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POLICY PAPER

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► **Executive Summary**

Accurate assessments of the threat posed by al-Qaeda to Western interests and government have been hampered by imprecise language and an absence of historical memory. Arguably the organization is over thirty years old. Unquestionably the franchises and self-described affiliates of al-Qaeda bear little resemblance to the elite terrorist organization that attacked the United States on 11 September, 2001. This paper describes the evolution of al-Qaeda from being a source of assistance to mujahedeen fighting the Red Army in Afghanistan to the armed insurgents operating today in Africa and the Greater Middle East, on the one hand, and the homegrown, often self-recruited and largely incompetent “jihadists” who are more a nuisance to western police forces than they are a serious military threat. This change in the effectiveness and operational capability of al-Qaeda does not mean that it will disappear, not least of all because the members of that organization think of themselves as fighting an endless war. It does mean that we ought to have a realistic understanding of the reduced nature of the threat that al-Qaeda can make to our interests.





In 2011 according to John Brennan, U.S. counterterrorism chief, and Leon Panetta, then CIA director, al-Qaeda was “on the ropes” and nearing strategic defeat.¹ That same year, Panetta’s successor, David Patraeus, told Congress that al-Qaeda was still a serious threat,² a position that has often been repeated in the media.³ Those who argue for the first option point to the absence of any serious threat from the terrorist organization akin to what they accomplished on 11 September, 2001. Those who argue the second point to the continuing ideological appeal of the al-Qaeda narrative. Both arguments are persuasive, but the realities to which they refer must be distinguished.

In this paper the focus is chiefly on the changes in the modes, as Machiavelli might have said, by which al-Qaeda has been organized and not the narrative or ideology that has inspired its adherents.⁴ Moreover, the analysis is concerned especially with Western “homegrown” al-Qaeda sympathizers not with the effectiveness of regionally organized affiliates and “franchises” in the Greater Middle East and Africa.⁵

The origin of al-Qaeda can be traced to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. During the early 1980s Osama bin Laden, along with Abdulla Azzam founded the “Office of Services,” the Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK), in Peshawar to assist non-Afghan mujahedeen in their fight against the Soviets. Between 1984 and 1987 this proto-al-Qaeda, which we may call AQ 1.0, was engaged in rudimentary military training and ideological indoctrination (or religious education, if one prefers). The MAK/AQ 1.0 leadership saw their task as both expelling the Russians from Afghanistan and undertaking revolution in the Muslim world to establish what we now would

¹ Brennan quoted in Kimberly Dozier, “U.S. Counterterrorism Chief: Al Qaeda Now on Ropes,” Associated Press, 1 Sept. 2011. Available at: <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/us-counterterrorism-chief-al-qaeda-now-ropes> (10 Dec. 2012); Panetta, Elizabeth Bumiller, “Panetta Says Defeat of al Qaeda is ‘Within Reach,’” *The New York Times*, 9 July, 2011, A1.

² Available at: <http://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-and-testimony> (10 Dec. 2012).

³ See, for example, David Gerstein-Ross, “Al-Qaeda is Winning,” *The Atlantic*, 8 September, 2011. Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/09/al-qaeda-is-winning/244701/> (10 Dec., 2012); Colin Freeze, “Terrorists are a Perpetual Threat, CSIS says,” *The Globe and Mail*, 10 September, 2005, A12.

⁴ I have provided an extensive analysis of the several variants of Islamism in: *New Political Religions: An Analysis of Modern Terrorism*, (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2004); “The Spiritual Structures of Contemporary Terrorism,” in Petra Bendel and Mathias Hildebrandt, eds., *Im Schatten des Terrorisimus: Hintergründe Strukturen, Konsequenzen des 11 September, 2001*, (Wiesbaden, Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002), 131-49; “Understanding Jihadist Terrorism after 9/11,” in Bradley C.S. Watson, ed., *The West at War*, (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 41-52. See also, Robert Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*, (Wilmington, ISI Books, 2010); Laurent Murawiec, *The Mind of Jihad*, 2 vols., (Washington, The Hudson Institute, 2005, 2007); Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat*, (Wilmington, ISI Books, 2002).

⁵ See, for example, Eric Schiff and Daniel Sanger, “Some in al Qaeda leave Pakistan for Somalia and Yemen,” *The New York Times*, 11 June, 2009, A12; Hoda Osman, “Reports: Al Qaeda’s Leaders in Yemen Relocate to Somalia,” CBS News Investigator, 7 April, 2010; available at http://www.cbsnews.com/8300-31727_162-10391695.html?contributor=44254 (12 Dec. 2012). See also Brian Michael Jenkins, “Al Qaeda in its Third Decade: Irreversible Decline of Imminent Victory?” *Occasional Paper*, (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2012). STRATFOR also produces regular up-dates on current affiliates and franchises such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al Sahab, and so on.



call Islamist and salafist regimes.⁶ Within two years following the defeat of Soviet forces at the battle of Jaji in May, 1987, the number of Afghan Arab fighters had grown from around a hundred to over 5000, of whom 15 to 20% had been trained by al-Qaeda and had pledged bayat, personal allegiance, to Osama bin Laden.⁷ By 1989 and the withdrawal of Soviet troops one might speak of AQ1.1. In their own minds they had (with the help of God) destroyed the Red Army.⁸ The subsequent debate over whom next to attack centred on whether Kashmir or kufr – apostate or unbelieving – Arab regimes, and not the United States, would be the target.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the response by the Americans began to change the thinking of the senior al-Qaeda leadership – Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, in particular. They opposed American troops in Saudi Arabia, of course, but blamed the Saudi regime more than the Americans.⁹ It took the American intervention in Somalia to shift the attention of al-Qaeda to the “far enemy” and “greater kufr,” America. In this mode – AQ 2.0 – al-Qaeda organized its first attack on the World Trade Center, followed by attacks on the U.S. embassy in Yemen and on USAF personnel in Aden. During the 1980s Khalid Sheik Mohammed, KSM, planned a series of attacks on the pope, President Clinton, and on a dozen trans-Pacific flights (Operation Bojinka).¹⁰ KSM, identified by the 9/11 Commission as the “principal architect” of the September 2001 attack, imagined, thought, and plotted on a grand scale.

The most successful attacks by AQ 2.0 were on the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998. The arrest of the so-called “millennium bomber,” Assad Ressam, in 1999 and the failure in 2000 of the attack on USS The Sullivans was balanced by the successful attack on USS Cole later that year. In retrospect, whatever success AQ 2.0 enjoyed was in part because it and the leadership kept a low profile and because they had learned from their experience in Afghanistan working indirectly with Western intelligence agencies via Pakistan’s ISI about how long Western agencies took to turn raw information into actionable intelligence. The AQ 2 attack teams were small and despite KSM’s ambitions for a major “planes operation,” they understood the connection between success and moderation.

The 9/11 attack announced a new mode: AQ 3. The large team was carefully selected and very well trained. Despite some significant lapses, they were able to maintain adequate operational security largely because U.S intelligence agencies were ineffective. And AQ 3 were spectacularly successful. The attack team was dispatched under the direct control of bin Laden, though at first he denied responsibility as if it were an operation undertaken in the earlier mode. The advantage of AQ 3 was its tight command-and-control; the disadvantage was that it was resource-intensive and, despite the ability to evade security forces, it left enough traces to ensure that it was, if not a one-time attack, then a mode of operation that would be very difficult to repeat.

Even so, the success of 9/11 in influencing the consciousness of the salafist-inclined members of the worldwide Muslim community, the ummah, would be hard to exaggerate. Specifically, it

⁶ See Fawaz A. Gerges, The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2005), ch. 2-3.

⁷ R. Kim Cragin, “Early History of al-Qa’ida,” The Historical Journal, 51:4 (2008), 1055-6.

⁸ Gilles Kepel, The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West, tr., Pascale Ghazaleh, (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 74.

⁹ Peter Berger, The Osama bin Laden I Know, (New York, Free Press, 2006), 119.

¹⁰ David Benjamin and Steven Simon, The Age of Sacred Terror, (New York, Random House, 2002), 20-6.



introduced and provided an opportunity to recruit both what we now call homegrown jihadists and al-Qaeda franchises precisely because the actions of counterterrorist organizations made a follow-on attack using the 9/11 model next to impossible. A further variant, AQ 4, may be understood as a response to the new conditions created by Western and allied security forces after 9/11. In other words, the chief result of 9/11 was that, within about five years, AQ 3 was more concerned with protecting its core leadership in the mountains along the Afghan-Pakistan border than mounting offensive operations. AQ 3 still exists even after the death of bin Laden but it is isolated and no longer a strategic threat, not even to Pakistan.

This new mode, AQ 4, uses local cells and local leadership, not foreign-trained and centrally commanded terrorists undertaking operations on foreign soil. AQ 4 terrorists may have spent some time abroad for training or fought in foreign parts, but by and large they have only been inspired not commanded by the al-Qaeda leadership. The members are usually at home in the target societies and conduct their operations almost entirely in the places they live. They borrow the name al-Qaeda but are largely disconnected from the leadership of AQ 3. Some are bumbling and others are efficient, but to date none of the affiliates and franchises is capable of posing anything more than a tactical threat, chiefly in the developing world.

In short, prior to 9/11 AQ 3 was planning or running multiple operations across many parts of the world at the same time. AQ agents travelled the globe and were well resourced. They seriously thought about restoring the Caliphate, mobilizing the Muslim masses, and instituting Sharia.¹¹ Of course, AQ 3 still desires this outcome, but they lack the capability to achieve it. They still threaten, but the seriousness of their threats, at least against the West, have been significantly reduced.

In the contest between terrorists and security forces one might say that the operational “trecraft,” especially of homegrown al-Qaeda sympathizers, has declined whereas the vigilance and effectiveness of security agencies has improved. Even the elite AQ 3 squad made major errors, any one of which could have resulted in failure. In this respect the mistakes of coalition intelligence agencies have apparently been easier to deal with and fix, much to the surprise of many analysts. It might be more accurate, and would be more cautious, to say that in the balance between failures in tradecraft and failures in intelligence analysis, so far the intelligence agencies seem to have learned more, or more quickly, than the terrorists. Any further decentralization of al-Qaeda means an additional decline in tradecraft, notwithstanding the very practical training in IED construction, for example, available to jihadists in Iraq and Afghanistan. After all, fighting an insurgency is as far from a clandestine operation as counter-insurgency is from Clausewitzian warfare between regular armies. Learning to fire an RPG will not help you glide invisibly through the back streets of London, New York, or Montreal. On balance, therefore, it would seem that the post 9/11 mode(s) of al-Qaeda, can be and have been significantly interrupted by coalition intelligence and counter-terrorism operations.

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the evolution of the modes of al-Qaeda is that operational security in AQ 4 is poor. Of course, some AQ 4 bumbling could get lucky and pull off a major attack, which means that counterterrorism people will not be out of work any time soon. More important, several analysts have made the point that many homegrown recruits, notwithstanding their incompetence in operational security to date, are well educated and

¹¹ See Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006).



intelligent. Eventually some of them will figure out what their chief weakness is and take steps to fix it.

A second conclusion, which leads to the second general point, is that current recruits to AQ 4, of which Internet-savvy amateurs such as the “Toronto eighteen” are an example, are also young men. They are too young to have fought in Bosnia or Afghanistan and, while they might make a pilgrimage to Pakistan for some rudimentary training as terrorists or insurgents, this will not be of much help in mounting a serious attack. On the one hand, their experience is limited. On the other, these Gen-Y jihadists became Islamists after the spectacular success of AQ 3 on September 11th. Moreover, the speed with which they became radicalized was a surprise to security officials. In this context, the great success of 9/11 was not just in the large-scale killings that day but also that the terrorists recovered the purpose of their nineteenth-century predecessors: propaganda by deed.

One can further conclude that for potential Gen-Y jihadists, both 9/11 and the American-led coalition response to it have been understood as reasons to act. The AQ 3 attack, the invasion of Iraq and the almost effortless military occupation of the seat of the former Caliphate, Baghdad, the on-going Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the nuclear stand-off with Iran, the instability of Afghanistan and Pakistan – all these events have been interpreted as a call to jihadis to do something about what is seen as an attack on the ummah led by the Great Satan. That is, pragmatic instances of injustice and grievance are opportunities to be exploited, not issues to be settled by negotiation.¹² Thus, the ideologically inspired AQ 4 terrorists are also not likely to fade away any time soon. However that may be, al-Qaeda, in its most recent modes, is rapidly approaching the status of what Walter Laqueur called “nuisance terrorism.”¹³

AQ 3 has isolated itself in order to keep out of harm’s way in the mountains of Pakistan. It is not starting wars like Hezbollah or fighting them like the Taliban. From time to time it issues media releases, as do some franchises, but a media blitz is a long way from a Blitzkrieg. Today, al-Qaeda is not a cadre of highly trained and motivated individuals who brought down the World Trade Center, but a disconnected collection of copycats inspired by an increasingly remote event. Some may be locally dangerous and most can keep the police on their toes, but none has the requisite vision and capability to pose a strategic threat.

This does not mean al-Qaeda will soon disappear either in the West or in the developing world. On the one hand, al-Qaeda members understand themselves as participating in a practically endless war. For them there is no significant difference between eleventh-century Christian Crusaders, nineteenth-century French colonialists, and twenty-first century Canadians in Afghanistan. Death in the path of God for such a self-understanding is an achievement.¹⁴

On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, Western police and intelligence bureaucracies, the military, and the media will all help ensure the continued presence of al-Qaeda. And when we say we are now fighting the jihadism that inspires homegrown jihadists rather than an

¹² Olivier Roy, Globalized Islam: The Search for the New Ummah, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 57.

¹³ Laqueur, The New Terrorists: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

¹⁴ For a version of this self-interpretation by a homegrown Canadian jihadist, see Stewart Bell, The Martyr’s Oath: The Apprenticeship of a Homegrown Terrorist, (Mississauga, Wiley, 2002).



identifiable group of jihadists, whether homegrown or not, we create for ourselves the prospect of endless conflict.

► About the Author

Barry Cooper, a fourth generation Albertan, was educated at Shawnigan Lake School, the University of British Columbia and Duke University (PhD, 1969). He taught at Bishop's University, McGill, and York University before coming to the University of Calgary in 1981. He has been a visiting professor in Germany and the United States. His teaching and research has tried to bring the insights of Western political philosophers to bear on contemporary issues, from the place of technology and the media in Canada, to the debate over the constitutional status of Quebec and Alberta, to current military and security policy. Cooper has published 30 books and over 150 articles and papers that reflect the dual focus of his work; most recently (with Lydia Miljan) he wrote *Hidden Agendas: How Canadian Journalists Influence the News* published by UBC Press (2003). In the spring of 2004, *New Political Religions: An Analysis of Modern Terrorism* was published by the University of Missouri Press. In 2009 he edited Tilo Schabert's *How World Politics is Made: France and the Reunification of Germany*. He publishes a regular column in the *Calgary Herald* and other CanWest Global papers.

Cooper has lectured extensively in Europe, the United States, India, Australia and China. He has received numerous on-going research grants from public and private Canadian, French, German, and American granting agencies. In addition he has received two major awards, the Konrad Adenauer Award from the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung, and a Killam Research Fellowship.

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