

## Al-Qa`ida's Five Aspects of Power

By The Combating Terrorism Center

SEVEN AND A HALF years after 9/11, the global community faces a resilient and dangerous al-Qa`ida. Despite immense efforts to understand al-Qa`ida, informed analysts disagree widely over its actual strength. Some consider the group a visceral and literal threat to Western civilization. Others proclaim the organization is irrelevant given the isolation of its senior leaders in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Finally, some point to al-Qa`ida's failure to prosecute meaningful attacks in the United States since 9/11, and the absence of successful large attacks in the West since the London bombings in 2005, as evidence of the organization's decline.

These metrics are important, but they are incomplete and when assessed in isolation lead to false conclusions. Any assessment of al-Qa`ida must consider al-Qa`ida's goals and a variety of metrics that capture all aspects of the organization's power. This article examines al-Qa`ida across five factors that encompass all aspects of the group's power: 1) the power to destroy; 2) the power to inspire; 3) the power to humiliate; 4) the power to command; and 5) the power to unify. These aspects of power are not unique to al-Qa`ida, but they are particularly relevant for a terrorist organization with global ambitions and reach. Far more comprehensive than metrics based solely on capture/kill rates of enemy leaders or attack trends, this approach leverages proxy measures that provide insight to the critical relationship between the organization that is al-Qa`ida and its associated movement. This is important because it is this symbiotic—and symbolic—relationship that lends al-Qa`ida its operational durability in the face of overwhelming pressure.

From this vantage point, al-Qa`ida and its associated movement remain a significant threat that cannot be dismissed. The organization is vibrant and its movement has gained strength through an increasingly dominant Islamist narrative. Recent

gains against al-Qa`ida's leadership elements in Pakistan present significant opportunities to weaken the core organization. Nevertheless, al-Qa`ida's peripheral elements are minimally dependent on its core leadership, so the gains from strikes on leadership elements may not achieve decisive effects. Finally, while the ideological divisions within the movement are important and must be better understood—and better exploited—they may not be nearly as significant as they appear.

### The Power to Destroy

Al-Qa`ida's operational capacity varies substantially in different regions. Along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, al-Qa`ida supports increasingly assertive Taliban forces that demonstrate a dangerous ability to extend their fight into Pakistan's urban centers. In Iraq, al-Qa`ida's ability to attack across wide swaths of the country has declined. Al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) maintains the ability to ambush U.S. and Iraqi forces and use suicide bombers to attack innocent civilians, but its overall capacity is dramatically weaker than at its height. Al-Qa`ida's status across the greater Middle East is mixed. Since 2003, the group has been largely crushed in Saudi Arabia, but it is deepening its activities in Yemen and Lebanon, and it has aspirations to build an organization in the Palestinian Territories. In Africa, al-Qa`ida has gained a serious presence in Algeria but is still unable to threaten the viability of the state. In Egypt, al-Qa`ida is weak, hampered by effective security services and a Muslim Brotherhood that dominates the Islamist landscape. Al-Qa`ida has demonstrated a capability to establish operational cells in Europe, although since 2005 they have been unable to attack effectively. In the United States, al-Qa`ida has not organized a successful attack since 9/11. Today, al-Qa`ida's propaganda emphasizes the importance of "individualized jihad" in the West, which may mean it faces problems importing fighters from outside the country.

### The Power to Inspire

The mechanism linking al-Qa`ida's organizational components with the broader associated movement is its strategic messaging efforts—the conduit for brand awareness and the expansion of the movement. The distributed

social movement that is al-Qa`ida is multi-generational, without geographic center, transnational in nature, virtual in design and exceptionally difficult to target effectively. As such, government approaches to understanding organizational strength bifurcate tactical metrics (kill/capture rates) and operational metrics (organizational mergers and geographic expansion) from what is perceived as more ephemeral attributes such as messaging. It is imperative that these dimensions be considered in concert with one another to develop meaningful counter-terrorism strategies.

Despite serious setbacks to its messaging efforts in the past two years, al-Qa`ida reestablished its messaging infrastructure and remains well-positioned to communicate with worldwide audiences. The decline of AQI, Hizb Allah's success in its 2006 war with Israel, a temporarily effective campaign to shut down jihadist websites in the summer and fall of 2008, and a series of statements criticizing al-Qa`ida by jihadist thinkers—such as Usama bin Ladin's mentor Salman al-Awda and former Ayman al-Zawahiri EIJ collaborator Sayyid Imam al-Sharif—impeded al-Qa`ida's messaging strategy. It is Iran, Hizb Allah and Hamas, however, that present the most significant obstacles to al-Qa`ida's strategic messaging efforts. Recent activities by these three entities have provided a model for action to Shi`a and Sunni militants that has, to some degree, eclipsed al-Qa`ida's messaging efforts. In many ways, these more "mainstream" efforts offer broader appeal to Muslims across the political spectrum and reach a far wider audience.

Al-Qa`ida's messaging acumen, however, goes far beyond message projection and brand awareness efforts. Indeed, the efforts to segment its audience have enabled a far more nuanced messaging strategy than many give it credit for. By tailoring its message, al-Qa`ida applies universal themes such as Western humiliation of the Muslim world to local contexts. As a result, al-Qa`ida continues to maintain message discipline, flexibility, and an opportunistic posture in this largely uncontested battle space. Moving forward, al-Qa`ida will continue to leverage contemporary events, increase

its message distribution channels (including online blogs, rap videos and video games), and strive to ensure message discipline when communicating to the global Muslim populace.

Presently, U.S. government efforts to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE), especially the ideology espoused by al-Qa`ida, lack focus, leadership, adequate resources and clearly defined/delineated authorities needed to successfully execute this important mission. The National Implementation Plan and various National Security Strategies provide strategic-level CVE guidance; however, the United States presently does not have an operational CVE plan, resulting in a significant gap between strategy and local implementation. This inaction to counter violent extremism has ceded the ideological battlefield to al-Qa`ida. As such, it would appear irrelevant as to whether or not U.S. military actions have actually degraded al-Qa`ida's abilities; the popular perception is that the movement has gotten stronger, or at a minimum has not been affected, over this period. Recent Pew data reveal that of the individuals polled who identified themselves as supporters of al-Qa`ida, 51% felt that the war against al-Qa`ida actually strengthened the terrorist group, while 21% believed that military action had no effect on the movement. Even among self-identified non-supporters of al-Qa`ida, a full two-thirds believe that U.S. military operations have strengthened the terrorists or have had no effect. In both instances, only a quarter of respondents felt that al-Qa`ida has been weakened during the last eight years.<sup>1</sup> Country specific data reveals even more alarming trends.

#### *Pakistan*

Nearly one-third of Pakistanis hold a favorable opinion of al-Qa`ida and Usama bin Ladin, while only 17% have a favorable view of the United States. Much of the enmity stems from the belief that the United States is responsible for the violence in their country (52%) and that the United States poses the greatest threat to their personal safety (44%). The threat from the United States is perceived as greater than that from India, whereas only eight percent

of Pakistanis blame al-Qa`ida for the violence. Nearly half of respondents who support Usama bin Ladin do so because they feel that he stands up to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Usama bin Ladin*

With small exceptions, public opinion toward Usama bin Ladin has generally trended downward since 9/11. Several countries experienced significant declines. In 2003, 59% of Indonesians, 56% of Jordanians and 46% of Pakistanis had confidence in Usama bin Ladin. By 2008, however, 37% of Indonesians, 19% of Jordanians and 34% of Pakistanis professed support for Bin Ladin. The one exception to this trend is in Nigeria, which has actually experienced an increase from 44% to 58% in the number of people who supported Bin Ladin during this time period.<sup>3</sup>

There is some hope in the fact that Bin Ladin is not as popular as only a few years ago. This decline in popularity may be attributable to the increasing displeasure within the Muslim world of the Muslim-on-Muslim violence often perpetrated by al-Qa`ida. Despite this shift, the data leave much to be concerned about—namely, that even in Pakistan where support for Bin Ladin fell by 12% over five years, still more than one in three Pakistanis supported Bin Ladin's efforts. Finally, even with Bin Ladin's declining popularity, the very real fear remains that extremist messaging is taking hold and threatening broader interests across the region.<sup>4</sup> Long-run analysis may reveal that the demise of al-Qa`ida may not prove the victory it is hoped should its ideas continue to gain traction.

#### **The Power to Humiliate**

Al-Qa`ida's primary strategy is to humiliate and delegitimize Arab governments. Although it has achieved

notable successes in this effort during the last five years, current trends limit al-Qa`ida's ability to portray itself as the clear alternative to corrupt regimes. The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq forced Arab governments into a terrible choice: support U.S. efforts and alienate their populations, or oppose U.S. efforts and risk alienating their primary patron. While that fundamental dynamic still holds, AQI's brutal violence against Muslims undercut al-Qa`ida's efforts to use the Iraq and Afghan wars to bolster its own legitimacy. More recently, Hizb Allah and Hamas have undermined al-Qa`ida's claim to be the vanguard of the Muslim world by achieving substantive militant victories while cooperating with Iran and participating in elections—both unacceptable to al-Qa`ida hardliners. In doing so, they—rather than al-Qa`ida—have become the primary groups shaming and humiliating Arab governments. Such setbacks are unlikely to be fatal to al-Qa`ida, but they are critically important because they constrain the group's ability to achieve its aims.

#### **The Power to Command**

Equally important to the strength of messaging is the degree to which the movement is unified. Unfortunately, internal debates between the ideologues and tacticians may present less opportunity for exploitation than previously thought. Internal disagreements about the use of violence and the best practices for mass mobilization are outweighed by the unity found on core issues such as the importance of jihad, the immutability of the Qur'an, and the importance of mass mobilization. While these differences should not be ignored, they should also not be overstated. It should be recognized that the differences are similar to those found in any political movement—disagreements over means.

Al-Qa`ida has had to confront the uncomfortable reality that attempts at mass mobilization result in more voices, and more voices mean greater variation in opinion and interpretation. This debate or dissention creates an internal dilemma for a group that relies on a single and immutable ideology. As al-Qa`ida's message started to reach more Muslims, the group confronted debates over fundamental issues such as the concepts of *takfir* (labeling Muslims as

<sup>1</sup> "US 'War on Terror' Has Not Weakened al Qaeda, Says Global Poll," BBC World Service, September 29, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Pakistanis Strongly Back Negotiations with Al Qaeda and Taliban Over Military Action; Public Support for Al Qaeda Gaining Ground," Terror Free Tomorrow, June 2008.

<sup>3</sup> "Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001-2008)," Pew Global Attitudes Project, December 2008.

<sup>4</sup> There is significant concern across Lebanon (78%), Pakistan (72%), Egypt (72%), Jordan (61%), Indonesia (60%) and Nigeria (53%) about Islamic extremism within their respective countries and a similar concern about the rise of Islamic extremism outside of their respective countries within the world.

infidels) and *al-Tatarrus* (human shields). The group has relied mainly on old *fatawa* that were issued by Ibn Taymiyya, and many believe these *fatawa* are inapplicable to modern life. The ongoing debate between Sayyid Imam al-Sharif and Ayman al-Zawahiri provide recent evidence of these tensions. While many in al-Qai`da question Sayyid Imam al-Sharif's legitimacy, al-Zawahiri still believed it necessary to respond. Similar criticisms about al-Qai`da and its use of violence against Muslims have also been voiced by Abu Muhammad al-Maqqadi.

Within the al Qai`da organization and the wider movement, there is widespread agreement that jihad is the only tool to make Shari'a prevail over man-made laws. This provides al-Qa`ida with a degree of legitimacy and uniqueness over all other Islamic movements, including organizations such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The debates occurring within the Islamist extremist community and the Arab world on these issues represent opportunities for government counter-terrorism efforts and may reflect the growing dissatisfaction and disapproval of al-Qa`ida. It is difficult at best, however, to gauge the impact of the disagreements on the broader support networks. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif's disagreement with al-Zawahiri may resonate far more in the West than in the Arab world.

#### The Power to Unify

Physical sanctuary in Pakistan has provided immense value to al-Qa`ida's efforts to regain control over the movement, and it has allowed the core group to better enable its affiliated organizations. The organization has expanded through selective mergers and affiliations in Somalia, Yemen, South Africa, West Africa, the Levant and Algeria. The al-Qa`ida affiliates that developed in these regions present a lesser, yet persistent threat strengthening the brand, further perpetuating the movement. Affiliate organizations offer greater opportunities for al-Qa`ida as well as increased risk due to loss of control of its message, brand and target selection. Despite the risks, al-Qa`ida has continued to expand.

Al-Qa`ida is more diverse today than ever before. The organization itself is only one part of a larger Salafist constellation. The relationship between al-Qa`ida, its associated movement and the broader Salafist community is one that "co-evolve(s) within specific historical contexts and complex religious belief systems."<sup>5</sup> Al-Qa`ida leverages this dynamic to search for new opportunities within the rapidly changing security environment. The reconfiguration, or adaptation, of its resources in response to environmental shifts is critical to al-Qa`ida's resiliency. Desire for long-run performance dictates that al-Qa`ida must shift its resources from mature situations to emerging growth opportunities. This "asset orchestration" is how a group seeks to maintain its position. One method of this that has proved successful for al-Qa`ida has been its mergers or alignment with other like-minded organizations. Many

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analysts have mistakenly viewed al-Qa`ida's mergers as a sign of weakness of the organization, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Instead, the continued interest of existing and new organizations to align with al-Qa`ida reflects the significant appeal and pervasive nature of its ideology and success of its messaging efforts. These mergers not only serve as a force multiplier for al-Qa`ida, but they also effectively lower the barriers of entry to the jihad, creating increased opportunity and access for participation in the global jihad.

Between 2003 and 2007, al-Qa`ida aligned itself with 10 new and extant groups (excluding affiliated groups operating in Iraq). Through these gains, al-Qa`ida increased its presence in at least 19 countries, conducting

operations in Europe, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, and West Africa. In each of these years, one to two groups aligned with al-Qa`ida, with four groups affiliating in 2004. Al-Qa`ida's decision to merger or align with a given organization can suggest one of several, sometimes incongruent, attributes: al-Qa`ida's core has the capacity to coordinate and manage geographically distant assets; al-Qa`ida's core is successfully propagating a desirable brand; al-Qa`ida cannot or does not want to project its own power but requires entry into the local support infrastructure and attack network. A decision not to affiliate with a given organization, as was the case with Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon, demonstrates that al-Qa`ida can be selective and will protect its brand from dilution in certain circumstances.

Yet mergers are not without risk. The lack of control over target selection and the difficulty in maintaining message coherence with affiliate organizations can present significant difficulties to al-Qa`ida. For example, merging with Jama`at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad gave al-Qa`ida significant presence and influence in the Iraqi insurgency, but ultimately led to a popular backlash against al-Qa`ida because of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi's excessive tactics. Mergers and alignments also allow al-Qa`ida to diversify its interests and create opportunities for new sanctuaries. Al-Qa`ida's long-standing interest in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen—countries or areas identified in its writings as core states—have driven al-Qa`ida to establish a presence in each of these locations at different times. In addition to these areas, the periphery of the jihadist diaspora is equally important, if not more so to al-Qa`ida's long-term future. The mutually reinforcing nature of al-Qa`ida's structure (the organized and self-organized cells) presents great opportunities for the organization.

As the strength of al-Qa`ida's core grows, the group is in a better position to enable the periphery to act in a seemingly self-organized, autonomous manner. Whether examining al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or "homegrown" cells in Europe, al-Qa`ida long ago recognized the importance of

<sup>5</sup> These comments were made by Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Michael Hayden.

establishing a presence in areas beyond the Middle East. Indeed, the last five major plots in Europe had direct ties to al-Qa`ida in FATA (London 7/7, London 7/21, the 2007 German plot, the 2006 British airliners plot and the 2004 attacks in Madrid). The symbiotic relationship between core and periphery indicates that the movement can offset losses in the core's ability to operate, acting as a force multiplier for the overall organization and the associated movement.

### **The Way Forward**

The success that al-Qa`ida has realized in the past seven years is not wholly attributable to its foresight, strategic planning and organizational design. In reality, many of al-Qa`ida's achievements result from the failure to challenge al-Qa`ida across the entire spectrum of conflict. The co-evolutionary dynamics of the security environment mandate a "whole of government" approach to the problems facing us today.

Analysts and policymakers alike must gain conceptual clarity of al-Qa`ida's dual nature: the organization, and its distributed social movement. Counterterrorism efforts too often ignore the political, ideological and religious underpinnings of the movement. Unfortunately, in the current fight against al-Qa`ida, a poor understanding of the enemy's ideology has led to unproductive and sometimes counter-productive strategy and tactics that fail to link the tactical/operational fight with broader strategic goals. Ultimately, this requires a different understanding of our adversary's strengths and weaknesses. The metrics presented in this article offer insight not available from traditional kill/capture metrics often used, and they may lead to different strategic choices over time. Until that time, a true understanding of al-Qa`ida will elude us.

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