world—al-Qaeda. In that year, the Muslim world witnessed the Islamic revolution in Iran—proof that it was possible to establish a truly Islamic state. Moreover—just to the North in Afghanistan—*Mujahidin* were gathering from all over the world, armed mainly with their fierce faith, determined to push back the awesome invading force of the Soviet military (Gunaratna, 2002).

Usama bin Laden, a young son of a wealthy Saudi construction magnate, felt called to share his resources, his energy, and if necessary his life to support the Afghan resistance. He brought workers and equipment to build, and executive skills to help create and develop, a recruiting and support system to reach and sustain Muslims from throughout the world to unite in a holy struggle against the godless communist oppressor. Usama was drawn to an older spiritual mentor, Abdullah Azzam, a Jordanian of Palestinian descent who had been a leader in the Muslim Brotherhood. Usama's money and business acumen complemented Azzam's spiritual leadership. Together, they created the *Maktab al-Khidamat* (MAK), or Afghan Services Bureau. The MAK, operating from a base in Peshawar, Pakistan, served as the hub of a transnational support network for *Mujahidin* guerillas. They developed links and relationships with leaders of *jihadi* groups throughout the world, and supported the *Mujahidin* through a ten-year struggle as they ultimately pushed back the Soviet bear and reclaimed their land in the name of *Allah* (Corbin, 2003; Gunaratna, 2001).

In the thick of the fight, Muslims from a variety of different countries and socioeconomic conditions made their way to Northern Afghanistan to stand with their brothers. A young Egyptian physician, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had been a leader among militant *ihadists* in Cairo since he was 15 years old. After being captured in a nationwide sweep of suspected conspirators in the assassination of Anwar Sadat, Ayman had spent three of the early years of the war imprisoned in the Citadel, an Egyptian prison. There, he was reportedly subjected to severe mistreatment, abuse, and humiliation, but never wavered in his faith and commitment to Islam. After his release in 1984, he sought to do some "service" in Pakistan, where he ultimately met the reputed man of means and influence Usama bin Laden. Like Azzam, Ayman had a deep intellectual knowledge of Islamic law and passionate commitment to the ideology (Raphaeli, 2002; Wright, 2002). Ayman had the vision for the movement and Usama had the means.

## THE GROWTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

After the Islamist *Mujahidin* defeated the Soviets, some remained in Afghanistan, aligning themselves with the warlords who were vying for power. Many of these

men, however, displaced from their homelands, found themselves fighters without an enemy. Usama briefly returned to his native land of Saudi Arabia, where his vocal criticism of the ruling regime<sup>3</sup> quickly landed him in political disfavor, resulting in exile and revocation of his citizenship. Through the 1990s, as he moved his base of operation through Sudan and back to Pakistan, however, he maintained his relationship with Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had returned to Egypt, where he had become a leading force in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), one of the largest and most active *jihadi* groups in Middle East (Corbin, 2003; Gunaratna, 2002).

By 1992, the official Soviet-supported government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan fell from power. No strong, hegemonic faction emerged immediately to assume control, leading to a period of intense civil unrest in which numerous warlords battled constantly for political dominance. One of the stronger factions, a Sunni Islamist movement known as the Taliban,<sup>4</sup> ultimately gained ascendancy; although worldwide they were recognized as the official governing power only by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates. The doctrine of the Taliban derived from the Deobandi tradition, a highly conservative Islamist movement born out of South and Central Asia. The Taliban's control of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 ultimately reduced much of the factional fighting and produced some economic and social stability in the country. However, it also produced a stronghold for Islamist ideology and a safe haven for militant *jihadists*, including al-Qaeda.

The international connections Usama and Ayman had made with other *jihadi* groups while running the MAK were now being leveraged to transform a 'support' and 'services' organization for paramilitary guerillas into the operational core of a terrorist network. Early in 1998, Usama formalized the relationships among those groups under the rubric of an umbrella organization called "The Islamic World Front for the Struggle against the Jews and the Crusaders" (*Al-Jabhah al-Islamiyyah al-'Alamiyyah li-Qital al-Yahud wal-Salibiyyin*), of which the EIJ was a critical member.

## EVOLUTION OF AL-QAEDA'S IDEOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

As its Arabic name implies, from its inception, al-Qaeda has sought to establish itself as a 'base'—a foundation and infrastructure of support among movements. Al-Qaeda has evolved from a local movement to support a *jihad* effort in Afghanistan to a global movement proselytizing to all Muslims around the world to commit to *jihad* against America. While recent counterterrorism efforts by the United States and her allies have diminished the organization and efficiency with which *al-Qaeda* engages in recruitment and training, the movement continues to attract, motivate, inspire, and facilitate a vast network of extremists who are responsive to their call for *jihad*.

<sup>3</sup>During Sadaam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, Usama had offered the Saudi government to mobilize his own *Mujahidin* to defend the land of the two holiest shrines (Saudi Arabia). Saudi Arabia needed defending and the *Mujahidin* needed something new to defend. The Saudi government declined Usama's offer in favor of having US military troops as their protectors, even allowing them to establish 'temporary' bases there.

<sup>4</sup>The term '*Taliban*' or '*Taleban*' derives from '*talib*,' the Arabic word for 'student.' Taliban is a Pashtun term, referring to students of the *Qur'an*.

That accomplishment will surely be their legacy, and to that extent they have enjoyed some degree of success. Al-Qaeda never has sought to be a traditional terrorist group or organization. Rather, Usama and Ayman recognized that Islamic discontent was festering in pockets throughout the world. It was fueled by factors such as globalization, Soviet repression of Islam, and foreign policies, but it was not caused by any one of these—or any other single factor (Calvert, 2002; Doran, 2002; Esposito, 2002; Sivan, 1985). The sentiments were strong. Speaking solely from a strategic perspective, Usama bin Laden saw an opportunity to ‘bottle it’ and use it to his advantage.

In the 1970s, Islam was at a crossroads. Numerous Arab nations and other countries that historically had been ‘Muslim countries’ were becoming increasingly secular in matters of politics, law, and social policy. Islam is regarded by its strict adherents not only as a religion, but as a comprehensive system that should guide and regulate all aspects of life, giving meaning and direction to social, legal, and political systems. Thus, those rulers and nations that deviated from the tenets of the *Qur’an* or Islamic law (*Sharia*) were seen as heretics by Islamic purists or what some would call ‘fundamentalists.’ They responded with the fury of a people watching the very will of God being desecrated in their own land. Many of these Muslims came to learn, however, that the ‘trouble’ was not just in their land. Numerous clusters of these infuriated purists existed throughout the Middle East, Northern and Eastern Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, among other areas (Gunaratna, 2002; Lyman & Morrison, 2004; Menkhaus, 2002; Rahim, 2003; Rashid, 2002; Singh, 2004). These movements often spawned militant factions, some of which engaged in terrorist activity, mainly against the secular, infidel governments or symbols of corrupting influence (Esposito, 2002). Although the factions throughout these many countries were all composed of Muslims, they largely viewed the nature of their conflicts and resistance as local. With vision and a broader view, Usama and Ayman saw the potential to unite, or at least coordinate, these movements in a way that would exponentially increase their power and impact. The outcome of a Pan-Arab movement, however, would be rather limiting, particularly because many of the militants were not Arabs. Instead, the objective was to create a Pan-Islamic movement with the potential to draw upon the 1.2 billion Muslims that live worldwide (Gunaratna, 2002). The conflicts, indignations and opposition were no longer local, but global.

## **TRANSFORMATION INTO AN ANTI-WESTERN IDEOLOGICAL VANGUARD**

Usama and Ayman already had begun to expand their focus from local secular governments to what they perceived as the ‘source’ of corruption—Western influence. The radical movements that began by looking inward and acting locally were now being directed to look outward and act beyond their own borders, because now they were part of a ‘World Front.’ The common enemy was the West. Al-Qaeda—specifically Usama and Ayman—had positioned itself to be the ideological vanguard of this radical, transnational Islamic front (Smith, 2002). In that role lies its major power (Doran, 2002; Gueli, 2003; Rich, 2003). Although al-Qaeda often is portrayed in the media as a formidable, well honed, organized

force of elite holy warriors, that characterization is not only hyperbolic, it also obscures what is perhaps its greatest and most enduring weapon—its anti-American ideology (Calvert, 2002; Elliott, 2004; Mann, 2002; Rich, 2003).

Al-Qaeda's structural evolution can be traced from its origin as a support structure for guerilla fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan to a tactically oriented terror network and ultimately—in its current form—to an ideological movement (Stern, 2003). The final transition from network to ideology has emerged since 9/11. The observations of three well known RAND terrorism analysts illustrate the point:

- “Al-Qaeda is an ideology more than an army.”—Dr. Bruce Hoffman
- “Al-Qaeda is a worldview, not an organization.”—Dr. William Rosenau
- “Al-Qaeda is more than an organization. It is an ideology, a galaxy of extremists, and an enterprise for turning Islam's discontents into commitment for its brand of *jihad*.”—Dr. Brian Jenkins

Since 9/11, American-led efforts have made it nearly impossible for the core members of al-Qaeda to have any direct tactical involvement in terrorist operations. Coalition forces in the global war on terrorism (GWOT) have stripped them of their operational base in Afghanistan, under Taliban control; decimated their training infrastructure; and killed or incapacitated more than two-thirds of their original core leadership (Pillar, 2004). Yet their influence remains as powerful as ever. In fact, the decimation has apparently renewed fervor towards waging *jihad* against the West. Some believe the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been the most successful recruitment efforts to date for extremist Muslims, either formally or informally trained, to commit to *jihad*.

## AL-QAEDA AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

In an examination of radical social/political movements in Europe—specifically, the Red Brigades in Italy and Baader Meinhoff in West Germany—Della Porta (1995) concludes that a thorough understanding requires analysis at three levels—macro, meso, and micro—moving from the broader societal influence to the narrower individual influence. At the *macro* level, she shows that the manner in which societal institutions such as the government, military, and law enforcement respond contingently to protest movements can affect the radical trajectory of those movements. That is, ideological movements tend to become more radical when driven underground. An example of this with al-Qaeda can be seen in the radicalization of Islamic thought that occurred in Central Asia while it was under Soviet control, and where Islam was officially outlawed (Rashid, 2002). The growing population of Muslims worldwide, both born and converted, is significant. By recent estimates, approximately 1.2 billion Muslims populate the earth, and the growth rate of Islam—including in North America—is among the highest of any major world religion (Barrett, 2001). The growth rate is greatest among sectarian Muslims and other Islamic schismatics. This provides ample opportunity for radicalization of those in political and economic crisis in changing and volatile regions of the world.

At the *meso* level, she examines the factioning that often happens within groups and movements, with more radical elements splitting off and gaining their own support. At this point the primary driving force of a group often shifts from

advancing its political cause to maintaining its survival as a collective. This kind of factioning has occurred among many Islamist movements, with the most militant elements turning to terrorism.

At the *micro* (individual) level, she argues that recruits often are motivated or influenced to join by seeking solidarity with friends and acquaintances, perhaps also seeking a collective identity or sense of belonging, and sometimes by indignation over an injustice, such as death or imprisonment, done to someone they know. Within the group, members then develop a 'freedom fighter' identity that supports subsequent justifications for violence. Interestingly, Marc Sageman (2004) notes that the majority of militant *jihadi* recruits in his study joined their organization or movement in collectives, with their acquaintances.

These *micro* influences of social networks and relationships are particularly powerful in collectivist societies—such as in Asian and Middle Eastern cultures—where Islam tends to be most prevalent. Within the collectivist ethos, being part of a larger cause is a natural predisposition. The identities of many in the Middle East—and to some extent in Asia—are influenced by the idea that “who I am is part of who I am with.” Seeking connections is critical in a world where one's value is defined by who you know and who is in your network, referred to in Arabic as *Wasta*. These priorities are, of course, distinctly different from Western values that tend to emphasize individual achievement and self-worth.

Applying Della Porta's observations on micro-level influences to persons affiliated with al-Qaeda, one finds that terrorist involvement is often the end result of a discernible pattern of behavior by an individual seeking personal meaning, direction and structure (Monroe & Kreidie, 1997). In that quest, he will suspend critical thinking, commit to a particular Mosque, leader, or collective—and their ideology—that advocates militant *jihadi*, and then by making that commitment develop the capabilities and connections to participate in potential terrorist attacks against Western interests.

Participating with a group meets an initial need for affiliation, particularly for those who have failed to affiliate and be validated elsewhere, or who have not lived up to expectations of family or tribe (Luckabaugh, Fuqua, Cangemi, & Kowalski, 1997). Islam—and its attendant ideology—provides structure, meaning, and identity (Monroe & Kreidie, 1997).

The radical collective fosters and maintains an unquestioning adherence to its tenets and to one another as 'brothers.' These individuals learn quickly that to question or raise issue with an extremist view would result in rejection, while embracing such thinking reinforces the primary motive of affiliation and connectivity (Marsella, 2003).

Of course, neither the Red Brigades nor the Baader Meinhoff—Della Porta's points of reference—ever reached al-Qaeda's level of global influence or effected comparable destruction. These concepts, however, show some affinity with radical Islam as a global movement, with al-Qaeda as its chosen guide.

Viewing al-Qaeda as an ideological movement clearly has profound strategic implications for how to oppose them in the GWOT (Byman, 2003; Mann, 2002). A tactical force—even one that is large and well organized—can be defeated with superior tactical measures. The US-led coalition undoubtedly has a tactical force superior to anything al-Qaeda could ever hope for. Even if al-Qaeda is using an asymmetric strategy, a finite tactical force can be found and defeated. However, not

only is al-Qaeda easily able to replenish their human losses, at this juncture they have transcended their influence as a finite tactical force. Dr. Rohan Gunaratna (2001), author of *Inside Al Qaeda*, concludes that “just as during the Cold War, the fight is against an ideology, and not against a physical force.” While military intervention may be a necessary part of the strategy, it may not be sufficient. Interestingly, this point was raised with remarkable foresight soon after the 9/11 attacks by Dr. Stephen Biddle of the US Army War College, noting that “. . . this war [on terrorism] can be won, not merely contained. But this will require war aims focused on our enemies’ ideology, not their tactics. . . . Our real opponent is the ideology that underpins al-Qaeda’s terrorist program—it is not terrorism per se, nor even al-Qaeda itself.” Indeed, it is the ideology that offers a solution and meets the primordial need to be part of a collective and to find meaning and direction.

Al-Qaeda has essentially morphed into web of affiliated networks that work to recruit, train, and operate at a local level. While overall coordination by senior leadership and Usama Bin Laden has been reduced significantly, the campaign of information to the world, and to the extremist sectors in particular, has led to more operational successes since 9/11 than prior to 9/11. Al-Qaeda-affiliated squads run by sergeants have replaced the former units run by lieutenants, demonstrating the efficacy of small, cellular, operational cadres under decentralized control. These are among the many critical changes in this evolving terrorist network to be discussed in the next section.

## ADAPTATIONS OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

### Leadership

As al-Qaeda developed into a distinct organizational entity, there emerged a core cadre of leadership that was central and vital to the organization’s operation and growth. At the top of the organizational chart (Figure 1) was Usama bin Laden serving as the *Emir General*, a role that some have likened to that of a corporate chief executive officer. Coordinating directly with Usama were the members of the *Shura Majlis*, his cabinet or council of leaders (Corbin, 2003; Gunaratna, 2001).

His closest friend and partner, Ayman al-Zawahiri, functionally guided the group on matters related to Islamic ideology and law, and continues to do so. While it is clear that Ayman has a crucial leadership role—even greater than that of other

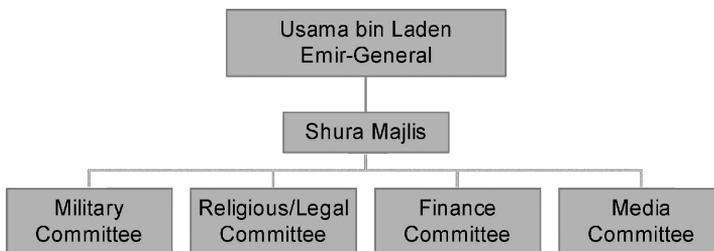


Figure 1. Early organizational structure of Al-Qaeda.

members of the *Shura Majlis*—the exact nature and extent of his influence is a matter of some debate. Although Ayman is commonly regarded as Usama's deputy, some have argued that, given his greater education and sophistication in Islamic matters, he actually exerts more influence over the organization than Usama himself (Raphaeli, 2002; Wright, 2002).

Trusted associates, many of whom were combat veterans of the Afghan resistance, held key committee leadership positions. The military committee was headed by Mohammed Atef. Khalid Shaikh Mohammed (KSM) took the lead in the area of operations. Financial matters were under the supervision of Shaikh Saiid al-Masri (Mustafa Ahmed al-Hisawi). Abu Zubaydah, recruited from an Islamic resistance faction in Bosnia, led al-Qaeda's training efforts, and personal and organizational security was managed by Saif al-Adil<sup>5</sup> (Muhamad Ibrahim Makkawi). Since al-Qaeda's attack on America on September 11, 2001, Atef has been killed in a U.S. air strike, and Zubaydah, KSM, al-Masri and others who had significant primary and secondary leadership roles have been captured and remain in custody. The others still remain at large, although their functional roles within the organization have changed (Corbin, 2003; Gunaratna, 2001).

As a result of the erosion of seasoned leadership through capture and attrition, one of the more dramatic changes in al-Qaeda's leadership has been a move toward decentralization. Usama used to be involved personally—at least desiring to give final approval—for strategic and tactical operational decisions. Since being the subject of one of the most intense manhunts the world has ever known, that level of involvement has not been possible; nor has the regular communication and collaboration among members of the *Shura Majlis* (Gunaratna, 2004; Nasir, 2003).

Al-Qaeda has had to accommodate. They have done so by replacing killed and captured leaders; changing the functional role and level of its field leaders; and emphasizing inspirational, rather than tactical, leadership. One of the most severe blows dealt to al-Qaeda in the GWOT has been dismantling its leadership core (Gunaratna, 2004). They have sought to fill those vacancies to create a second generation of leaders who tend to be younger; most too young to have been *mujahidin* in the battle against the Soviets (Schmidt & Farah, 2002). Many have received training in the now dismantled camps, or have been mentored or tutored by those who have trained in the camps. The new less centralized al-Qaeda has a mix of soldiers with a spectrum of skills ranging from the basic fundamentals of bomb making to more advanced skills associated with assassination, kidnapping and crude chemicals. For example, in April 2004 Jordanian officials disrupted an al-Qaeda-related plot to attack the U.S. Embassy in Amman, the office of the Jordanian prime minister and the headquarters of Jordanian intelligence. Following the arrest of Azmi Jayyousi, the suspected cell leader, and others, authorities seized more than 20 tons of chemicals, including a large quantity of sulphuric acid, raising questions about whether the attack plans included creating a large 'toxic chemical cloud.' Jayyousi apparently operated under the authority of one of the more prominent second generation leaders, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi of Jordan. Jayyousi said, "I took explosives courses, poisons high level, then I pledged allegiance to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, to obey him without any questioning" (CNN, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>Al-Adil reportedly was appointed to lead the 'military committee' after Khalid Shaikh Mohammed was captured. Mir, H. (2004). Rediff.com

Some of the second generation leaders had been leaders in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad before it formally merged with al-Qaeda. Others had attended al-Qaeda training camps and returned to their homelands where they began forging or leading a local al-Qaeda-related militant Islamist movement. Al-Qaeda also found some talent among combat and operational veterans of Islamic struggles in other parts of the world, including Somalia, Chechnya, and Bosnia. Ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have provided an environment for on the job training where some can get first hand experience leading *jihadi* operations<sup>6</sup> (Schmidt & Farah, 2002).

A second adaptation to the leadership losses was to decentralize aspects of the tactical and operational decision making. Usama bin Laden and the core leadership were taken 'out of the loop' for many decisions—especially specific ones—about attack planning. Cell leaders and field leaders, with a foundational understanding of the organization's overall strategic objectives, were given more autonomy in assembling teams, selecting targets, and determining tactical details such as timing, and to some extent financing. With core leadership being constantly hunted, any communication or contact with them would increase their vulnerability and potentially compromise the security of the operation as well. By necessity they moved organizational decisions away from the core and into the field. Although decentralized, these cells do not appear to be functioning with complete autonomy and do receive peripheral support via funding and direction (Gunaratna, 2004; Hoffman, 2003).

The third adaptation was to modify the way in which the core exerted its primary influence. Under the pressure of increased scrutiny, tactical leadership was impractical. Their role as leaders of 'the base' became more inspirational than instrumental. For example, early on in the Coalition's 2003 invasion of Iraq, Usama broadcast a media message calling on Muslims everywhere to come fight against American forces, including by means of suicide attack tactics. This was not motivated out of loyalty to Sadaam Hussein, who is generally recognized as having run a very secular state and therefore would be an *infidel*, but rather to cast the war as an Islamic struggle and further inspire and mobilize more Muslims to act against the U.S.

Over the past several years, bin Laden's message to the Muslim world has changed and evolved from the specific goal of removing the U.S. from Saudi Arabia to a more generalized mandate to kill anyone associated with the U.S. and Israel. Some believe this broadly targeted call to action is the cornerstone of an information campaign designed to provoke local cells to conduct attacks against Western interests in their native Arab countries. The attacks on housing complexes in Saudi Arabia, for example, targeted an area in which Westerners and Muslims lived together, and foreseeably resulted in Muslim casualties. This also demonstrates a shift in operational methodology permitting Western interests to be attacked, even where there may be a cost in loss of Muslim life; although extremists do not regard secular Muslims as 'true' Muslims. Bin Laden's broadening of legitimate targets unshackles localized and decentralized cells, and allows al-Qaeda to take some credit for such actions without having to dedicate too many resources.

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<sup>6</sup>e.g., Saif al-Adel; Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah; Abu Musab Zarqawi; Riduan Isamuddin; Tawfiq bin Atash; Rahim al-Nashri.

A more subtle aspect of this inspirational shift was a 'notching up' of the most violent elements of al-Qaeda's ideology. With Ayman al-Zawahiri remaining as the group's principal ideologist, the second generation leaders were chosen, in part, for their own affinity with his core worldview. Although Usama's entrance into radical Islam was heavily influenced by *Wahhabbi* doctrine, Ayman—an Egyptian native—was surrounded and swayed by members of *Takfir wal Hijra*, a Muslim sect characterized by some as a kind of "Islamic Facism" (Elliott, 2004).

*Takfiri* doctrine tends to be among the least tolerant and most militant of any of the radical sects. There is a heavy emphasis on eliminating Muslim leaders—by violence if necessary—who do not strictly follow *Sharia*. They appear to emphasize the necessity of blending in with one's environment, even if this involves "worldly" behavior, to maximize the effective position for a lethal attack. Elements of *Takfiri* influence have gained increasing ascendance in al-Qaeda's ideology and among its leaders over time. There is good evidence, for example, that Abu Musab Zarqawi, the vicious coordinator of a recent series of 'al-Qaeda-related attacks' and assassinations in Iraq is a follower of *Takfir* doctrine (Johnson & Crawford, 2004). While the inspirational core leaders may now be further removed from 'hands on' operations, they are no less influential.

### Tactical Elements

Since its origin, al-Qaeda has undergone substantial changes in its areas and mode of operation, in its target selection strategy and in the tactics it employs to execute an attack. Perhaps the most significant operational change for al-Qaeda has been shifting the center of its tactical planning and operations from 'the base' to its associated or affiliate organizations in various parts of the world (Wagener, 2003). This parallels, of course, the necessarily reduced role of the core leadership, but it is the mechanism of al-Qaeda's sustained destructive power. Members of other militant Islamist organizations and radicals from throughout the world were among the thousands who trained in al-Qaeda's camps. As we noted previously, some returned to their native countries to begin or to nurture a cadre of support in their homelands. In al-Qaeda's overall strategy, these groups have transitioned from what was speculated to be subordinate or support actors for the base to being the principal unit of tactical operations for the transnational terrorist network (Gueli, 2003; Gunaratna, 2002). Some key regional players are as follows:

- Al Ansar Mujahidin (Caucuses)
- Al Ithihad al Islami (Horn of Africa)
- Jayash-e-Mohammad (South Asia)
- Jemmah Islamiyah (Southeast Asia)
- Salafi Group for Call and Combat (North Africa, Europe, and North America)
- Tunisian Combatants Group (Middle East) (Gunaratna, 2003a).

The associated groups are myriad. They share ideology and goals, but operate independently and have no other formal, legitimate connection to one another. This is certainly the case in Iraq where it has been acknowledged that most recent attacks may not have been conducted or organized by al-Qaeda *per se*, but by ideologically sympathetic Iraqis and some foreign fighters seeking an outlet for *jihād* (Katzman,

2004). Many al-Qaeda-affiliated groups align themselves philosophically with the Iraqi plight and are driven by the belief that the United States once again improperly occupies sacred Arab land.

Even setting aside the Iraqi attacks, a testament to the impact of the decentralized network, as noted earlier, is the fact that since 9/11, even with dramatic increases in security and proactive intelligence measures worldwide, al-Qaeda and affiliated networks have been responsible for more major attacks than in the entire period of their existence leading up to it. While US law enforcement and intelligence authorities have helped to disrupt a number of planned attacks, and have made it extraordinarily difficult for al-Qaeda cells to plan and operate within homeland borders, the terrorists have adapted by selecting Western targets and interests on foreign soil (Nasir, 2003). For example, the Bali nightclub bombings in October, 2002, and the suicide bombings of housing complexes occupied by Westerners in Riyadh in both May and November, 2003, were all al-Qaeda-related attacks (Pillar, 2004).

They have further adapted their target selection strategy by shifting from hardened, high-profile targets to softer, more opportunistic—albeit populated—ones (Associated Press, 2004). Such targets as housing complexes and shopping centers are simply too numerous and impractical to fully protect. This strategy combining inspirational leadership and outreach through affiliate organizations has enabled a resilient al-Qaeda network to broaden its geographic sphere of influence and operations and continue to move forward on its path of annihilation (Gunaratna, 2003a).

This tactical shift should not be taken as a sign that al-Qaeda has given up in either its interest or intent to strike again within the U.S. They most certainly have not. The disrupted plots, uncovered cells, and ongoing intelligence provide ample evidence that al-Qaeda continues to pose a serious and persistent threat to the security of our homeland. There have been numerous arrests in the U.S. of both individuals and groups who are alleged to have been trained or training, planning, and attempting to organize and implement an attack on U.S. soil (Department of Homeland Security, 2004).

Those responsible for preventing terrorist attacks must continue to be vigilant in monitoring al-Qaeda's tactical and strategic changes, and mindful of the fact that they are a learning organization. Professionals and agencies with protective responsibilities should carefully attend to operational reviews of failed, aborted, and successful al-Qaeda-related attacks, many of which provide exquisite detail on what they did and did not do and could have done, and how these facts might affect threat and vulnerability assessments. Understanding and monitoring operational methodology has been a key to interrupting al-Qaeda's forward motion. Although the organization and its affiliated networks do learn and adapt, these efforts require time and resources. Al-Qaeda has demonstrated a patterned attack methodology that reflects primary reliance on fundamental non-technical tactical skills. However, they strive to advance their capabilities and seek actively to develop more technical capacity to create weapons of mass destruction.

Al-Qaeda continues to conduct extensive surveillance and to over-plan potential attacks. They have been described recently in the press as assessing the vulnerability of potential targets with excruciating detail (Eggen & Lancaster, 2004). Culturally, many affiliated with al-Qaeda are associative thinkers, so they attempt

to create and act on a linear attack 'template' to insure operational efficiency. The need for linearity and rote planning provides some insight into their focus on detail, need for extra time in planning, divisions of labor, and compartmentalization. Analyses of al-Qaeda's operational planning suggest they separate and divide the tasks so that individuals can attain a certain degree of proficiency and perform a series of actions almost mechanistically. Although compartmentalization has been a hallmark of al-Qaeda's operational security, it is also a functional necessity to execute attacks in which members perform their tasks and carry out their responsibilities without much background knowledge or technical sophistication.

Khalid Shaikh Mohammed—al-Qaeda's former chief operational strategist—is reported to be a proponent of the aphorism "to lose is to learn." This certainly is consistent with their past patterns of action, where they subsequently revisit foiled plans or unsuccessful attempts on targets, such as the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Moreover, they learn not only to be persistent, but also to attend to the causes of past failures. A classic example of this adaptation can be seen in preparations for the USS Cole attack. Just ten months before, the same al-Qaeda cell attempted a similar attack on the destroyer USS The Sullivans, but the plan failed when their attack boats sank from the excessive weight of the explosives loaded on board. The attackers modified their tactics accordingly and successfully carried out a water-borne suicide attack against USS Cole in the harbor of Aden. For an example in the post-9/11 era, as security increased and targets were hardened throughout the Middle East, al-Qaeda adopted a two-wave attack strategy in which an initial assault was launched on the perimeter security, facilitating access for the second attack wave to the primary target within. Knowing this would clearly affect the way in which security personnel would respond to preliminary indications of an assault. It also facilitated access to more symbolic and protected targets. The overarching lesson to be learned is that al-Qaeda is resilient and adaptable. Despite devastating losses and unrelenting pressure, they have evolved and reinvented themselves in ways that ultimately have multiplied, instead of diminished their influence.

## Recruitment and Training

Accompanying these changes in al-Qaeda's structure, leadership, and tactics were major transformations in the 'maintenance' functions of recruitment and training. Throughout the 1990s, al-Qaeda drew the majority of its recruits from other existing *jihadist* groups such as EIJ and from among the veteran *mujahidin* of Islamic resistances in Kashmir, Bosnia, Chechnya, and most especially the Afghan resistance against the Soviets (Gunaratna, 2002). In fact, the Islamic victory in pushing back the superpower gave recruitment efforts a substantial boost. It is always easier for 'winning' than for 'losing' groups to attract new members. After all, nothing succeeds like success.

Similar events and operational successes have enhanced al-Qaeda's pool of recruits in recent years as well. We already have discussed how Operation Iraqi Freedom has provided a new impetus for *mujahadin* and attracted an even larger and broader array of *jihadists*. In addition, the USS Cole bombing has been viewed as one of its most successful attacks, and has been exploited as a recruitment tool. Al-Qaeda has even produced a recruitment film that features 'footage' of the Cole

attack—although in reality the event was never captured on film because the designated videographer forgot to bring his camera to the launch site. The importance of that particular attack, however, was so critical that they deemed it necessary and appropriate to insert the unacknowledged ‘simulation’ into the tape. In the debriefing of arrestees from the so-called ‘Lackawanna six’ (or seven), one reported being personally moved by the USS Cole attack and impelled by the realization that America could ‘be touched.’

These recruiting enhancements have increased the size and quality of *jihadists* who might be mobilized to participate in an attack. In the 1990s, as bin Laden and al-Zawahiri were making impassioned calls for all Muslims to wage *jihad*, their principal criteria for potential affiliates were zeal and commitment. Persons were subsequently ‘screened’ more thoroughly in the training camps. In the current era, al-Qaeda rides on a reputation of operational success and—at least in most of the Islamic world—respect. They can be—and are—more selective about those they pursue or receive as members (Blanche, 2002). Capability and target access supplement zeal and commitment in preferred qualifications. For example, Jose Padilla was allegedly sent the US to conduct an attack. The question to be examined in future proceedings is whether it was Padilla’s technical capability or his access to the U.S. that motivated al-Qaeda to supposedly send Padilla back to the U.S. to organize and potentially execute an attack. Regarding access, they are particularly interested in people with U.S. or other Western passports who defy the typical al-Qaeda profile of the ‘young Arab male.’ In emphasizing technical capability, they can seek and recruit persons who already have particular technical knowledge in areas such as chemistry and engineering or operational skills such as bomb making or weapons use, rather than having to invest in developing all of these in basic recruits.

This evolution in recruitment is tied, in part, to changes in al-Qaeda’s training methodology. Their original tactical doctrines were heavily influenced—intellectually and instrumentally—by Hezbollah, one of the leading terrorist forces at the time. In Afghanistan, and particularly in Sudan, al-Qaeda learned and trained Hezbollah attack methodology, including the strategic use of suicide attacks and simultaneous attacks on multiple targets. Al-Qaeda’s original training infrastructure was based on leftover facilities and equipment from the Afghan war against the Soviets (Gunaratna, 2002). These were the cornerstones of the well known—and now decimated—al-Qaeda training camps. Some reports suggest that tens of thousands of individuals were trained in organized al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and Sudan. Not even a fraction of that number, however, have been killed or captured, suggesting that many extremists trained and committed to fight in a *jihad* remain at large.

Now that the organized training camps have been dismantled, al-Qaeda has been relegated to conduct training in a home school environment, on the job, or over the internet. There are many active *jihadists* today who have had not formal training, but who participate in cells that are a part of the al-Qaeda diasporas (Abuza, 2004). They receive training either in small seminars held in safe houses or are self-taught on the hundreds of web sites containing lessons that were previously taught in the organized camps. These individuals are committed to *jihad* and use the messages from Usama bin Laden to guide their efforts to wage war against the infidel. Their level of technical capability is somewhat less clear, although some are known to have technical training and sophistication that exceed those found in groups of the past. Technical skill and capacity inevitably translates into more sophisticated operational

practices and the greater probability that al-Qaeda could develop and implement a weapon of mass destruction.

Other recruits learn by doing. Iraq, for those who can gain access, has become a fertile training ground for Arab and other *jihadi* fighters seeking to gain some on the job training and operational experience (Katzman, 2004). While the tides of foreign fighters into Iraq have ebbed and flowed, the Iraq-based *jihadi* will generate enough tutors for local cells to promote continued threats and attacks against Western interests for years to come. As the diasporas migrate into Europe and elsewhere, the threat and influence of al-Qaeda will increase even further, just as occurred with the former *mujahidin* after the Afghan Soviet War (Ignatieff, 2004). Usama and al-Zawahiri need do little more than perpetuate the message, reinforce the philosophy, and fund the appropriate sources.

## CONCLUSION

The influence of al-Qaeda is, and for the foreseeable future will be, the foremost threat to US national security and safety. The nature of that influence and threat has changed substantially, however, over the past 15 years, and it continues to evolve as the network learns from its successes and failures and adapts to security and intelligence efforts designed to thwart them. After coalition forces decimated their original leadership core, they spawned a second generation of leaders, allowed cells to be led at a lower level, and emphasized inspirational, rather than tactical, leadership. Al-Qaeda has expanded its areas and mode of operation by acting through a network of associated or affiliate organizations in various parts of the world. They have modified their tactics and target selection strategy, and re-vamped their recruitment and training methods. More of these changes are certain to be forthcoming. For example, there is already increasing concern that al-Qaeda may be targeting ships and other maritime targets in addition to air and other forms of transportation (Gunaratna, 2003b; Sinai, 2004), and that they are seeking to extend their tactical approach beyond on-location attacks, including suicide bombings, to include more remote attacks, such as firing man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) or rocket propelled grenades at airliners or other targets (Bales, 2003).

Most importantly, al-Qaeda has evolved from a group, to an organization, to a network, and ultimately—in its current form—to an international *jihadi* movement that embraces and promotes a virulent and militant anti-Western ideology (Gunaratna, 2003a; Rauffer, 2003; Stern, 2003). From a behavioral perspective, understanding and monitoring these changes in structure and operational methodology have been—and will continue to be—critical to interrupting al-Qaeda's forward motion, and to developing appropriate aims and effective strategies to defeat them.

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