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Al-Qaeda's Persistent Sanctuary (ARI)

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Theme: With growing instability across the Arab world, it has become *de rigueur* to argue that the primary al-Qaeda threat now comes from the Persian Gulf or North Africa. While these regions certainly present a threat to Western security, al-Qaeda's primary command and control structure remains situated in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions.

Summary: Since the mid-1990s, al-Qaeda's senior leadership has enjoyed a sanctuary in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Today, al-Qaeda continues to present a grave threat from this region by providing strategic guidance, overseeing or encouraging terrorist operations, managing a robust propaganda campaign, conducting training and collecting and distributing financial assistance. As demonstrated over the past year, key al-Qaeda operatives such as Ilyas Kashmiri have been involved in plots to conduct Mumbai-style attacks in Europe, target a newspaper in Copenhagen that published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad and bomb New York. The US, for example, has narrowly escaped several imminent attacks. Faisal Shahzad, who was trained in Pakistan, constructed several bombs, placed them in the back of his Nissan Pathfinder sports utility vehicle and drove into Times Square in New York City on a congested Saturday night in 2010. Only fortune intervened, since all three bombs malfunctioned. It may be tempting to focus predominantly on terrorist threats to the West from Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Egypt and other countries in the Arab world because of the widespread unrest and on-going violence, but this would be a dangerous mistake.

Analysis: How serious is the al-Qaeda threat to the West from operatives based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region? What lessons, if any, has the West learned in its pursuit of al-Qaeda? In an effort to answer these questions, I returned to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in early 2011 to assess the current situation.

(1) *Debating the Threat*

There has been growing scepticism about the importance of Afghanistan and Pakistan for al-Qaeda. In his 2011 testimony before the US House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, Michael Leiter, Director of the US National Counterterrorism Center, remarked that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is 'probably the most significant risk to the US homeland'.¹ Others have argued that al-Qaeda has a nearly endless supply of sanctuaries in weak states, such as Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan and even Iraq.

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¹ Testimony of Michael Leiter, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Hearing of the House Homeland Security Committee, 9/II/2011.

'Many of these countries', notes Stephen Biddle from the Council on Foreign Relations, 'could offer al-Qa'ida better havens than Afghanistan ever did'.²

While this argument seems reasonable, at least on the surface, the evidence suggests that al-Qaeda leaders retain an unparalleled relationship with local networks on the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, have a 30-year history of trust and collaboration with the Pashtun militant networks located in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These relationships are deeper and more robust than the comparatively nascent, tenuous and fluid relationships that al-Qaeda has developed with al Shabaab in Somalia and local tribes in Yemen.

Indeed, al-Qaeda has become embedded in multiple networks that operate on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Key groups include the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e Tayyiba and Afghan Taliban. Al-Qaeda has effectively established a foothold with some of the Mahsud sub-tribes for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Zadran sub-tribes for the Haqqani Network and Salarzai and other sub-tribes for militants in north-eastern Afghanistan. The secret to al-Qaeda's staying power, it turns out, has been its success in cultivating supportive networks in an area generally inhospitable to outsiders. 'Except at the times of sowing and of harvest, a continual state of feud and strife prevails throughout the land', Winston Churchill wrote of the region in his epic tome, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*. 'Every tribesmen has a blood feud with his neighbour. Every man's hand is against the other, and all against the stranger'.³

Al-Qaeda provides several types of assistance to Afghanistan and Pakistan militant groups in return for sanctuary. One is coordination. It has helped establish *shuras* (councils) to coordinate strategic priorities, operational campaigns and tactics against Western allied forces. In addition, al-Qaeda operatives have been involved in planning military operations, such as launching suicide attacks, emplacing improvised explosive devices and helping conduct ambushes and raids. It also helps run training camps for militants, which cover the recruitment and preparation of suicide bombers, intelligence, media and propaganda efforts, bomb-making and religious indoctrination. Al-Qaeda provides some financial aid to militant groups, though it appears to be a small percentage of their total aid. Finally, it has cooperated with Afghan and Pakistan militant groups to improve and coordinate propaganda efforts, including through the use of DVDs, CDs, jihadi websites and other media forums.

Some pundits have argued that al-Qaeda operatives primarily reside in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. But the 1,519-mile border, drawn up in 1893 by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, the British Foreign Secretary of India, is largely irrelevant. Locals regularly cross the border to trade, pray at mosques, visit relatives and –in some cases– target NATO and coalition forces. Indeed, al-Qaeda migration patterns since the anti-Soviet jihad show frequent movement in both directions. Osama bin Laden established al-Qaeda in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1988 though he and other Arab fighters crossed the border into Afghanistan regularly to fight Soviet forces and support the mujahedeen. When bin Laden returned to the area in 1996 from Sudan, he settled near Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and later moved south to Kandahar Province. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime,

² Stephen Biddle (2009), 'Is It Worth It? The Difficult Case for War in Afghanistan', *The American Interest*, July-August.

³ Winston S. Churchill (1989), *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War*, Leo Cooper, London, p. 3.

however, most of the al-Qaeda leadership moved back to Pakistan, though some settled in neighbouring Iran.

Even today, some al-Qaeda operatives have pushed back across the border into such Afghan provinces as Konar and Nangarhar. They look for opportunities where there are few coalition forces and supportive local communities. The rugged snow-capped Hindu Kush mountains, narrow valleys and swelling rivers provide an ideal sanctuary for al-Qaeda and other militants. In short, Afghanistan and Pakistan remain the core sanctuary for al-Qaeda's leaders.

Other sceptics contend that informal, home-grown networks inspired by al-Qaeda have become the most serious threat to the West.⁴ Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and central al-Qaeda more broadly have become extraneous, according to this argument. Impressionable young Muslims can radicalise through the Internet or interactions with local extremist networks. They do not need a headquarters. The threat to the West, therefore, comes largely from a 'leaderless jihad' in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North America rather than a relationship with central al-Qaeda located in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

But there is sparse evidence to support this argument. The majority of recent terrorist plots against the West have been connected to al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, though a few others have been tied to such areas as Yemen and Somalia. Sparsely few serious attacks have come from purely home-grown terrorists. The 2004 Madrid attacks involved senior al-Qaeda leaders, including Amer Azizi, as Fernando Reinares has pointed out.⁵ The 2005 London attacks and 2006 transatlantic airlines plot involved senior al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan, who were involved in strategic, operational and even tactical support. In 2008, 12 individuals of Pakistani origin and two Indian nationals were arrested in a terrorist plot to conduct suicide attacks in Barcelona's public transport system. Jonathan Evans, the Director General of MI5, the UK's domestic intelligence agency, recently acknowledged that at least half of the country's priority plots continue to be linked to 'al-Qaeda in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where al-Qaeda senior leadership is still based'. Over the last decade, there have been plots and attacks in the UK, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, France, India and other countries with links to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

In May 2010, Faisal Shahzad attempted to detonate a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in Times Square in New York City after being trained by bomb-makers from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, a group in South Waziristan Agency with strong ties to al-Qaeda. In February 2010, Najibullah Zazi pleaded guilty in a US District Court to 'conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction' and 'providing material support for a foreign terrorist organisation' based in Pakistan. Several al-Qaeda operatives, including Saleh al-Somali and Adnan Gulshair el Shukrijumah, were involved in the plot. According to US government documents, Zazi's travels to Pakistan and his contacts with individuals there were pivotal in helping him build an improvised explosive device using triacetone triperoxide, the same explosive used effectively in the 2005 London subway bombings. In

⁴ Mark Sagemen (2008), *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, p. 133 & 140.

⁵ Fernando Reinares (2010), 'The Madrid Bombings and Global Jihadism', *Survival*, vol. 52, nr 2, April-May, p. 83-104.

December 2009, five Americans from Alexandria, Virginia, were arrested in Pakistan and charged with plotting terrorist attacks.

(2) Al-Qaeda's Organisational Structure

With a leadership structure still in Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qaeda is a notably different organisation than a decade ago and can perhaps best be described as a 'complex adaptive system'.⁶ The term refers to systems that are diverse (composing multiple networks) and adaptive (possessing the capacity to evolve and learn from experience). One key element of complex adaptive systems is that they include a series of networks, which are often dispersed and small. But different nodes can communicate and conduct their campaigns with some coordination. Al-Qaeda today can perhaps best be divided into several tiers: central al-Qaeda, affiliated groups, affiliated networks and inspired individuals.

To begin with, 'central al-Qaeda' includes the organisation's leaders. Despite the death of key figures, such as the chief financial officer Shaykh Sa'aid al-Masri and the external operations chief Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Najdi, top leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri remain involved in providing strategic-level guidance. Al-Qaeda's goals remain overthrowing regimes in the Middle East (the near enemy, or *al-Adou al-Qareeb*) to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate, as well as to fight the US and its allies (the far enemy, or *al-Adou al-Baeed*) who support them. As demonstrated over the past year, key al-Qaeda operatives such as Ilyas Kashmiri have been involved in thwarted plots to conduct Mumbai-style attacks in Europe and to target a newspaper in Copenhagen that published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Abu Yahya al-Libi continues to act as one of al-Qaeda's senior ideologues and religious figures. Despite enjoying a headquarters in Pakistan, most of the organisation cannot directly contact the senior leadership because of security concerns. Prior notification for a terrorist operation is generally done to help al-Qaeda prepare its media strategy, but not to get permission, which time delays made impractical.

The second tier includes a range of affiliated groups. They benefit from bin Laden's financial assistance and inspiration, and receive at least some training, arms, money or other support. Some of these groups have publicly joined al-Qaeda, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri retain a degree of oversight over these groups and, when necessary, may discipline members for failing to follow guidance. Others, such as Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and al Shabaab, are more autonomous but still cooperate with central al-Qaeda for specific operations or training purposes.

The third tier involves affiliated networks –small, dispersed adherents who enjoy some direct connection with al-Qaeda–. These entities are not large militant groups with clear command-and-control structures, but often self-organised small networks that congregate, radicalise and plan attacks. In some cases, they comprise individuals who have prior terrorism experience in Algeria, the Balkans, Chechnya, Afghanistan or perhaps Iraq. In other cases, they include individuals who have travelled to camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan for training, as with Mohammed Siddique Khan and the British extremists responsible for the successfully July 2005 London bombing.

⁶ See, for example, Murray Gell-Mann (1995), *The Quark and the Jaguar*, Henry Holt and Company, New York; John Holland (1995), *Hidden Order*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA; Kevin Dooley (1997), 'A Complex Adaptive Systems Model of Organization Change', *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Science*, vol. 1, nr 1, p. 69-97.

Finally, the inspired individuals include those with no direct contact to al-Qaeda central, but who are inspired by the al-Qaeda cause and outraged by perceived oppression in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya and Palestinian territory. They tend to be motivated by a hatred towards the West and its allied regimes in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia. Without direct support, these networks tend to be amateurish, though they can occasionally be lethal. In November 2004, a member of the Hofstad Group in the Netherlands, Mohammed Bouyeri, murdered the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam. But many others, such as the cell led by Russell Defreitas that plotted to attack New York City's John F. Kennedy International Airport in 2007 (codenamed 'chicken farm'), were rudimentary and would have been difficult to execute.

Taken together, al-Qaeda has transformed itself by 2011 into a more diffuse –and more global– terror network. While the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region was its home base, it had a growing array of allied groups and networks on multiple continents.

(3) Countering al-Qaeda

While the al-Qaeda threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan has remained fairly constant, the West has struggled to pursue an effective counterterrorism strategy. In 2001, less than 100 CIA and US Special Operations personnel, supported by punishing US airpower, toppled the Taliban regime and unhinged al-Qaeda from Afghanistan.

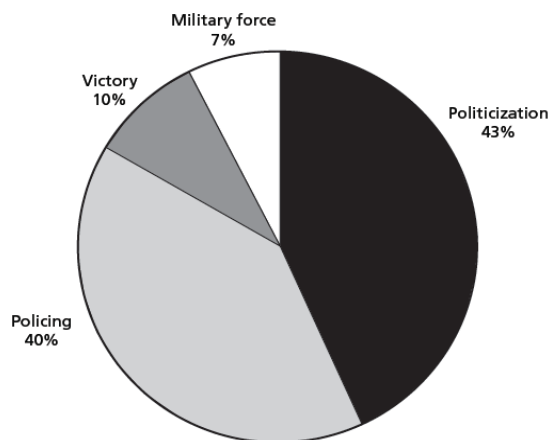
Two years later, however, the small footprint approach went out the window. I was in the Bermel area in 2003 when the US military established a brigade-level headquarters in eastern Afghanistan, increasing its conventional footprint to 20,000 forces. It was an ironic, though somewhat backward, step. By then, US policymakers and national security documents referred to operations against al-Qaeda as the 'global war on terror'. The use of the word 'war' to describe US efforts had an important symbolic importance, since it suggested a military conflict that required a *military* solution. Even Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had reservations about using the term because 'the word "war" led people to overemphasize the importance of the military instrument in this multi-dimensional conflict'.⁷

In 2003, NATO countries also deployed large numbers of conventional forces to Iraq as part of its global war against terror. But as Western intelligence agencies later concluded, the bitter irony was that al-Qaeda established a foothold after –and indeed *because of*– the US invasion. Military forces may help penetrate and garrison an area frequented by terrorist groups and, if well sustained, may temporarily reduce terrorist activity. But once the situation in an area becomes untenable for terrorists, they will transfer their activity to another location. Terrorists groups generally fight wars of the weak. They do not put large, organised forces into the field, except when they engage in insurgencies. This means that military forces can rarely engage terrorist groups using what most armies are trained in: conventional tactics, techniques and procedures. Most soldiers are not trained to understand, penetrate and destroy terrorist organisations. In examining 648 terrorist groups, I found that most groups end in one of two ways. Either they join the political process, or else small networks of clandestine intelligence and security forces arrest or kill the leadership. Large-scale military force has rarely been the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups, and few groups achieve victory.⁸

⁷ Douglas J. Feith (2008), *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terror*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, p. 87.

⁸ Seth G. Jones & Martin Libicki (2008), *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al-Qaeda*, RAND, Santa Monica, CA.

Figure 1. How terrorist groups end



By 2011, however, Western policymakers seemed to better understand the utility of intelligence and Special Operations forces. The US increased its covert efforts against al-Qaeda, improving its intelligence collection capabilities and nearly trebling the number of drone strikes in Pakistan from 2009 levels. Recognising the importance of al-Qaeda's local hosts, the US stepped up efforts to recruit assets among rival sub-tribes and clans in the border areas.

In Pakistan there were a range of senior-level officials killed, such as chief financial officer Shaykh Sa'aid al-Masri and external operations chief Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Najdi. This left perhaps less than 300 al-Qaeda members in Pakistan, though there were larger numbers of foreign fighters and affiliated organisations. In late 2010 Ayman al-Zawahiri ordered al-Qaeda operatives to disperse into small groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, away from the tribal areas, and cease most activities for a period of up to one year to ensure the organisation's survival. In Afghanistan, intelligence and US Special Operations activities disrupted al-Qaeda, which became less cohesive and more decentralised among a range of foreign fighters. Al-Qaeda retained a minimal presence in Afghanistan, with perhaps less than 100 full-time fighters at any one time. This estimate is larger if one counts al-Qaeda-affiliated foreign fighter networks operating in Afghanistan.

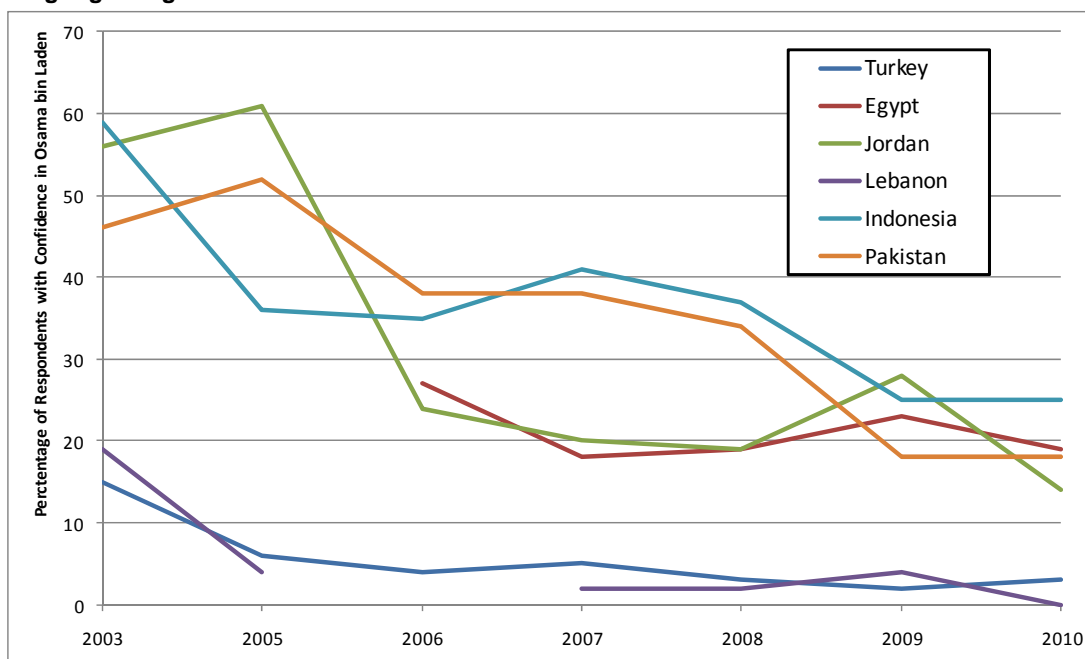
What does this fragile progress mean? For a start, the number of al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan shrunk from 2001 levels, where it was well over 1,000 fighters. More importantly, however, Western efforts disrupted al-Qaeda's command and control, communications, morale, freedom of movement and fund-raising activities. Central al-Qaeda was a weaker organisation, though not defeated. The death of senior leaders also forced al-Qaeda to become increasingly reliant on couriers, hampered communication because of operational security concerns, delayed the planning cycle for operations and exposed operations to interdiction.

Conclusion

A Long War

The landscape along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is strangely reminiscent of Frederick Remington or C.M. Russell's paintings of the American West. Gritty layers of dust sap the life from a parched landscape. With the exception of a few apple orchards, there is little agricultural activity because the soil is too poor. Several dirt roads snake through the area, but virtually none are paved. In this austere environment, central al-Qaeda has been disrupted. Its popularity has also declined.

Figure 2. Poll of al-Qaeda:⁹ 'How much confidence do you have in Osama bin Laden to do the right thing regarding world affairs?'



Yet there are still several challenges. One is the absence of an effective campaign to counter al-Qaeda's extremist ideology. Public perceptions of al-Qaeda have plummeted. According to a 2010 public opinion poll published by the New America Foundation, more than three-quarters of residents in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas opposed the presence of al-Qaeda. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that positive views of Osama bin Laden have significantly declined across the Middle East and Asia between 2001 and 2010, including in Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon. In addition, there has been widespread opposition to al-Qaeda's ideology and tactics among conservative Islamic groups, especially al-Qaeda's practice of killing civilians. Public opposition of al-Qaeda, especially from legitimate Muslim religious leaders, needs to be better encouraged, supported and publicised. While drones have contributed to a weakening of al-Qaeda, however, they are still a short-term, temporary solution. Key sanctuaries in Pakistan need to be cleared –and held– by Pakistan security agencies, including in North Waziristan Agency.

⁹ Pew Research Center (2010), *Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home, Global Image of US Continues to Benefit*, Pew Global Attitudes Project, Washington, DC, June.

As our Blackhawk helicopter departed Bermel, the sun was slowly setting, its last rays spilling over the silhouetted hills to the west. 'We are getting closer', remarked one US Special Operations soldier sitting next to me, sounding hopeful. 'But it will still be a long war'. He was right, of course. As Winston Churchill observed over a century ago during the British struggles on the North-west Frontier, time here is measured in decades, not months or years. It's a concept that does not always come easy to Westerners.

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