

Afghan Taliban's agenda. Today, al-Qa`ida continues to drape itself in the Taliban flag and proclaims allegiance to Mullah Omar. Yet as it did in the 1990s, it is simultaneously pursuing strategic objectives that directly threaten those of Mullah Omar. In many ways, the Afghan Taliban remain as dependent on support from Pakistan as they were prior to 9/11. Yet it is against this very patron, and under a Taliban banner, that al-Qa`ida and its coalition of Pakistani jihadists are waging a bloody campaign of suicide terrorism. Mullah Omar has flatly condemned this campaign, telling his purported "followers" in Pakistan's tribal areas that they are "bringing a bad name" to the Taliban and "harming the war against the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan."³⁸

The "Commander of the Faithful," however, has proven unable to command these particular faithful, and the violence in Pakistan's cities rages on. This says less about the limits of Mullah Omar's authority than it does about the expedient nature of the allegiances that al-Qa`ida and its partners profess. To achieve its objectives in the region, the policy community must strive for a more nuanced understanding of these allegiances, the purposes they serve, and the underlying tensions they conceal.

Vahid Brown is a Research Fellow with the Combating Terrorism Center, as well as a senior instructor for the Center's FBI program.

Assessing the Al-Qa`ida Threat to the United States

By Martha Crenshaw

This article is based on testimony before the Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment, Committee on Homeland Security, United States House of Representatives, Hearing on Reassessing the Evolving al-Qa`ida Threat to the Homeland, November 19, 2009, Washington, D.C. The author adapted her testimony for use in the CTC Sentinel.

ALTHOUGH AL-QA`IDA IS substantially weaker than it was on the eve of the 9/11 attacks, it still poses an active threat to the United States and its allies.¹ Transnational reach is central to al-Qa`ida's identity, and it is organized to carry out this mission. The expanded U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and continued strikes against the core leadership in Pakistan may cause the remaining al-Qa`ida operatives to grow more desperate to activate supporters in the West. Local militants may be motivated to act to avoid failure and the collapse of the cause. Al-Qa`ida's leaders have likely given up the idea of a repetition of 9/11 and would settle for less spectacular but lethal attacks on civilian targets.

¹ A sampling of many works on jihadist attacks and plots in the West would include: Petter Nesser, "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994-2007: Planned, Prepared, and Executed Terrorist Attacks," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31:10 (2008): pp. 924-46; Edwin Baker, "Jihadi Terrorists in Europe," Netherlands Institute of International Relations, December 2006; "Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terror Networks," Forsvarets Forskningsinstitutt (FFI) Seminar, Oslo, Norway, 2006, along with many other FFI Reports from the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment; Lorenzo Vidino, *Al Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2006); Jeffrey M. Bale, "Jihadist Cells and 'I.E.D.' Capabilities in Europe: Assessing the Present and Future Threat to the West," unpublished paper, Monterey Institute of International Studies, 2009; Lorenzo Vidino, "Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States: A New and Occasional Phenomenon?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32:1 (2009): pp. 1-17; Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," New York City Police Department Intelligence Division, 2007.

This article examines the three levels that constitute al-Qa`ida's overall structure and then assesses the terrorist group's intentions going forward.

The Organization

Al-Qa`ida has always depended as much on local initiative as on top-down direction, and in the aftermath of 9/11 it has dispersed even more. Its complex organizational structure is somewhere between a centralized hierarchy and a decentralized flat network. It is a flexible and adaptable organization that has survived well beyond the lifespan of most other terrorist groups. It is a web of overlapping conspiracies, often piggy-backing on local conflicts and grievances. In many ways it is a transnational secret society. Clandestine cells are the norm, not the mobilization of mass support.

The structure of the organization can be analyzed on three levels: al-Qa`ida central in Pakistan; the second tier leadership; cells (or micro-cells) and individuals.

Al-Qa`ida Central

The key policy issue is leadership and leadership potential. Although the leadership does not control the worldwide organization, it provides ideological direction and guidance as well as some resources (mainly assistance with training and funding). Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri are compelling motivational figures. Locally, al-Qa`ida is a disruptive player in Pakistani politics.

The leadership is reduced in number and many key operational personnel have been captured or killed. There can be no doubt that their loss is a serious blow to the organization. It is demoralizing as well as debilitating. In addition, communication is impeded. Under pressure it is harder to communicate both within the leadership group and to supporters outside, although it is clearly not impossible since al-Qa`ida's media outlet still operates.

There are a number of key questions concerning al-Qa`ida's central leadership. Can the removed leaders be replaced? If there is no effective succession, can the core leadership continue to function under pressure? Can it maintain communication with the rest of the organization and with

³⁸ These quotes are drawn from a letter addressed to leaders of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan in February 2009. For details, see Tufail.

the world, which is essential to survival as the vanguard of jihad? Is the top leadership essential to mounting terrorist attacks against and in the West?

Could the al-Qa`ida leadership survive without a base in Pakistan or Afghanistan? Could it be transplanted to another conflict zone such as Somalia or Yemen? Al-Qa`ida has been rooted in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater for almost 30 years. Rebuilding a base in a new location would be problematic and perhaps impossible.

Moreover, does al-Qa`ida need a territorial location at all? One reason for a base may be to maintain training camps rather than ensure the functioning of the core leadership. Although experts disagree, the author's judgment is that hands-on training is important to the tactical success of terrorist attacks. Expertise in handling explosives, tradecraft, and operational security are learned through experience, not through the internet or training manuals.

Another question is the relationship between al-Qa`ida central and diverse Taliban factions in Afghanistan and Pakistan. One scenario is that if the United States and NATO withdraw forces, the Taliban will regain control in Afghanistan, and al-Qa`ida will return to its pre-9/11 home and pose the same deadly threat as before. Pakistan would then be likely to make an accommodation with both the Taliban and al-Qa`ida. This assumption appears to be the logic behind the current strategy of the Barack Obama administration. On the other hand, there may be no coherent "Taliban" but a mix of local interests. Such a weak coalition is not likely to secure control of the country, and even if a faction of the Taliban did take power it might not be sympathetic to al-Qa`ida and in fact might be hostile. After all, it was al-Qa`ida's recklessness that led to the Taliban's defeat in 2001. In fact, some proponents of the new Afghanistan strategy hope that pragmatic elements of the Taliban will be willing to compromise, which assumes that the Taliban is not monolithic and suggests that its disparate elements would not be able to control Afghanistan.

Another consideration is that al-Qa`ida may not need Afghanistan as long as it has a base in Pakistan. How will

U.S. policy in Afghanistan affect the Pakistani government's willingness and ability to confront al-Qa`ida? Apparently, al-Qa`ida has a closer relationship with the Pakistani Taliban than with the Afghan Taliban, and it is the Pakistani Taliban that committed the spectacular acts of terrorism that provoked a military offensive from the Pakistani government (in terms of a threat to the homeland, recall that the Pakistani Taliban has exhibited a capacity for organizing terrorism outside of the region, such as the 2008 Barcelona plot). Perhaps the United States should leave the eradication of al-Qa`ida to the Pakistani military and intelligence services. On the other hand, Pakistan may not be willing or able to do the job, especially considering the high levels of anti-Americanism among the country's public. Uncertainty about U.S. intentions after the summer of 2011—which is the start of withdrawal date for U.S. forces in Afghanistan—will lead to equivocation.

The Second-Tier Leadership

It is a mistake to think of al-Qa`ida as composed solely of a core leadership at the top and self-generated or self-radicalized volunteers who respond independently to the call for jihad at the bottom. The intermediate level of leadership is equally important.

The first type of interface consists of affiliated or merged local organizations with their own interests in specific conflict zones, such as Lashkar-i-Tayyiba, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, the revived al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operating in Yemen, or al-Shabab in Somalia. They are either branches of the central organization or associates that have adopted the al-Qa`ida brand or label. In return, al-Qa`ida central acquires transnational reach as well as the all important image of a force that mobilizes Muslims around the world. Some of these alliances are fragile, as local affiliates discover the high price of joining. An important part of the al-Qa`ida brand is suicide attacks on civilian targets, including on Muslim civilians. This requirement has apparently provoked dissension among supporters. Nevertheless, a number of attacks and plots in the West can be linked to these groups. They also pose

real threats to political stability in Yemen and Somalia.

The second mid-level interface is composed of local leaders in Western countries, often Muslim clerics (for example, at the Finsbury Park Mosque in London, which drew adherents from across Europe) but including other activists as well. They are public figures, not covert operatives. It is difficult

“Even if a faction of the Taliban did take power, it might not be sympathetic to al-Qa`ida and in fact might be hostile. After all, it was al-Qa`ida's recklessness that led to the Taliban's defeat in 2001.”

to trace their direct connections to al-Qa`ida central, but clearly they have adopted its principles. They provide more than just inspiration by calling for jihad against the West. They also organize young men in summer camps, sports clubs, and other venues for socialization, indoctrination, and recruitment. In the years since 9/11 and particularly since the London bombings in July 2005, Western governments have arrested or deported radical clerics and closed down mosques (or assisted in a transfer of control).

Recruits and Volunteers

A major concern is transnational recruitment in the West or among individuals who move easily to and from the West. From what little is known, recruitment processes at the individual level vary. Typically, it is difficult to establish a connection between a local militant and al-Qa`ida or to determine who took the initiative in making contact. As seen in the 9/11 conspiracy, the process combines both volunteering and active recruiting by activists or organizers—it is bottom-up and top-down at the same time. Some individuals in the West initially travel abroad to fight, but when they arrive al-Qa`ida leaders persuade them to return home to attack their own societies.

Key factors in recruitment include family and social ties in the local setting as well as to a country of origin, access to training camps, and collective encouragement as well as contacts in institutions such as mosques, sports centers, or prisons. Social network theory is often used to map out these relationships (usually through friendship and kinship networks). The internet also contributes to radicalization and recruitment, but operational control probably requires

“The radicalization process can apparently occur quickly. Individuals can rapidly move from a secular lifestyle to extreme religiosity and then to the endorsement of violence. It is difficult to predict who will take this path.”

face-to-face contact. A recruiter may be in touch with an individual who then reaches out to other individuals to form a conspiracy, or a recruiter may enlist an already-formed group that appears promising. Recruits have included first generation, second generation, and even third generation immigrants as well as converts. Some are citizens, but others are illegal residents. Some appear well-assimilated, well-educated, upwardly mobile, and prosperous, while others are rootless and marginal. Some have criminal backgrounds, some do not. Most participants in these conspiracies are male, and in Western Europe most were initially recruited in their country of residence.

The radicalization process can apparently occur quickly. Individuals can rapidly move from a secular lifestyle to extreme religiosity and then to the endorsement of violence. It is difficult to predict who will take this path.

An important policy question, and yet another point of dispute among experts, is whether or not non-violent Islamist-oriented organizations serve as conveyor belts for recruitment into underground cells or instead as safety valves that

divert potential extremists away from the path to terrorism. Hizb al-Tahrir (also known as Hizb-ut-Tahrir), which seeks the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and is estimated to have a million members worldwide, is a case in point. Western governments have taken different positions on this issue, some banning these organizations and others not (usually on grounds of freedom of speech and association).

These associations may not be effective substitutes for violence because committed extremists are impatient with endless philosophical discussion and are eager for action. They are not attracted to moderate Islamism and do not find its representatives persuasive or credible. This rejection is an impediment to a policy that tries to end terrorism by encouraging moderates within the same general community of belief to take a stand against violent extremism. It is important to remember, however, that those who use violence are a tiny minority.

Al-Qa`ida's Intentions

Considering the diversity of perspectives within the organization, it is unsurprising that al-Qa`ida's motivations are not necessarily consistent or uniform. There are many currents of jihadist thought.² It is also logical that the goals of the top leadership would be couched in vague terms, reflecting their conception of a minimum common denominator. The author's interest is in the beliefs and objectives that drive attacks on the United States, especially attacks on or within the homeland, and on allies of the United States. Will the rationale

2 For a small selection of recent works on ideology and organization, see Devin R. Springer, James L. Regens, and David N. Edger, *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009); Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Raymond Ibrahim ed. and trans., *The Al Qaeda Reader* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007); Gilles Kepel et al., *Al-Qa`ida dans le Texte* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005); Bruce Lawrence ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005); Mark E. Stout et al., *The Terrorist Perspectives Project: Strategic and Operational Views of Al Qa`ida and Associated Movements* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008); Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qa`ida Strategist Abu Mus`ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

for attacking the West be altered as circumstances change? What is the implication of the surge in Afghanistan, coinciding with a drawdown in Iraq?

The narrative promoted by the top leadership—reflected in statements by Bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, the jihadist strategist Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, and others—is that violent jihad is an obligatory response to encroachments on Muslim lands by the “Crusaders and Jews.” Jihad is considered fundamentally defensive and thus essential as long as Islam is in danger. It is also an obligation at the level of the individual, as authorized by al-Qa`ida. The framing of terrorism as a defense against aggression toward the *umma* (the Muslim community, not al-Qa`ida itself) and as an individual duty is coupled with another justification. Al-Qa`ida explains terrorism as a way of making citizens of the West suffer as Muslims have suffered—to establish equivalence by bringing the war home. Communications emphasize the suffering of civilians at the hands of the United States and its allies fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Palestinian victims of Israel are also cited as evidence of the enemy's perfidy.

These messages constitute powerful and urgent emotional appeals to defend one's community and one's faith and to take revenge on their persecutors. Martyrdom is the highest expression of commitment (since the war in Iraq, it has become an al-Qa`ida trademark, although suicide attacks began in the early 1980s and were initially conducted by secular or Shi`a groups). There is no indication of a change in the view expressed by al-Qa`ida theoretician Abu Mus`ab al-Suri in 2005: the lesson of history is that terrorism is the most useful political method to compel an opponent to surrender to one's will.³

Demonstrating that Muslims in the West can be mobilized in the service of these collective aims is a legitimizing device for al-Qa`ida. Sponsoring terrorist attacks in the West is an ideological imperative, essential to al-Qa`ida's identity and image. Promoting terrorism

3 See “The Strategy of Deterring with Terrorism,” in “The Global Islamic Resistance Call,” (2005) excerpts translated as an appendix to Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*, pp. 413-19. Al-Suri was captured in Pakistan in 2005.

in the West is all the more important to their reputation because challenging the United States in the Middle East has failed so far, although al-Zawahiri boasts that al-Qa`ida has won in every conflict. The al-Qa`ida challenge to Saudi Arabia also collapsed, and Egypt is a lost cause. The outcomes of the conflicts in Yemen and Somalia remain to be determined.

Decentralization is also a practical response to pressure. Following the logic that most terrorism is local, instigating local cells to attack the enemy at home is the most effective way of reaching Western territory. Mounting an attack from abroad is logistically difficult. Al-Suri explicitly acknowledged that dispersion into small units is the most effective way of maintaining the organization and continuing the struggle in the face of the effectiveness of post-9/11 counterterrorism.

It is instructive to look at al-Qa`ida's and its sympathizers' reactions to President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo in June 2009 calling for a new beginning as expressed in online forums. In general, the initiative was interpreted as a threat. Al-Zawahiri was scornful of Muslims who were deceived into welcoming a dialogue or partnership with the West. Al-Zawahiri appealed to nationalism in both Egypt and Pakistan (interestingly, speaking in English to a Pakistani audience and referring frequently to the honor of the military). Jihadist online circles also seemed alarmed by Muslims' positive reception of the Obama message. One theme of jihadist discourse is that Obama's deceptive "sweet-talk" and cajoling cannot be permitted to weaken Muslim hatred for the United States. Another is that U.S. policy will not change—the new approach renouncing the war on terrorism is mere rhetoric, and the United States will continue to kill Muslims and support Israel. These views will be reinforced by the new strategy in Afghanistan; no matter how careful U.S. forces try to be, civilian casualties are inevitable.

A common view in these discussions is that jihadists must act because of the cowardice of leaders in Muslim countries (Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular), including the *ulama* or clergy. Online comments also remind audiences that

there has not been a successful attack against a target in the West since 2005. Criticism of their passivity presents a challenge for al-Qa`ida loyalists.

Is there Muslim opposition to the al-Qa`ida worldview? Some prominent Muslim clerics have taken a strong stand against al-Qa`ida's doctrine (particularly in Saudi Arabia and Egypt), but their critiques are unlikely to moderate the views of major al-Qa`ida leaders. Delegitimizing the jihadist message might discourage potential recruits who have not yet moved to violence, but it is almost impossible to know. Al-Qa`ida and the Taliban typically deflect internal criticism of bomb attacks that kill Muslim civilians by evoking conspiracy theories: the true perpetrators are invariably the Central Intelligence Agency, the Mossad, Pakistani intelligence, or other shadowy agents of the enemy.

Conclusion

Al-Qa`ida is declining, but it is still a dangerous organization. It is not a mass popular movement, but rather a complex, transnational, and multilayered organization with both clandestine and above-ground elements. It has proved durable and persistent. The determination of its leaders to attack the United States is undiminished and might strengthen as the organization is threatened, but another attack on the scale of 9/11 is unlikely.

Dr. Martha Crenshaw is a Senior Fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) and the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, as well as Professor of Political Science, by courtesy, at Stanford University. She is also Professor of Government Emerita at Wesleyan University, where she taught from 1974 to 2007. She is a lead investigator with the National Center for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism (NC-START) at the University of Maryland. Dr. Crenshaw is a former President of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) and was a Guggenheim Fellow in 2005-2006. Her current research focuses on why the United States is a target of terrorism and the effectiveness of countermeasures against terrorism. She recently edited The Consequences of Counterterrorism, forthcoming from the Russell Sage Foundation.

The Pakistan Military's Adaptation to Counterinsurgency in 2009

By Sameer Lalwani

FACED WITH A rising and emboldened insurgency in its tribal belt, Pakistan's military has come under fire in recent years for failure to adapt its military doctrine, which is based around conventional warfare, to tackle the internal threats of insurgency and terrorism.¹ Not adapting to unconventional warfare has been used to explain Pakistan's failures to quell insurgency in the tribal areas, high civilian and soldier casualties, rising levels of resentment and militancy, three major operational failures in South Waziristan, and its overall poor battlefield performance.² Underscoring this concern is the mounting evidence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) rapid learning and adaptation that poses a serious threat to the state of Pakistan.³

The Pakistan military's failure has been attributed to a number of poor tactical choices since 2002, including: 1) excessive focus on enemy targeting and "high-value targets"; 2) overdependence on large-scale multi-unit forces (mostly brigade level) rather than smaller units dispersed among the population; 3) frequent deployment of forces to static garrisons or defensive positions inhibiting proactive actions; 4) inadequate resources for flexible responses to contingencies such as quick reaction forces; 5) over-reliance on kinetic "direct-action" operations and heavy firepower; and finally 6) an

1 This critique has been advanced by a number of prominent security analysts and includes: David Kilcullen, "Terrain, Tribes, and Terrorists: Pakistan, 2006-2008," Brookings Counterinsurgency and Pakistan Paper Series, No. 3, September 10, 2009; Ahmed Rashid, "Pakistan's Continued Failure to Adopt a Counterinsurgency Strategy," *CTC Sentinel* 2:3 (2009); Seth G. Jones, "Pakistan's Dangerous Game," *Survival* 49:1 (2007).

2 One anonymous Western analyst quoted by the *Economist* estimated that Pakistan had lost 70% of its battles with the Taliban. See "Pakistan and the Taliban: A Real Offensive or a Phony War?" *Economist*, April 30, 2009.

3 Some examples of analysts underscoring the role of adaptation by both insurgent and counterinsurgent parties includes Ejaz Haider, "Agency to GHQ," *Indian Express*, October 13, 2009; Shaukat Qadir, "The Taliban Diaries," *Daily Times*, June 20, 2009.