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The Prospects for al Qaeda

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Sixteen months after the attacks of 11 September, what is the status of al Qaeda and what are its prospects? Earlier articles concluded that the organization remained active, was retaining a strategic sense of direction, and, among other things, trying to draw Israel into a wider conflict. While all of these points remain pertinent, it also makes sense to attempt a more general analysis, not least in the light of the aftermath of the war in Afghanistan.

From the al Qaeda perspective, it is still probably correct to argue that one of the aims of the assaults in New York and Washington was to draw the United States into southwest Asia, especially Afghanistan. This was in the expectation that a lengthy guerrilla war would ensue involving U.S. ground troops. In the event, the rapid aligning of the United States with the Northern Alliance meant that few U.S. combat troops even entered the country.

Instead, a combination of large-scale arms shipments and wholesale bribery of warlords meant that the U.S. effectively took sides in the civil war, and thereby succeeded in terminating the Taliban regime. The aftermath of this for peace building in Afghanistan is still being felt, and much of the country remains unstable and lawless. Even so, most supporters of the action see the war as a success because it deprived al Qaeda of its main base and destroyed numerous camps used to train recruits.

This is true, but only up to a point, as it misses a key feature of al Qaeda operations in Afghanistan prior to 9/11. Most of the camps and facilities had been concerned primarily with training recruits to fight alongside the Taliban against the Northern Alliance, rather than producing paramilitaries for operations overseas.

Because of this, the loss of the camps was almost certainly not the hindrance to al Qaeda's global activities that many supposed at the time. There are, in addition, two further factors. First, most of al Qaeda's significant operatives dispersed quickly after 9/11 and many may have left Afghanistan beforehand. Certainly, few have since been killed or captured.

Secondly, al Qaeda has always been a highly dispersed organization, even to the point where some of its major attacks have been initially planned as projects independent of the leadership. It looks very much as if the New York and Washington operations, and the killing of the German tourists at the Tunisian synagogue in April 2002, were each planned overseas and then loosely coordinated by the organization.

In Retreat, or Gathering Forces?

As previous articles have detailed, al Qaeda and its associates have been maintaining a level of activity over the past sixteen months that is actually higher than in the months leading up to the New York and Washington atrocities. Major incidents include the killing of French technicians in Karachi and the attempt to bomb the U.S. consulate in the same city, the attack on the Limberg oil tanker, the Bali bomb, the Paradise Hotel bomb at Kikambala, and the attempt to shoot down an Israeli charter airliner taking off from Mombasa airport.

There have been many lesser incidents in numerous countries, and a number of major attempted incidents have been intercepted,

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including planned attacks in Paris, Rome, and Singapore. Away from al Qaeda itself, Chechen rebels laid siege to a Moscow theater and, more recently, bombed the Russian administrative building in Grozny that was presumed to provide the greatest place of safety in the city for Russian civilians. There have, in addition, been frequent bombings in the Philippines.

Though some of these may not be directly connected to al Qaeda, they should be analyzed in the context of a number of other incidents in a range of countries where there are also no clear links with al Qaeda as such. The ricin incident in Britain may be an example of this, and some other interceptions in Europe seem to show little connection.

In Pakistan, the arrest last month of three suspects in an attempt to assassinate a U.S. diplomat did not immediately show any links to al Qaeda and this appears also to be the case with the murder of three U.S. missionaries in Yemen. Local paramilitaries appear in both cases to have been operating on their own.

More generally, the trend now appears to be for al Qaeda and its associates to be proselytizing among Islamic communities in many parts of the world via videos, tapes, and direct contacts, replacing the single "safe haven" of Afghanistan with many small safe havens around the world.

In general, such a dispersal of a paramilitary organization would be regarded by western security authorities as a success. On this measure, al Qaeda would be considered to be in retreat. This is clearly not the case, given the extent of current activity.

There are two explanations for this. The first is that al Qaeda might have appeared to be thoroughly centered on Afghanistan, but this was never the whole picture. Long before 9/11, it was an organization with affiliates and supporters across much of the Middle East and North Africa as well as in some communities in Asia, Europe, and North America.

The second explanation is that there is probably more support for al Qaeda in many countries than there was two years ago. Although al Qaeda previously gave little support to the Palestinians, and even less to the secular regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, it has embraced both causes and is achieving considerable success in promoting the view of a deeply anti-Islamic U.S./Israeli "axis of evil."

If this is right, al Qaeda would welcome any U.S. action against Iraq with open arms, just as it welcomes the policies of the Sharon government, even down to the refusal to allow Palestinian participation in this week's talks in London.

Local Action, International Challenge

Beyond all this, what of the war on terror? Several hundred detainees are still held by the United States in Cuba and elsewhere, some of them exposed to severe interrogation, especially when handed over to countries that practice torture. The Cuban detentions appear now to be long term, with indications of impending release a few months ago proving to be inaccurate. Across Europe, some 200 people are in detention, but very few are being brought to trial. Among many Islamic communities around the world, this further feeds a sense of alienation.

In Afghanistan, thousands of U.S. troops are tied down trying to kill or capture Taliban and al Qaeda militias, and there have been substantial recent tensions with Pakistan over border crossings. Osama bin Laden, Mullah Mohammad Omar, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar all elude capture, and the CIA is authorized to kill more than twenty al Qaeda leaders if it cannot capture them.

This very decision has its own consequences, as was seen in Yemen with tragic results. First, a CIA drone was used to destroy a vehicle in which an al Qaeda leader was travelling but, within a few weeks, a secular politician, Jarallah Omar, was assassinated and two days later three missionaries from the U.S. were murdered.

Some western security analysts argue that these independent attacks are proof that al Qaeda is in retreat, and is unable to coordinate its operations. This may miss the point. Al Qaeda has always been a partially dispersed network, and what is now significant is its greater concentration on this aspect of its organization, a process aided by increasing support for at least some of its overall aims.

In particular regions, local paramilitary groups may concentrate on local issues, but they are doing so as part of a loose international movement that may on balance not be losing any of its force. Once again, we are faced with a situation in which all the emphasis in the war on terror is focused on pre-emption and capture—beating the terrorists into submission. Meanwhile, there is scarcely any focus on the reasons for the groundswell of support for al Qaeda and its associates in the first place, a support that is likely to be enhanced still further by a war with Iraq.

(This article was first published in its entirety on the global issues website www.opendemocracy.net as part of an ongoing debate about Global Security. Paul Rogers is professor of peace studies at Bradford University and is openDemocracy's international security correspondent.)