

Monthly Global Security Briefing – May 2012

THE CURRENT STATUS OF AL-QAIDA

Paul Rogers

Introduction

During May, there were three events that aid an understanding of the current status and future prospects for the al-Qaida movement. These were the interception of an improvised explosive device designed to be employed in destroying a passenger aircraft; the killing of a key operative, Fahd al Quso, by a drone attack in Yemen; and the exploding of two very large car bombs in Damascus, as well as a third car bomb targeting a military complex in an eastern Syrian city. The issue of who are the perpetrators of the increasing terrorist violence in Syria is hotly contested, but it is likely to prove a severe complication in any attempt to seek an end to the conflict. This makes diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in Syria even more critical.

There are widely differing views as to the potency of the al-Qaida movement and this briefing seeks to present a helpful interpretation. The movement can be conveniently seen as having five phases.

1985-1992 Origins and Early Development

Although steeped in many years of radical Islamic exegesis, especially the work of Sayidd Qutb (1906-1966), the movement only really developed towards the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The early al-Qaida adherents were part of the extensive and protracted opposition to Soviet rule which produced a cohort of some thousands of non-Afghan paramilitaries. By 1988, these young men had gained combat experience mainly against Soviet conscripts in a rural environment. They subsequently dispersed across the Middle East after the end of the war, with key leadership elements settling initially in Saudi Arabia. One effect of the Afghan War was to empower the leadership through its perceived role in aiding the destruction of a superpower that had occupied an Islamic state. With the United States in mind, what could be done against the Soviet Union might be done again.

1992-2000 Consolidation and Expansion

The failure of the House of Saud to accept al-Qaida aid in ousting the Iraqis from Kuwait was made far more acute by the post-war presence of uniformed U.S. troops in the Kingdom of the two Holy Places. This was anathema to bin Laden and others and further consolidated the view that the House of Saud was the core element of the “near enemy”. Its close association with the “far enemy” (the United States) was a further affront. Actions against US interests developed with attacks on U.S. personnel in Saudi Arabia and on the *USS Cole*. These anti-U.S. attacks extended at the end of the decade to embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Meanwhile, following bin Laden’s eviction from Saudi Arabia and later from Sudan, the al-Qaida movement focused primarily on Afghanistan, principally in aiding the Taliban in the civil war against the Northern Alliance.

While the main al-Qaida focus by 2000 concerned Afghanistan, and consolidating Taliban rule there, the movement now had clear aims, both short- and long-term:

Short-term:

- Termination of the House of Saud
- Termination of “near enemy” regimes such as Mubarak

- Countering and defeating Zionism
- Support for associated movements in Chechnya, Thailand, Indonesia, Kashmir and elsewhere
- Actions to weaken the far enemy

Long-term:

- The development of a world-wide Caliphate

Given the eschatological nature of al-Qaida, timescales for the short-term aims would be measured in decades and the long-term aim in at least half a century, a problem for western political culture and its much shorter time-frames.

2001-2005 Maximum Impact

The 9/11 attacks led on directly to the war on terror and regime termination in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it is commonly forgotten that this period also involved numerous actions across the world. These included attacks on western-linked targets in Casablanca, Jewish and British sites in Istanbul, the Marriot Hotel and Australian Embassy in Djakarta and the Sari nightclub in Bali. French naval technicians were killed in Karachi, where the US consulate was also attacked, Israeli tourists were killed in Mombasa and in Sinai and an historic synagogue site was attacked in Tunisia. Western-owned hotels were bombed in Amman, the *Limburgh* oil tanker was damaged in the Indian Ocean and there were devastating attacks in Madrid and London. Many other attacks were intercepted, including major intended actions against U.S. diplomatic missions in Paris and Rome and multiple diplomatic and commercial targets in Singapore.

What is significant about these many incidents is that there is little evidence that they were the work of a single highly organised entity known as al-Qaida. This was never narrowly hierarchical and always much more dispersed. Indeed it became something of a common idea, very loosely formulated around the aims mentioned above, but adapting to local circumstances, al-Qaida had evolved into an entity that was increasingly difficult to counter.

Even so, there were two elements of the 2001-2005 period that were relevant. One was a massive investment in counter-terrorism forces and associated intelligence agencies, especially but not only in the United States. This investment included controversial measures, such as interrogation under torture, rendition and indefinite detention without trial. It had an effect in curbing elements of the al-Qaida movement, including the killing or capture of significant elements of the dispersed leadership, although the methods used seriously damaged the standing of the U.S.

The other element was the impact of two wars, both of which were expected to be short operations but became very long term. The heavy civilian casualties in Iraq and the extensive and graphic reporting of casualties by Al Jazeera and other media were substantial aids to jihadist propagandists. In particular, the manner in which the U.S. sought Israeli aid in facing down a very difficult and unexpected urban insurgency in Iraq was a gift to propagandists who could present the war as a 'Crusader/Zionist plot to control the heart of the Arab-Islamic world'.

2005-2008 Dispersal

In the closing years of the Bush administration, U.S. forces surged into Iraq and were prepared to surge further into Afghanistan. The core elements of the al-Qaida movement, such as they

were, came under heavy pressure in western Pakistan, and their associates in Iraq faced internal antagonism. At the same time, the al-Qaida idea took root more firmly elsewhere, especially in Yemen and Somalia, and to some extent in some parts of the Islamic Maghreb. While Osama bin Laden took care to maintain a formal distance with al-Shabab in Somalia, declining their proposal for a formal link, he agreed connections with al-Qaida could be spread unofficially, according to documents dating from August 2010 taken from his house after killing and released by the United States in May 2012. There were numerous costly attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan in which many lives were lost, but police and counter-terrorism organisations in western countries were generally successful in curbing initiatives in their own countries with certain exceptions, such as the July 2005 bombings in London.

2009-2012 Corpse or Phoenix?

Barrack Obama campaigned on withdrawal from Iraq and implemented that policy within three years. His administration surged forces into Afghanistan not to defeat the Taliban but to negotiate withdrawal from a position of strength. By early 2012, this had clearly failed but notwithstanding this the U.S. planned to withdraw most forces by 2014. At the same time, 2009-12 saw a substantial increase in the use of armed drones and Special Forces, such that leadership elements of al-Qaida were further depleted, including the killing of bin Laden. In spite of this, the movement has spread, with increased activity in Yemen, including the direct control of territory. Elements are strong in Somalia, there has been a recent resurgence of linked activity in Iraq and there are some links with more loosely affiliated Boko Haram movement in Nigeria (last month's briefing). In Mali on 27 May, Islamists from Ansar Dine and the Tuareg MNLA group declared independence for the northern half of Mali, Africa's sixth-largest country under a 'transitional council of the Islamic state of Azawad'.

The Three Incidents

The introduction to this briefing cited three incidents. The killing by an armed drone of Fahd al-Quso, said by the FBI to be one of the masterminds behind the attack on the *USS Cole* in the harbour of Aden, Yemen in 2000, in which 17 American sailors were killed and 39 were injured, was a recent example of an anti-leadership drone strike. It is one of 23 strikes logged by the Centre for Investigative Journalism in the first four weeks of May.

<http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/05/08/yemen-reported-us-covert-action-2012/>
The interception on 7 May of a sophisticated bomb said by the FBI to be for use on an aircraft, apparently through a sting operation, seems to demonstrate the ingenuity and persistence of Yemen-based associates. To an extent, Yemen is now replacing Pakistan as a basing point for al-Qaida affiliated groups, and there is therefore likely to be far more intensive US intervention in that country.

Finally, there were the devastating Damascus bombs on 10 May, in which 55 people were killed. They were followed by a suicide vehicle bomb in an eastern Syrian city on 19 May, in which nine people were killed. The attack was against military installations in Deir al-Zour, a former transit hub for militants heading to fight U.S. forces in nearby Iraq. These should be placed in a particular context. Probably the biggest threat to the al-Qaida idea is the Arab Awakening, since it broadly seeks a democratic and non-violent transition that is anathema to the aims and methods of the movement. If, however, the Awakening falters, and a democratic transition is bitterly and violently resisted by autocratic regimes, then there is every chance the movement could be boosted.

There is evidence that this is now happening in Syria and what has to be recognised is that there is a dispersed but active cohort of jihadist paramilitaries, who gained their experience not against low-morale Soviet conscripts in 1980s Afghanistan, but against highly trained and well-

armed professional U.S. soldiers and Marines in mid-2000s Iraq. Many of these fought in Iraq for months or even years and came from across the Middle East. Those that survived are believed to be numbered in the thousands and have direct experience of urban conflict.

Oxford Research Group (ORG) has pointed in the past to the risk that from within these ranks would come highly experienced paramilitaries, who would be willing and able to use their skills in further conflicts against elements of the near enemy. These certainly include the Assad regime, and this now appears to be happening in Syria. It is a singularly dangerous, if hardly recognised, consequence of the war in Iraq, and is likely to prove a severe complication in any attempt to seek an end to the conflict.

The Wider Context

This comes at a time of international condemnation of the Houla massacre, increased Iranian military support for the Assad regime, more support from Saudi Arabia for the rebels, and an indication from the Chair of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, that were the situation in Syria to deteriorate still further, military intervention against the regime might be a possibility.

Overall, this means that there is an increasing risk of a proliferating conflict, making the Kofi Annan diplomatic mission even more important. Whether that mission has any chance of success will depend, in large measure on Russian attitudes. The increased involvement of radical Islamist groups within the country adds to the urgency of seeking a settlement.

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