

## THE EVOLUTION OF AL QAEDA

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This paper describes the evolution of Al Qaeda after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The first part discusses Al Qaeda's transition into the vanguard of a "global jihad movement" (GJM). The second part describes the group's adaptive strategy with a particular emphasis on the growing sophistication of the group's strategic communication efforts. The third part concludes with a brief discussion of Al Qaeda's likely evolution over the next few years.

### **I: FROM AL QAEDA TO THE GLOBAL JIHAD MOVEMENT**

#### ***2001-2003: The Fall and Rise of Al Qaeda***

The attacks of September 11, 2001, which killed nearly 3,000 individuals, were a strategic success for Al Qaeda, but the magnitude and swiftness of the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks did not allow the group to rest on its laurels for long. The first stage of what came to be known as the "global war on terror" (GWOT) was *Operation Enduring Freedom*, which consisted of an attack on Afghanistan by a U.S.-led alliance that aimed to destroy Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime, which had provided a safe haven to bin Laden and his cohorts during the previous five years. From Al Qaeda's standpoint, the situation immediately following 9/11 looked bleak. In the first year and a half, Al Qaeda had lost up to 75 % of its original members and had lost its infrastructure of training camps to other groups.<sup>2</sup> The loss of its operational bases severely

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<sup>2</sup> For example, at a speech in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, on September 9, 2004, President Bush said that "more than three-quarters of Al Qaeda's key members and associates have been

disrupted the group's command and control capabilities. Cells affiliated with Al Qaeda were rounded up in Europe, Africa, and Asia, and successes were made in disrupting terrorist financing and in foiling a number of terrorist plots.<sup>3</sup> As a result of these initial successes, a number of intelligence analysts and officials of the Bush administration believed that the United States was winning the war against Al Qaeda.<sup>4</sup>

Others were more cautious and warned of the dispersal of jihadists into a global movement. One of the first analysts who described the ongoing threat posed by Salafi Jihadist groups in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was Israeli terrorism analyst Reuven Paz. One month after the 9/11 attacks, Paz circulated a paper in which he suggested that the new centers of gravity of jihadist groups would migrate to the Muslim communities living in the West, and to other countries in the periphery of the Muslim world, such as the Philippines. Pockets of jihadists in these countries, he argued, would begin cooperating closely with one another and form a special bond he termed the new 'brotherhood of global jihad'—a network that would replace the base that had previously roamed in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> The term 'global jihad,' Paz wrote, "marks and reflects the solidarity of a variety of movements, groups, and sometimes ad hoc groupings or cells" that act under an ideological umbrella of a radical interpretation of Islam. The interpretations themselves, he wrote, stem from developments in the Arab world since the 1960s; ignorance of principal elements of orthodox Islam due to secularization; and difficulties coping with Western modernization and its values.<sup>6</sup>

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brought to justice." Quoted in James Risen, "In Tape, Top Aide to Bin Laden Vows New Strikes at U.S.," *New York Times*, 10 September 2004., 10.

<sup>3</sup> The plots included a plan disrupted in late 2001 to attack several embassies and other targets in Singapore using simultaneous truck bombs, and the planned suicide boat attack in May 2002 against U.S. and British warships in the Straits of Gibraltar. See "Interrogation of Suspect Reveals New Details of Singapore Plot," *International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, 19 December 2002.; and Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam.*, 264.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Dana Priest and Susan Schmidt, "Al Qaeda's Top Primed to Collapse, U.S. Says," *Washington Post*, 16 March 2003., A1.

<sup>5</sup> Paz, "The Brotherhood of Global Jihad."14.

<sup>6</sup> Reuven Paz, "Global Jihad and the European Arena" (paper presented at the International Conference on Intelligence and Terrorism, Priverno, Italy, 15-18 May 2002)., 1. Available at <http://www.e-prism.org/> Last accessed 6 December 2006.

Paz believed that what helped make jihad a concept accepted on a global level was the adoption by more and more Muslims of the view that jihad is a religious duty designed to fend off a perceived global conspiracy against Islam. It also resulted from a growing acceptance by Muslims of the notion of the “non-territorial Islamic state”—itself an outcome of a more intense global interaction of different Muslim communities that helps strengthen the perception that Muslims are under threat. “The globalization of the reaction to this threat,” Paz concluded, “has led to the doctrine of a global Jihad.”<sup>7</sup>

Paz’ analysis proved prescient. Most likely even before *Operation Enduring Freedom*, Al Qaeda, which could hardly have been surprised by the U.S. reaction to the attacks on the U.S. homeland, began to plan the dispersal of its fighters to the Afghan countryside, Pakistan, Central Asia, and their various home countries. In Pakistan, many Al Qaeda figures would remain in the mountainous region near the Afghan border, or would abscond in the larger cities like Karachi and Rawalpindi, where some key Al Qaeda figures, such as Khalid Sheikh Muhammad (KSM) and Ramzi Binalshibh, would be arrested in subsequent years. Other Al Qaeda leaders fled to Iran, aided most likely by the Revolutionary Guards.<sup>8</sup>

According to Michael Scheuer, who headed the CIA’s bin Laden unit, Al Qaeda used its ties to Pashtun tribes and to Afghan heroin smuggling networks for its dispersal. It was also assisted by members of Pakistan’s bureaucracy and Islamists in Pakistan’s army and security services, Islamic NGOs, as well as insurgent and terrorist groups in Kashmir such as Jaish-e-Muhammad (JEM), Lashkar-e-Taybeh (LET), and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM).<sup>9</sup>

In forming the global jihad movement over the next years, jihadists benefited from and exploited the links they had made while undergoing training in

<sup>7</sup> Paz, “The Brotherhood of Global Jihad.”1.

<sup>8</sup> See Sebastian Rotella, “Terrorism Suspects Traced to Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 August 2004.; Clarke et al., *Defeating the Jihadists.*, 14. On Iranian support to Al Qaeda, see also National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report.*, 61, 240-41; and Josh Meyer, “Some U.S. Officials Fear Iran Is Helping Al Qaeda,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 2006..

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris.*, 64-65. See also David Rhode and James Risen, “A Hostile Land Foils the Quest for Bin Laden,” 13 December 2004., 1.

Afghanistan or subsequent jihads fought in places like Bosnia and Chechnya. These common experiences and bonds enabled the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experience. Thanks to shared funding, training, and logistics, as well as the benefits of globalization—notably a greater ease of travel and access to modern technologies and communication systems such as the Internet—jihadists would now be able to form a dedicated and empowered brotherhood that was truly global in nature and aspiration.

As Al Qaeda members and insurgents dispersed in late 2001, bin Laden transferred funds to jihadists with workable plans to attack U.S. and other Western targets of interest. One jihadist, Mohammed al-Tubaiti, reportedly received \$5,000 from a bin Laden lieutenant. With the money, he planned to dispatch a cell to organize a suicide boat attack against U.S. and British warships in the Straits of Gibraltar. The attack was to occur in May 2002, but never took place.<sup>10</sup> According to Burke, the April 2002 attacks on a synagogue in Djerba had also originated during the last days of fighting in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. The bomber, Nizar Nawar, apparently received money and was sent off to perpetrate an attack while the Taliban collapsed.

Saif al-Adel, one of the top lieutenants of Al Qaeda, confirmed the group's post-9/11 strategy to scatter and broaden the front of attacks against 'infidels' and 'apostates.' "Our plan was to spread in the territory and open new and several battlefronts with the Americans to disperse their forces and deny them the chance to focus on one region," he told Jordanian journalist Fuad Husayn. The dispersal was "very important for the project to survive..." he continued. "The young men who spread all over the world would open new battlefields with the Americans, polytheists, and hypocrites."<sup>11</sup>

In November 2002, while Al Qaeda continued to suffer the loss of key leaders, the group reportedly convened a strategic summit in northern Iran, at which the *shura majlis* decided that it could no longer act as a hierarchy. According to Spanish counterterrorism judge Baltasar Garzon, the summit was held without bin Laden present, but with many of the top leaders attending. The discussion

<sup>10</sup> Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam.*, 264.

<sup>11</sup> Husayn, *Al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of Al-Qa'ida.*, Part 8.

was led by Abu Musab al-Suri, the leading jihadi strategist of the post-9/11 period. Al-Suri suggested that Al Qaida was no longer capable to survive as a hierarchical organization, and would need to transform into a network, with operations spread out over the entire globe, carried in large part by individuals, rather than organizations.<sup>12</sup>

In retrospect, Al Qaeda's decision in late 2001 to disperse its members and fighters and to decentralize its operations—formalized in the meeting of the *shura majlis* in Iran in late 2002—guaranteed the group's survival in the face of massive military pursuit by the United States and its allies. Al Qaeda's diffusion, of course, had not been planned hastily. It was the logical consequence of a deliberate strategy to breed a network of affiliated fighters, cells, and organizations long before September 11, 2001. Since its years in the Sudan, the group had been *primus inter pares* in a network of affiliated and like-minded groups eager to wage jihad in places where Muslims were deemed to be threatened, oppressed, or besieged. September 11, as is sometimes argued, did not transform Al Qaeda from an organization into a network—Al Qaeda had been the leader of a network at least since 1992. The real shift that Al Qaeda was forced to undergo after September 11 was a relative and temporary shift in its center of gravity from the group's core leadership away to the group's affiliates. Whereas prior to 9/11, it was relatively free to plan operations and lead an international terrorist network, its ability to do so after the September attacks was eroded to some degree. As its ability to conduct operations diminished (although never to the extent that it vanished altogether), the relative importance of its ability to send strategic messages—and hence serve as an *inspirational leader* of a *global* network—became even more important.

As a result of these transformations, and given Al Qaeda's loss of a safe haven and operational command post, the aftermath of 9/11 witnessed the relative increase in attacks planned and executed by Al Qaeda affiliates and associates, when compared to the period before 9/11. Even after 9/11, many attacks by Al Qaeda affiliates were planned with financial, operational, or material support of the remaining leadership of Al Qaeda, now often referred to as 'Al Qaeda

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Windrem, "The Frightening Evolution of Al-Qaida," *MSNBC.com*, 24 June 2005.. Available online at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8307333>, last accessed 1 August 2006.

Central' or 'Al Qaeda Core.' The extent of this support was and remains different from case to case.

One factor that worked in Al Qaeda's favor is that the aftermath of 9/11 did not alter the fact that individuals who had trained in camps in Afghanistan were present in a multitude of countries in the world. In many cases, these Al Qaeda-affiliated fighters had been present in these regions before 9/11, including in Africa (Somalia, Kenya), South East Asia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Central Asia, Western Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Training camps would soon reemerge first in Central Asia, then spread to Asia, South East Asia, the Far East, and Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Now that the center of gravity of Al Qaeda shifted increasingly to its affiliates, Al Qaeda suddenly appeared not only as highly robust, but also as a truly global network of terrorists and insurgents—one whose members were able to strike in such distant places as Aceh, Chechnya, Indonesia, Iraq, Kashmir, Kenya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. In sum, Al Qaeda's forced reliance on local groups, brought about by the pressures exerted on the group after September 11, helped render the group more resilient.

### ***The Global Jihad Movement After 2003***

During the course of 2003, U.S. officials began acknowledging that Al Qaeda had survived the onslaught of the United States and was a reinvigorated entity, with bases of operations established in places like Kenya, Sudan, Pakistan, and Chechnya.<sup>14</sup> By 2004, the optimism reflected in the statements of American officials shortly after 9/11 vanished almost entirely. Reports that Al Qaeda had suffered a death blow as a result of *Operation Enduring Freedom* and the war in Iraq, which began in March 2003, were reversed. More importantly, perhaps, was the admission—based in part on evidence gathered after the arrest of

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<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Gorka, "Al Qaeda's Next Generation," *Terrorism Monitor* 2, no. 15 (29 July 2004).; Damien McElroy, "Us Forces Hunt Down Al-Qaeda in Sudan Terrorists from Saudi Arabia Cross Red Sea to Train for Jihad in Mountain Camps," *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 August 2004., 26.

<sup>14</sup> David Johnston and Don Van Natta Jr., "U.S. Officials See Signs of a Revived Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, 17 May 2003., 1.



Mohammed Naeem Noor Khan, an Al Qaeda computer engineer—that Al Qaeda’s senior command structure may not have taken as strong a hit as had long been assumed.<sup>15</sup> Officials now believed that Al Qaeda had retained some of its previous command and communications structure.<sup>16</sup>

Experts credited this resiliency on Al Qaeda’s ability to continue to recruit, mobilize, and animate actual and potential fighters, supporters and sympathizers.<sup>17</sup> Jessica Stern, for example, attributed Al Qaeda’s survivability to its “protean nature,”<sup>18</sup> which involved the group’s adoption of tactics of “leaderless resistance” used prominently by right-wing American extremists in order to evade law enforcement agencies. Popularized by Louis Beam of the Aryan Nations, Beam warned that hierarchical organizations endangered the survival of insurgencies. Instead, he suggested, individuals and groups should operate independently of one another, and avoid reporting to a central headquarters or single leader for directions.<sup>19</sup> Bruce Hoffman likened Al Qaeda to the archetypal “shark in the water, having to constantly move forward, albeit changing direction slightly, in order to survive.”<sup>20</sup>

Some analysts even believed—prematurely, as it turned out later—that Al Qaeda ceased to be an organization altogether and transitioned entirely into a movement.<sup>21</sup> Many of the analysts who predicted a death of Al Qaeda as an organization based their assessment on the investigation of the March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombings. Because the investigation of the Madrid bombings had failed to produce clear evidence of involvement by Al Qaeda’s core leadership, some researchers believed that Al Qaeda had been completely replaced by ‘homegrown terrorism’ consisting of self-radicalized Muslims and converts not dependant on the training and direction of a terrorist organization.

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<sup>15</sup> Amy Waldman and Salman Masood, "Elaborate Qaeda Network Hid 2 Captives in Pakistan," *New York Times*, 3 August 2004., 10; Amy Waldman and Eric Lipton, "Rounding up Qaeda Suspects: New Cooperation, New Tensions, New Questions," *New York Times*, 17 August 2004., 12.

<sup>16</sup> David Johnston and David E. Sanger, "New Leaders Are Emerging for Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, 10 August 2004., A1.

<sup>17</sup> Hoffman, "Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism, and Future Potentialities: An Assessment."434.

<sup>18</sup> Jessica Stern, "The Protean Enemy," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (July/August 2003)..

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. See also Stern, *Terror in the Name of God.*, 237-280.

<sup>20</sup> Hoffman, "Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism, and Future Potentialities: An Assessment."435.

<sup>21</sup> Jason Burke, "Think Again: Al Qaeda " *Foreign Policy* May/June 2004.

In February 2006, Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and described the contemporary threat to the United States as the global Jihad movement which, the intelligence community believed, consisted of three different types of groups and individuals:<sup>22</sup>

The first constituent part of the global Jihad movement is Al Qaeda, “a battered but resourceful organization.” Secondly, the movement consists of other Sunni jihadist groups, some of whom are affiliated, and some that are not. All of them, however, are allied with or inspired by Al Qaeda’s global anti-Western agenda. Negroponte added that these groups posed less of a danger to the U.S. homeland than Al Qaeda, but they posed a growing threat to U.S allies and U.S. interests abroad. Further, these Sunni jihadist groups persisted in their attempts “to expand their reach and capabilities to conduct multiple and/or mass casualty attacks outside their traditional areas of operation.”<sup>23</sup> Thirdly, the global jihad movement consisted of networks and cells that are the “self-generating progeny of al-Qaida”<sup>24</sup> The DNI went on to describe the origin, nature, and threat posed by these networks and cells:

Emerging new networks and cells... reflect aggressive jihadist efforts to exploit feelings of frustration and powerlessness in some Muslim communities, and to fuel the perception that the US is anti-Islamic... This has led to the emergence of a decentralized and diffused movement, with minimal centralized guidance or control and numerous individuals and cells—like those who conducted the May 2003 bombing in Morocco, the March 2004 bombings in Spain, and the July 2005 bombings in the UK. Members of these groups have drawn inspiration from al-Qaida but appear to operate on their own. Such unaffiliated individuals, groups and cells represent a different threat than that of a defined

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<sup>22</sup> *Statement by the Director of National Intelligence, John D. Negroponte, to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2 February 2006..*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



organization. They are harder to spot and represent a serious intelligence challenge.<sup>25</sup>

Negroponte's testimony strongly suggested that Al Qaeda's 'demise' had been prematurely predicted. In early 2007, the DNI reiterated that Al Qaeda was far from dead, and instead posed "the gravest terrorist threat to the United States."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, between September 11, 2001 and early 2007, Al Qaeda had been able to inflict massive damage by initiating or inspiring terrorist attacks in Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Madrid, Iraq, the United Kingdom, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, and Indonesia. After 9/11, jihadists also regrouped in the Horn of Africa, and made inroads in Afghanistan and Iraq.

No less important, between 2005 and 2007 the group has managed to convince at least 40 organizations to adopt Al Qaeda's focus on the far enemy, and thus become an integral part of the global jihad movement.<sup>27</sup> Well-known examples include the merger of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the GSPC with Al Qaeda, but other, lesser known groups have adopted Al Qaeda's world view, too.

Reports about the resilience, and even a 'return' of Al Qaeda, appeared even more frequently in the course of 2006 and 2007.<sup>28</sup> The picture drawn by the reports was one of a growing reconfiguration of Al Qaeda on the Afghan-Pakistani border, where Al Qaeda had been able to establish a new safe haven. European intelligence agencies, for instance, reported about increased movements among jihadist recruits to the tribal area of North Waziristan, a remote area where Pakistani soldiers were unable or unwilling to exercise their authority. The poorly controlled terrain enabled Al Qaeda to establish training centers where some 10-20 recruits per camp were taught skills similar to those that previous jihadists had acquired in training camps in Afghanistan. Although these new training camps did not reach the size and level of sophistication of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Katherine Shrader, "Negroponte: Al-Qaida the Biggest Threat," *Associated Press*, 12 January 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Scheuer, "Al-Qaeda and Algeria's Gspc: Part of a Much Bigger Picture," *Terrorism Focus* 4, no. 8 (3 April 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Reuven Paz, "Qa'idat Al-Jihad: Moving Forward or Backward? The Algerian Gspc Joins Al Qaeda," *PRISM Occasional Papers* 4, no. 5 (September 2006). Bruce Hoffman, "Remember Al Qaeda? They're Baaack," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 February 2007.

the Al Qaeda camps of the 1990s, recruits nevertheless received valuable lessons in the construction of IEDs and suicide bomb vests, communication techniques, and most importantly, jihadist indoctrination.<sup>29</sup>

According to several U.S. officials, Al Qaeda's renewed ability to regroup and establish training camps was a result of an agreement reached between Pakistani President Musharraf and tribal leaders in the area. Musharraf promised the leaders to withdraw troops from the area in exchange for the leaders' ending their support for cross-border attacks into Afghanistan by the Taliban and Al Qaeda.<sup>30</sup> The agreement, which collapsed during the summer of 2007, was widely regarded as detrimental to the ability to confront the militants with force. Other factors, however, have also contributed to Al Qaeda's ability to create a new safe haven in Pakistan. For one, the Iraq war has diverted crucial assets away from Afghanistan to Iraq, including Special Forces and CIA operatives, leaving the Afghan government in a weakened position to stabilize the country. A second major factor for Al Qaeda's ability to regroup along the Afghan-Pakistani border was the mobilization of Pakistani forces along the Pakistani-Indian border following an attack by Al Qaeda-affiliated Kashmiri separatist groups on the Indian parliament. After India had mobilized its forces along the border in response to the attack, Pakistan shifted hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the western border eastwards.<sup>31</sup>

In July 2007, a threat assessment by the National Counterterrorism Center titled 'Al-Qaida Better Positioned to Strike the West' lent additional credence to claims of a reconstituted Al Qaeda. While the report acknowledged that Al Qaeda was still considerably weaker than before September 11, the authors of the report stated that the group was stronger than it had been in years.

Increasingly, leading U.S. officials suggested that Al Qaeda had coordinated closely—indeed, established a virtual merger—with the Taliban and established

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<sup>29</sup> Sami Yousafzai, Ron Moreau, and Mark Hosenball, "Al Qaeda's Western Recruits," *Newsweek*, 1 January 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Mazzetti and David Rohde, "Al Qaeda's Leaders Rebuilding Networks," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 February 2007. P. 1. Spencer S. Hsu and Walter Pincus, "U.S. Warns of Stronger Al Qaeda," *Washington Post*, 12 July 2007. P. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Al-Qaida's Resurgence in Pakistan," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 1 (December 2007).

a haven along the Afghan-Pakistan border—a 1,400 mile long mountainous stretch.<sup>32</sup> Another indication of Al Qaeda's renewed strength is its ability to upgrade its propaganda operations, with as-Sahab, its main production arm, distributing highly polished videos, sometimes within days of an attack.

At the time of this writing, most of Al Qaeda's leaders are presumably based in Pakistan, but also travel to places such as Afghanistan, and occasionally to Iraq, Turkey, Iran, the Caucasus, and North Africa. Much of the leadership of Al Qaeda has changed, when compared to the leadership that existed in September 2001. With the killing or capturing of many senior operatives in the months and years following the U.S. led invasion of Afghanistan, lower ranking personnel have quickly taken their place and assumed leadership responsibilities, according to a testimony of CIA director Michael Hayden.<sup>33</sup> The new leadership continues to be dominated by Egyptians, most of whom are associates of Zawahiri, as well as a growing contingent of Libyans, including Abu Yahya al-Libi and—until his death in January 2008—Abu Laith al-Libi, a veteran of the Afghan war against the Soviet Union who led Al Qaeda's retreat from Kabul after the U.S. invasion. Another key Libyan operative, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, is believed to act as a liaison between Al Qaeda's central leadership and Al Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>34</sup>

## II: AL QAEDA'S ADAPTIVE STRATEGY

In early 2006, Al Qaeda's top operational priorities, according to the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, were attacks on the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests overseas, as well as on U.S. allies, in that order.<sup>35</sup> The strategy to achieve these aims, however, was subject to a number of adaptations. For one, the preferred targets after 9/11, and especially after March 2003, tended to be

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, statements by Defense Intelligence Agency Director LTG Michael Maples, as quoted in "Al-Qaeda Rebuilding in Pakistan," *BBC News*, 14 January 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee, *Testimony of Gen. Michael V. Hayden to the Senate Armed Services Committee on 'the Current Situation in Iraq and Afghanistan'*, 15 November 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Craig Whitlock, "The New Al Qaeda Central," *Washington Post*, 9 September 2007. A1.

<sup>35</sup> *Statement by the Director of National Intelligence, John D. Negroponte, to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*. 2 February 2006.

'softer' civilian targets that were not necessarily symbols of Western, especially American, economic and military powers as most targets up until that time had been. After 9/11, and especially after 2003, attacks against purely civilian targets such as dance clubs, restaurants, shopping malls, wedding ceremonies, and even funerals increased relative to attacks against more symbolic installations such as embassies, military bases, or financial centers. Attacks planned and executed by jihadist groups in places like Bali, Riyadh, Morocco, and Iraq left no doubt that civilians now became fair game.

A second element of the new strategy was the deliberate attempt by Al Qaeda and the global jihad movement to erode popular support for the United States by targeting mostly Western countries in what, per Al Qaeda's calculation, would result in a chasm between the United States and its traditional allies. Several books published in 2003 and early 2004 appealed to jihadist cells to adopt just such a strategy. One of these books was titled *Iraqi Jihad: Hopes and Risks*, and was published on an Islamist website by *The Information Institute in Support of the Iraqi People—The Center of Services for the Mujahideen*. On eight pages of the book, the author made a case that Spanish troops present in Iraq should be attacked because Spain was the "weakest link" of support for the United States. Attacking Spanish forces, the author/s argued, would be a useful starting point in a domino effect by which Al Qaeda would gradually erode Western support of the United States by undermining relationships between Western countries and the United States, thus isolating Washington. On December 8, 2003, the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) published a more explicit threat, hinting at the possibility of attacks against Spain outside of Iraq. Indeed, on March 11, 2004, three days before Spanish elections, Madrid was shaken by bombings on four commuter trains that killed 191 people.<sup>36</sup>

The strategy to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies is part of a growing political sophistication in the strategy of Al Qaeda. The suicide attacks in Istanbul of November 2003, which coincided with a Bush-Blair summit

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<sup>36</sup> Such a strategy also crystallized from the writings of Abu abd-al Aziz, known as "Barbarossa," a Saudi who commanded the brigades of the Arab Jihadi volunteers in Bosnia, in an analysis of the bombings in London published on July 7, 2005 on a Jihadi web site of a leading Saudi supporter of Al Qaeda. See Reuven Paz, "From Madrid to London: Al-Qaeda Exports the War in Iraq to Europe," *PRISM Occasional Papers* 3, no. 3 (July 2005)..

in London, and the Madrid attack's timing, which coincided with the Spanish elections, suggested that Al Qaeda was increasingly exploiting the political calendar in the West for its own purposes, thus becoming a more pragmatic actor. Al Qaeda's growing political activity was also apparent in April 2004, when bin Laden offered a 'truce' to European countries, albeit not to the United States—an offer clearly designed to cause disagreements between the United States and its allies in the West.<sup>37</sup>

Norwegian terrorism analysts Lia and Hegghammer showed that Al Qaeda's growing political sophistication was reflected in the publication of a new genre of "jihadi strategic studies"—writings that draw on Western secular-rationalist sources, identify and analyze weaknesses of both parties, consider political, economic, and cultural factors in the conflict, and recommend realistic strategies. The writers of these tracts, which include such strategists as Yusuf al-Ayeri and Abu Musab al-Suri, oftentimes refrain from long religious justifications of the need to fight the West based on the Quran and the Sunna, and instead focus on practical strategies and tactics of how to wage that struggle. Lia and Hegghammer added that these strategic thinkers adopted an academic approach, constructing arguments in a rational and organized fashion, while extensively drawing from Western media and academic sources.<sup>38</sup>

Third, beginning in 2005, Al Qaeda began to significantly widen the audience to which it appealed, aiming on the one hand to widen the circle of individuals drawn to Al Qaeda, and on the other hand to create rifts within 'infidel' countries. In an essay published in February 2005 titled 'The Freeing of Humanity and Homelands Under the Banner of the Quran,' Zawahiri, for the first time, attempted to appeal to a non-Muslim audience, thus trying to increase anti-Americanism among such groups as the anti-globalization movement and environmentalists or nuclear disarmament activists, i.e., within the camp of the 'infidels' proper. In a statement issued on July 27, 2006, Zawahiri called upon

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Bernstein, "Tape, Probably Bin Laden's, Offers 'Truce' to Europe," *New York Times*, 16 April 2004., 3.

<sup>38</sup> Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (September-October 2004)..

“all oppressed and wronged people in the world, the victims of Western oppressive civilization led by America: Stand by Muslims in the face of this injustice which humanity has never witnessed before.”<sup>39</sup> In the same statement, Zawahiri even made overtures to Shias by praising Hizballah, a Shia organization, and invoking the names of Ali and Hussein, two of the most central figures in Shia Islam. In another videotape distributed on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Zawahiri further distanced himself from the bloody campaign that Al Qaeda’s viceregent in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had waged until his death in June 2006. In the interview, Zawahiri suggested that Al Qaeda’s central leadership had never initiated the infighting among Sunnis and Shia that had emerged in Iraq, adding that Al Qaeda was too busy fighting the infidels. Repeating Al Qaeda’s perennial efforts to unify the umma, he stressed that Muslims were “one nation, waging one war on multiple fronts.”<sup>40</sup>

An interview broadcast on May 5, 2007 was a further sign that Al Qaeda attempts to widen its appeal among segments even of the American population, thus attempting to erode domestic support for the Bush administration while creating a rift within Americans. Zarqawi portrayed Al Qaeda as a group fighting on behalf of the oppressed of the world, including the oppressed in North America. He stated that Al Qaeda was not waging jihad “to lift oppression from Muslims only; we are waging jihad to lift oppression from all mankind...,” but still called upon the underdogs of the world to convert to Islam, “the religion of freedom and rejection of tyranny.”<sup>41</sup> In the videotape, Zawahiri for the first time invoked Malcolm X, calling him a fellow Islamic struggler and martyr, while referring to Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell as “house slaves.” Zawahiri asked rhetorically why African Americans were joining the U.S. army when they should instead turn against their own government, which continues to oppress them. Bin Laden hit on the same theme in a September 7, 2007 statement, when he invoked, seemingly for the first time, the African American icon, before calling upon Americans to accept Islam. The same theme was again invoked in

<sup>39</sup> Michael Scheuer, "Zawahiri: Internationalizing Jihad, Uniting Muslims and Trumping Saudi Clerics," *Terrorism Focus* 3, no. 30 (1 August 2006).

<sup>40</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Al-Zawahiri's September 11 Video Hits Main Themes of Al-Qaeda," *Terrorism Focus* 3, no. 36 (19 September 2006).

<sup>41</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Latest Al-Zawahiri Tape Targets American Society," *Terrorism Focus* 4, no. 13 (8 May 2007).



a video message by Zawahiri in November 2008, in which Al Qaeda reacted to the election of Senator Barack Obama as president of the United States. The video invoked Malcolm X as a juxtaposition to Obama, Powell, and Rice, which were again called “house slaves.”

The fourth adaptation of its strategy, and one that mushroomed after 9/11, was the jihad movement’s growing presence on and exploitation of the Internet. For Al Qaeda, this medium was the perfect tool for what has been traditionally its most important priority, namely to spread the spirit of jihad in as many countries and to as many people as possible.

### **III: AL QAEDA’S FUTURE EVOLUTION**

Developments in the course of 2008 suggest that Al Qaeda will continue to matter in the foreseeable future because of its ability to regroup along the Afghan-Pakistani tribal area, where the group has effectively established a new safe haven. More importantly perhaps, the group’s survival is ensured as long as its core argument—that the United States is waging a war on Islam—remains in place. This is Al Qaeda’s central message to its followers, and a message that has benefited from the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, which remains in effect, thus allowing Al Qaeda to continue to argue that the United States is occupying Muslim lands. Another important factor is that the Internet continues to work in Al Qaeda’s favor rather than against it, and it is difficult to fathom that the United States or its allies will find a response to Al Qaeda’s internet advantage in the next years.

Despite these advantages, Al Qaeda has suffered some important setbacks. Not only has Al Qaeda lost a number of important members, such as Abu Laith al-Libi and Abu Sulayman al-Jazairi, but it has also suffered heavy setbacks in Iraq. More importantly, it has been plagued by a number of painful recantations and defections from individuals of significance to the jihadist movement, such as Sayed Imam Sharif (aka Dr. Fadl) and Salman abu Awdah. These recent recantations, which underscore previous condemnations of extreme violence by important jihadi thinkers such as Abu Basir al-Tartusi and Abu Muhammad al-

Maqdisi, continue to put Al Qaeda on the defensive. As a result, Al Qaeda is under more pressure to justify its activities in late 2008 than at any time before. How can we best think of Al Qaeda's structure in the foreseeable future? The shift away from Iraq toward the Afghan-Pakistan border region is likely to continue over the next few years. Whereas Iraq was the main hub of Al Qaeda's operations since 2003, the main center of operations for Al Qaeda in the foreseeable future is going to be along the Afghan-Pakistan border region. In addition, however, Al Qaeda and its associated movements have established a number of other regional hubs, including in North Africa, the Horn of Africa, Yemen, and the Levant. It is likely that some of the countries most at risk to be attacked by Al Qaeda over the next years are countries in the vicinity of these regional hubs. The mergers between Al Qaeda and groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb help Al Qaeda diffuse and establish this multi-polarity. This multi-polar network of Al Qaeda with a central node in the FATA region and satellite stations in places such as Algeria, Somalia, Yemen, the Gaza Strip, and Lebanon may be a far better framework to describe the geographic structure of the movement in the foreseeable future than either an Al Qaeda centralized along Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas on the one hand, or a completely diffuse movement spread over more than hundred countries on the other hand.

The most useful avenue to address the problem posed by Al Qaeda appears to be the counter-ideological struggle. It is on the ideological level that Al Qaeda is at its weakest: It must justify the killing of civilians, and especially Muslim civilians; it must confront recantations and second guessing from members of its own ranks; and it must put up with the fact that some of its local affiliates are giving it a bad name with actions that are not sanctioned by the group's core leadership. It must also deal with criticism based on tactical and strategic issues.

Al Qaeda will strengthen as a movement as long as it manages to shift focus away from killing civilians indiscriminately; and by refocusing its message on the United States. It will be weakened if the notion will be spread that Al Qaeda is detrimental to the Muslim cause; that the primary victims of Salafi-jihadist terrorism are Muslim; and that Al Qaeda offers no positive vision for the future.