

Al Qaeda: The Next Generation

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A madrassa in Chingai, Pakistan -- a small village near the northwestern border with Afghanistan -- was destroyed and at least 80 people were reportedly killed by a powerful airstrike Oct. 31. There have been reports that Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's No. 2 man, was the intended target. Most of those killed are thought to have been teachers and students from the madrassa; however, the results of forensic tests to identify many of the victims are still pending, and al Qaeda militants eventually could be identified as among the dead.

The madrassa that was struck was located a little more than a mile from the village of Damadola, the site of an airstrike in January that was also intended to kill al-Zawahiri. (He was not present at the time of the January attack but four other senior al Qaeda operatives reportedly were killed.) If al-Zawahiri indeed was the target of the Oct. 31 strike, it is clear that intelligence has led the U.S. and Pakistani governments to believe he is moving about in a very specific area of northwestern Pakistan.

If al-Zawahiri survived this latest strike -- and if, as in the past, he wants to offer continued "proof of life" to his supporters and needle the United States -- he will be producing a video or audiotape quite soon.

In fact, in the past there has been a discernible and consistent lag of about two to three weeks between the events that trigger al-Zawahiri's videos (which he mentions in his messages) and the release of As-Sahab productions. For instance, in the Damadola case, the strike occurred Jan. 13 and a video of al-Zawahiri -- taunting the United States for having missed him -- was released Jan. 30. Similarly, the tape eulogizing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was released June 23; the militant leader in Iraq was killed June 6. Using this pattern as a guide, we would expect As-Sahab productions to send out a banner ad, announcing a forthcoming video, to jihadist Web sites and message boards late this week or early next week, with the video airing a day or two later.

In the interim, however, there is a question to be pondered: What if "proof of life" does not emerge? There long have been rumors that Osama bin Laden is dead or dying, and it is significant that al-Zawahiri -- who, some personal acquaintances have said, prefers the No. 2 position to the role of top leadership (believing it to be more powerful) -- has been the public face of al Qaeda for quite some time. So far this year, he has appeared in a dozen As-Sahab productions (compared to only five for bin Laden, whose spate of voice recordings in the first half of the year constituted an uncharacteristic media blitz). Supposing that al-Zawahiri could have been killed by the recent airstrike -- or will be killed by a future airstrike in the same region -- who might emerge to fill the power void?

Looking for Leadership

Since the disruption of its base in Afghanistan in 2001, it clearly has become more difficult for al Qaeda to cultivate and develop the next generation of leaders. Many prominent second-tier commanders have been captured or killed in the war, and there has been a decided movement toward a "virtual training" model, with publications such as Muaskar al-Battar emerging, particularly in the early years of the war, to provide the kinds of tactical training that once took place in al Qaeda's camps.

Nevertheless, since the beginning of 2006 there have been indications that al Qaeda's leadership is retrenching and becoming more comfortable. Bin Laden issued a flurry of audiotapes between Jan. 19 and July 1, and al-Zawahiri's numerous videos have been slick, professional-grade productions. That, plus the more consistent time frames involved in the release of statements, indicates the leadership once again has established a sense of security and built up a degree of infrastructure.

Whether this will be the group's undoing, as it was in Afghanistan, remains to be seen. However, it is quite possible that, having entered a period of relative stability, the al Qaeda leadership -- less concerned with the immediate issues of survival -- has been able to devote some attention to the crucial issue of succession.

Chain of command is a vital issue for any military organization, especially one that could lose its leaders at any time to a Predator strike. Moreover, neither al-Zawahiri nor bin Laden is a young man, even if they could claim to be hale and hearty -- and, not being delusional, they recognize that death is the certain end of all men. The group clearly has a long-term perspective regarding the war it has declared against the "Jews and Crusaders." It doesn't expect it to end tomorrow, and it is in for the long haul. Thus, questions of battlefield necessity aside, there is every reason for the upper echelon to identify and begin to cultivate the next generation of leadership.

Given the level of attrition al Qaeda has suffered in the past several years -- and particularly with the death of al-Zarqawi in Iraq -- there are not many at the moment who have the broad public recognition, the background or the respect needed to fill the void that will be left by al-Zawahiri. Though a number of tactical commanders and leaders (such as Abu Ayyub al-Masri, al Qaeda's new leader in Iraq) have risen up to replace those killed or captured, most are not well-known by al Qaeda's supporters and grassroots followers. That is significant: The man who replaces al-Zawahiri will need to be both recognizable and respected. One way to gain that recognition and respect is turn the person into a media personality -- a celebrity, if you will, in the jihadist universe.

Since As-Sahab is al Qaeda's most recognized and authoritative media outlet, a look at those featured in its videos over the past year could provide some clues as to who the current leaders might be grooming for future leadership positions.

Prominent speakers include:

* Adam Yahiye Gadahn, or "Azzam the American": Gadahn has appeared in four As-

Sahab videos this year. Because he was born and raised in the United States, he is used as a spokesman whenever al Qaeda wants to ensure that its message is clearly heard and understood by an American audience. Though widely recognized, Gadhafi lacks the experience, stature, trust and respect needed to fill al-Zawahiri's shoes. Moreover, as an American -- and one of Jewish descent, at that -- he is not qualified to lead the global jihad against Jews and Crusaders. He is not a contender in the leadership contest.

* Mohammed al-Hakayma, or Abu Jihad al-Masri: Al-Hakayma has appeared in one As-Sahab video. He is al Qaeda's designated regional commander in Egypt, but he is not, at this point, widely known or respected for his leadership or accomplishments. Though there is a strong Egyptian cadre within al Qaeda and, apparently, a bit of an "old boys network" linked to al-Zawahiri, al-Hakayma has not yet proven himself in Egypt.

* Abu Nasir al-Qahtani, or (true name) Mohammed Jafar Jamal al-Khatani: Al-Qahtani is a Saudi national and one of four suspects -- the Bagram Four -- who escaped from a U.S. military jail in Bagram, Afghanistan, on July 11, 2005. Al-Qahtani has appeared in one As-Sahab video, from April, which touched on the need to apply experiences and lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan to jihadist efforts in Saudi Arabia. This militant supposedly is leading al Qaeda attacks against coalition forces in Afghanistan. He has not been heard from since the April video was released.

* Omar al-Farouq: This militant also was among the four to escape from Bagram, alongside al-Qahtani, in 2005. He appeared in one As-Sahab video, released in February. He was killed by British troops in Iraq on Sept. 25.

* Abu Yahya al-Libi, or Sheikh Abu Yehia al-Libi, Mohammed Hassan: Al-Libi has appeared in five As-Sahab videos this year, the most recent of which -- "Combat, not Surrender" -- appeared Nov. 1. Al-Libi also is one of the Bagram Four. He is a militant preacher and recruiter, and thus quite charismatic. He has appeared in numerous videos produced by other sources such as Labik Productions, a tool used by al Qaeda in Afghanistan. In his videos, he has touched on a number of important topics, including the cartoon controversy and the death of al-Zarqawi.

Clearly, al-Libi has the advantages of a recognizable face and, like al-Zawahiri, the cachet afforded by having been imprisoned by "Crusader forces" for his participation in the jihadist struggle (not to mention his escape from their custody, which was quite embarrassing for coalition forces). In addition, he has published a number of letters and fatawa that have helped to establish his stature and authority as a sheikh. These include:

* A 17-page fatwa on "The Infidel Karzai Regime and the Necessity of War" that

circulated on jihadist message boards in late October.

* A lengthy fatwa criticizing Hamas and its failure to adhere to "Islamic" principles and those related to "jihad" that was posted on an al Qaeda-affiliated Internet forum in late April.

* A 20-page letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, dated Nov. 23, 2005, in which he describes how news of al-Zarqawi's exploits buoyed his spirits while he was in prison in Bagram. The letter also states that Iraq had overshadowed Afghanistan as an important theater of jihad, and that jihadists should avoid splits and factionalisms in the face of their enemy.

Al-Libi has been in the news quite recently as well. In October, Al Arabiya re-released a video that originally was produced by Labik on July 27. In the hour-long tape, al-Libi was seen speaking to a group of al Qaeda fighters in southern Afghanistan, saying, "Allah will not be pleased until we reach the rooftop of the White House." He also told the militants that "You have to get well-prepared by starting with exercise, and then you have to learn how to use technology until you are capable of nuclear weapons."

To Lead, or Not To Lead?

Al-Libi -- with his charisma, religious standing and emergence as a media personality -- would appear the best-positioned of the speakers on this list to step into any void left by al-Zawahiri. But even for someone with these credentials, those would be big shoes to fill. It is entirely possible that, with the passing of al-Zawahiri and bin Laden, al Qaeda's transformation from organization to movement will be complete.

Though there have been clear connections between the main al Qaeda leadership and operational cells in places such as the United Kingdom and Iraq -- as evident from the group's statements, intercepted letters and suicide videos -- the various nodes of al Qaeda currently exist in more of a loose federation than a strict hierarchical chain of command. It is these nodes that have conducted the vast majority (if not all) of the attacks since 9/11.

Noting this transition, we wrote in September 2005 that:

"If you were to plot this out on a chart, what you might see are two trend lines forming an 'X:' One, depicting al Qaeda's impact as a strategic force, on a declining trend; the other, depicting the tactical and security threats posed by a widespread and less-visible movement, on the increase.

At this point, we find ourselves near the midpoint on the X. Al Qaeda has a top leadership that is, though in hiding, still capable of communicating with the world through broadcast

recordings and the Internet, and -- if London is any indication -- foot soldiers around the world who are capable of flying below the radar until an attack actually is carried out. If, however, al Qaeda gels as a movement, with its ideology resonating among militants with various causes of their own, the existence or annihilation of widely recognized figureheads would be, in most respects, irrelevant."

If al-Zawahiri has been taken out and bin Laden remains somehow out of the picture, al-Libi or any other next-generation leader would find it challenging indeed to arrest the progression from "group" to "movement." In fact, it would be at that point -- with the apex leadership responsible for 9/11 no longer on the scene -- that al Qaeda's progression as a jihadist "movement" would accelerate rapidly.

There is no question that, though al Qaeda at that point would be spent as a strategic force, the larger issue of jihadism would remain. New recruits are receiving advanced degrees in jihad everyday at the higher institutions of instruction provided by the environment in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. They also have the worldwide "web of jihad" to help them plan and communicate, and these nodes could very well use their skills and communication abilities to give rise to a new structure.

There are significant pros and cons to both structural models.

In the futuristic form -- without a central leadership or planning unit -- grassroots jihadists could remain largely faceless and nameless, linked together by the Internet and operating under pseudonyms as they planned strikes against geographically diverse targets. High-profile leaders would not exist for U.S. or allied intelligence agencies to identify, track down and kill. However, cases in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada this year have shown that it is quite dangerous to attempt to coordinate militant activities through cyberspace. Moreover, if multiple, independent nodes are operating in the same environment, it would be difficult to avoid competition, synchronize activities, agree on target sets and cooperate in any concerted effort. Soft targets would be struck and, possibly, high death tolls generated, but these kinds of grassroots strikes almost certainly would lack the kind of strategic significance achieved with 9/11.

There also is the important issue of bankrolling the jihad. Independent strikes such as the London or Madrid train attacks can be fairly inexpensive to pull off, but a strategic strike like 9/11 requires more sophisticated funding mechanisms and coordination between the operational cell and support networks. Running terrorist training camps also requires capital. Part of al Qaeda's success has stemmed from its ability to raise capital from a variety of sources, funding operations that have spanned the globe -- from the Philippines to Europe and the Americas -- and striking at "apostate" regimes. Having a recognized, charismatic leader and a central financial clearinghouse eases fundraising efforts considerably for any cause.

For this reason, if for no others, we expect that there eventually would be a movement

toward a centralized, formal al Qaeda command -- and quite possibly, one with a geographically identifiable base of operations. The passing of bin Laden and al-Zawahiri inevitably will usher in a period of flux, which might or might not be resolved within a foreseeable time by the emergence of al-Libi or another of his compatriots. But, in this long-term war of ideology, a new leader -- whether in this generation or the next -- in all likelihood will emerge.