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Exclusively for Management

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Al Qaeda, the Taliban and Grassroots Terrorism: The Connection

The focal point of the United States jihadist struggle has become the Afghanistan/Pakistan theater — with the goal of developing a more secure environment in this region that would deny the Taliban a sanctuary, sever Taliban ties with al Qaeda and fracture the jihadist threat emanating from Southwest Asia. Al Qaeda remains a pivotal supporter of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, providing training and strategic planning. One can never underestimate the hatred of the West or complexity indigenous to these foreign domains. Continued resolve against the al Qaeda-fortified Pakistani and Afghani Taliban is of paramount importance. The primary battle has shifted from Afghanistan to South Waziristan in Pakistan, where the Taliban and al Qaeda have evolved into formidable foes and are engaging the Pakistani military with a ferocious onslaught of attacks. The escalating situation has increased regional anti-Americanism and has set off terrorist attacks — including suicide bombings — across the country.

Eight years after the American-led coalition pushed the Taliban out of Kabul, stability and democracy in Afghanistan are still very fragile. The government of Afghanistan is considered one of the most corrupt in the world, and the Taliban threat continues to intensify. There is a serious concern that the Taliban will become even more powerful, leading to the return of al Qaeda and the collapse of Pakistan. This issue of The Lipman Report® *will look at the ongoing threat represented by the presence of al Qaeda and the Taliban in the Northwest Territories of Pakistan, the dangerous connection to the rising number of homegrown terrorists in the West and some of the alarming trends of these new grassroots initiatives.*

A key example of the link between grassroots terrorists and the escalating conflagration in Afghanistan and Pakistan is the discovery of the passport of a suspect in the 9/11 plot during a recent raid in Western Pakistan. The suspect, Said Bahaji — a German citizen whose father is Moroccan — was the main logistics supporter of the 9/11 attacks. Bahaji was part of the Hamburg cell of al Qaeda, a tightly knit group of young Arabs who met in Germany in the 1990s under the leadership of Mohamed Atta, who eventually became the central planner of the 9/11 attacks. In fact, American authorities have unearthed and killed a number of senior al Qaeda members in the tribal areas of Pakistan over the past few years — including Usama al-Kini, a Kenyan who was the group's operations chief in Pakistan and had been involved in the al Qaeda attacks on the American embassies in Africa, and Baitullah Mehsud, who led the Pakistani Taliban.

Taliban Funding

The Taliban in Afghanistan is running a sophisticated financial network to pay for their insurgent operations, raising hundreds of millions of dollars from the illicit drug trade, along with kidnappings, extortion and foreign donations. They have imposed an elaborate system to tax the cultivation, processing and shipment of opium, as well as of other crops, such as wheat, that are grown in the territory they control.

Drugs remain a primary source of funding for the Taliban. Afghanistan produces more opium than any other country in the world, and the Taliban is widely believed to profit at virtually every stage of the trade. This group extorts money from those involved in the heroin trade by demanding protection payments from poppy farmers, drug lab operators and the smugglers who transport chemicals and heroin into and out of the country. Taliban commanders charge poppy farmers a 10 percent tax, while Taliban fighters supplement their pay by working in the poppy fields during harvest. However, the largest sources of drug money for the Taliban are the regular payments made by drug traffickers to the Taliban leadership, based in the Pakistani border city of Quetta. Counterterrorism experts say the relationship of the insurgents to drug trafficking is intensifying. Some opium-trafficking guerrillas have secretly stockpiled more than 10,000 tons of illegal opium worth billions of dollars, enough to satisfy at least two years of world demand. The large stockpiles could bolster the insurgency's war chest and further undercut the ability of NATO military operations to curb the flow of drug money to the Taliban.

However, illegal operations — lucrative as they are — are not the only source of Taliban income. The CIA recently estimated that Taliban leaders and their associates had received $106 million in the past year from donors outside Afghanistan. Private citizens from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran and some other Persian Gulf nations are the largest individual contributors. To date, no evidence has been found indicating that the

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governments of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates or other Persian Gulf states are providing direct aid to the Afghan insurgency, but American intelligence officials have always suspected that Pakistani intelligence operatives have given some financial aid to the Afghan Taliban. The United States Treasury and the United Nations have maintained lists of those suspected of being donors to the Taliban and al Qaeda, but donors have become savvier about disguising their contributions to avoid detection.

Estimates of the Taliban's annual revenue vary tremendously. Proceeds of the illicit drug trade alone range from $70 to $400 million a year. However, by diversifying their revenue stream beyond opium, the Taliban is successfully confounding American and NATO efforts to weaken the insurgency by cutting off its economic lifeline. To complicate matters, American officials are debating whether cracking down on the drug trade will anger the farmers dependent on it for their livelihood and drive them into the arms of the Taliban. But even if the United States and its allies were to limit the money flow, it is not clear how much impact it would have. In reality, it costs little to train, equip and pay for the insurgency in impoverished Afghanistan. Fighters typically earn $200 to $500 a month, while corruption is rampant because the cost of bribing poorly paid Afghan security and government officials is minimal.

Homegrown Jihadists: Paying Attention to the Grassroots

For years now, al Qaeda has been referring to its movement to arms as sowing seeds across the globe, and now it appears that these seeds are beginning to sprout. During August 2009, seven men accused by American authorities of belonging to a militant cell appeared in the United States District Court in Raleigh, North Carolina. These men were charged with conspiring to provide material support to terrorists and conspiracy to murder, kidnap, maim and injure people in a foreign country. One defendant, Daniel Patrick Boyd, also known as "Saifullah" — Arabic for "the sword of Allah" — is a Muslim convert who was in Pakistan and Afghanistan from 1989 to 1991 attending militant camps. He reportedly fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and against the Soviet-backed Afghan forces during the civil war waged by Islamist militants against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Islamic veterans of that war in Afghanistan are held in reverence in the Islamic community and tend to be afforded a romanticized mystique as "holy warriors" who defeated the Soviets and their communist and atheistic Afghan allies. The grand jury indictment implies that Boyd used this prestige to influence and recruit others to participate in militant struggles abroad.

The activities of Boyd's group mirror those of the group of jihadists in New York who would go on to assassinate Rabbi Meir Kahane of the Jewish Defense League in Manhattan in 1990 and help bomb the World Trade Center in February 1993. Members of that organization also traveled overseas to train and fight.

The "7/7" suicide bombers who attacked London's public transport system and the terrorists convicted in the 2006 airline plot in the United Kingdom also shared this important common trait: Prior to these incidents, they all left Britain for jihad in Pakistan. Apparently, Pakistan served as a "terrorist finishing school," where these individuals — on their way to radicalization — met veteran al Qaeda fighters and leaders. Their stay in this al Qaeda hot spot solidified their radical views, and they maintained contact with jihad leaders when they returned to Britain.

Three recent cases — one involving two Chicago men accused in October of planning an attack on a Danish newspaper that published cartoons of the prophet Mohammed, the second a 24-year-old Denver shuttle bus driver's conspiracy to use improvised explosives in New York City, and the third the arrest of Boston resident Tarek Mehanna — bring the known number of terrorist plots foiled since 9/11 to 27. The main defendants are all long-term residents of the United States with substantial community ties who traveled to Pakistan's tribal areas, where they trained with extremist groups affiliated with al Qaeda.

In a foreboding trend, David Coleman Headley, Najibullah Zazi and Tarek Mehanna — all United States citizens and the central players in these three arrests — seem to have been more security-conscious and better trained and organized than many of those involved in terrorism cases since 2001. According to FBI documents, Headley — the principal defendant in the Chicago case — met with Ilyas Kashmiri, who is regarded by Western authorities as one of the most dangerous Islamic militants operating in Pakistan's restive tribal areas. Kashmiri turned to terrorism after serving as a Pakistan special operations commander.

He has been described as a consummate opportunist and a master strategist who has intimate local knowledge, combined with a vicious global agenda.

A case last year confirmed suspicions that young men from the United States are traveling to Pakistan for training. The individual in question, Bryant Neal Vinas, made contact with an al Qaeda group before being captured in 2008 and is reportedly cooperating to identify other extremists who trained for operations in the West. However, the pattern of young men who have lived for years in the United States before traveling overseas and connecting with militant Islamist groups is not confined to Pakistan. Shirwa Ahmed, a teenager from Minneapolis, participated in a suicide bombing in Somalia — driving a car packed with explosives into an intelligence headquarters in the port town of Bosasso — while another American citizen carried out a subsequent suicide bombing in that country. These are the first known suicide bombings by American citizens. Ahmed in fact attended and graduated from Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis; he enjoyed playing basketball and going to malls with his friends. In the months before the attack, Ahmed traveled from the United States — where he was a citizen since he moved here in the 1990s — to the Horn of Africa and joined up with Al Shabab, a militant Muslim group with links to al Qaeda. Currently, there are a significant number of young men missing from the Somali Diaspora in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who are suspected of having been recruited by militants in local mosques to travel to Somalia to join Al Shabab in its jihad against Ethiopia.

The tragic November 5, 2009 shooting at Fort Hood in Texas by United States Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Hasan that killed 13 people and wounded 30 others is one of the most horrific recent incidents on American soil. As of press time, authorities are still investigating possible links to al Qaeda or other radical Islamists.

Other domestic jihadist plots include: a June 2009 attack that killed a soldier outside of a United States military recruiting office in Little Rock, Arkansas; a May 2009 plot to bomb Jewish targets in the Bronx and shoot down a military aircraft at an Air National Guard base in Newburgh, New York; the August 2007 arrests of two men found with an improvised explosive device in their car near Goose Creek, South Carolina; a May 2007 plot to attack United States soldiers at Fort Dix, New Jersey; a June 2006 plot to bomb the Sears Tower in Chicago involving seven men from Miami; a June 2006 plot to attack targets in the United States and Canada involving two men from Georgia; and the July 2005 arrests in Torrance, California, involving a planned attack on targets including the El Al airline ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport, synagogues, California National Guard armories and a United States Army recruiting station.

It is believed that given the escalating situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, this mounting grassroots activity will only increase. The threat from al Qaeda and its jihadist militant spawn has been changing, devolving to pre-9/11 operational models. Since al Qaeda's structure has been under continuous attack, and no regional al Qaeda franchise groups in the Western Hemisphere have been identified, many believe that the most pressing terrorist threat to the United States homeland at present stems from these grassroots jihadists. Authorities need to continue to keep a close watch on this changing domestic terrorist landscape.

Smaller-Scale Operations: A Dangerous Pattern?

After disrupting the three most recent terrorist plots, American intelligence officials are becoming increasingly concerned that extremist groups in Pakistan linked to al Qaeda are planning smaller operations in the United States, ones that will be harder to detect but more likely to succeed than the spectacular attacks they once emphasized. The Chicago, Denver and Boston cases involved plots that are less ambitious than the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks or suspected larger plots of years past, like those aimed at Los Angeles International Airport or the Sears Tower in Chicago. Up until recently, al Qaeda's leadership concentrated on mass-casualty attacks to build its credibility in the Muslim world, and the difficulty of carrying out such grandiose plots offered a measure of protection to the United States. These latest incidents suggest that al Qaeda may be rethinking its strategy. However, these could also be isolated cases in which the al Qaeda core has simply delegated smaller-scale attacks to its affiliated groups while the core continues to undertake a major operation, possibly involving weapons of mass destruction.

Ilyas Kashmiri, the mentor of David Coleman Headley and operational commander of Harakat-ul Jihad Islami — a Pakistani terrorist group affiliated with al Qaeda —

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epitomizes the emerging pattern of small-scale operations. Kashmiri is described as a "nightmare guy" due to his focus on small-scale tactical operations. He also has a long history of waging guerrilla operations; as a Pakistani army trainer of Afghan mujahideen, he was wounded battling Soviet forces and later worked with Kashmiri militants against India. His credentials are further validated by his participation in an assassination attempt on President Pervez Musharraf and his assistance to Islamic fanatics against the July 2007 Pakistani army siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad. Kashmiri then moved his operation to North Waziristan, where he took up arms with al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban. Kashmiri is considered a dangerous militant because of his training skills, commando experience and strategic vision to carry out attacks that are deadly, yet small enough to escape detection.

Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)

There is also increasing concern regarding the expanding use of makeshift bombs beyond the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan to other countries in the region, as well as in East Asia, South America or possibly even the United States. Improvised explosive devices — or IEDs, as the military calls them — have been the largest killer of American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and are now showing up with devastating effect in many other areas of the world. Even Russian security forces have faced these devices in the Russian republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan and Chechnya. Those recently arrested in the United States learned to make IEDs during their training in Afghanistan and Pakistan camps and planned to use them in their plots. There is a constant and robust IED effort among violent extremists, who are using them as their weapons of choice. There are about 300 IED cases a month outside Iraq and Afghanistan.

Pakistan has experienced the most pronounced escalation of IEDs dating from 2007, after the Pakistani military mounted an eight-day siege to end a long standoff with Islamic extremists. India has the second highest number of IED incidents. Extremists are not only increasing the power of their devices but also showing a grim cleverness in the delivery systems. The IED is a tempting, low-cost option for jihadists, who hope that this strategic ammunition will wear down the will to resist on all fronts.

Good News

Although the tenacity and commitment of the jihadists has not abated, as evidenced by the continued carnage in the Middle East, Western Asia and now the emergence of homegrown groups in the United States, the American legal environment has improved dramatically in terms of helping authorities combat potential terrorist groups and halt plots. Prior to recent legal changes, it was very difficult for law enforcement to prosecute terrorism conspiracies. It was, quite frankly, easier to prosecute a terrorism case after the attack had been conducted. Following 9/11, the Patriot Act amended many statutes in order to ease the prosecution of terrorist crimes and stop them before people were harmed. The newer terrorism laws mean that prosecutors can be more proactive than they could in the 1990s, and this has allowed them to focus on prevention rather than prosecution after the tragic fact.

Has the risk to America been eliminated? There have been no large-scale attacks since 9/11, which implies that the Homeland Security team is meeting current challenges. However, the threat is as alive as at any other time since 9/11, with the mastermind Bin Laden still around, hiding somewhere in Pakistan and releasing graphic videos to frighten Americans and their allies. The dangers are broader than ever before, now encompassing large-scale operations that are more deadly but perhaps less difficult to detect and smaller-scale attacks that fly more easily under the radar until they occur. The rudimentary terrorist can still create casualties; even seemingly unsophisticated plotters can occasionally get lucky. Aggressive counterterrorism efforts since 9/11 have helped reduce the odds of such a lucky strike, but as we move further from that pivotal event, complacency, budget constraints and other factors have begun to erode counterterrorism on the national level and security of the infrastructure on the private level. Congress, the administration and the private sector must not rest on recent achievements and should continue the development of America's counterterrorism capabilities with the same vigor, determination and urgency as in the months immediately following 9/11. ***The time for urgency is now.®***

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