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The Changing and Expanding al-Qaeda Threat

By Michael Jacobson
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On July 17, Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell released declassified key judgments from a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on "The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland." According to the NIE -- which represents the intelligence community's collective view on a given issue -- al-Qaeda still has both the capability and intent to conduct an attack inside the United States and will increase its efforts to place operatives in the country. Terrorists coming from Europe pose a particularly serious risk. Yet, in addition to remaining a major threat to the United States, al-Qaeda has made clear through recent statements and actions that it poses a serious threat to many U.S. allies as well -- and that its definition of success is no longer limited to an attack on U.S. soil.

A Resurgent al-Qaeda

The NIE, which took approximately nine months to complete, paints a picture of a resurgent al-Qaeda holding all of the elements needed to plan and carry out an attack against the United States, including key leadership, operational lieutenants, and a safe haven in the federally administered tribal areas of Pakistan. The NIE suggests that any al-Qaeda attack inside the United States would likely involve operatives coming from outside. Only a handful of individuals with ties to al-Qaeda's senior leadership have been identified in the United States since the September 11 attacks, and FBI deputy director John Pistole has stated that the bureau is not aware of any al-Qaeda cells in the country. As such, al-Qaeda will likely intensify its efforts to slip operatives into the United States.

Although the U.S. government is particularly worried about terrorist operatives infiltrating the United States from Europe, it acknowledges that the terrorist threat in Europe itself is more "severe." As the recent failed attacks in London and Glasgow illustrate, Europe has become one of the most important terrorism battlegrounds. The 2004 Madrid attacks, the 2005 London subway and train bombings, and the failed and disrupted 2006 plots in the United Kingdom and Germany are examples of this growing phenomenon. According to the European Union, countries such as Spain, Italy, Denmark, France, the Czech Republic, and Britain arrested a total of 260 Islamist terrorist suspects in 2006 alone.

The Threat from Europe-Based Terrorists

In discussing the NIE, Tom Fingar -- chairman of the National Intelligence Council (NIC), an office under the director of national intelligence that leads the joint NIE drafting process -- expressed concern about the possibility of Europe-based terrorists attacking the United States, citing the ease of travel from European countries. U.S. officials are right to be concerned. Convicted terrorist Dhiren Barot, now serving a thirty-year sentence in a British prison, had "reconnaissance plans" of buildings in New York and Washington, including Citigroup, the New York Stock Exchange, and International Monetary Fund headquarters. Younis Tsouli, who recently pleaded guilty to terrorism charges in Britain, was an administrator of an online jihadist forum. On his laptop, authorities discovered a folder labeled "Washington" that contained video clips of the U.S. Capitol grounds and the World Bank's D.C. headquarters.

Indeed, terrorists from European countries face far fewer obstacles to infiltrating the United States. A majority of them can make the trip legally under the visa waiver program. In addition, many of them speak English and have experience living in Western countries, making it far easier for them to adapt to life in America. For more complicated and sophisticated operations, these skills are essential.

The September 11 plotters, for example, would have had great difficulty pulling off the attacks without the leadership of Muhammad Atta and the other "Hamburg cell" members. As the 9-11 Commission Report noted, the cell "shared the anti-U.S. fervor of the other candidates for the operation, but added the enormous advantages of fluency in English and familiarity with life in the West." In contrast, Nawaf al-Hamzi and Khaled al-Mihdhar, the first of the team members to arrive in the United States, struggled to acclimate. The 9-11 Commission described them as "ill prepared for a mission in the U.S. Neither had spent any substantial time in the West, and neither spoke much, if any, English."

Al-Qaeda's Expanding Target List

The NIE repeats the standard answer to the obvious question of why al-Qaeda has not succeeded in conducting an attack inside the United States since 2001: improved worldwide counterterrorism efforts have constrained the organization's capabilities in this area. Terrorist groups also reportedly perceive the United States as a far more difficult target to strike than it used to be -- perhaps convincing them that they should expend their energies elsewhere.

Although the reasons cited by the NIE are certainly factors, they are only part of the answer. Another possible reason may be that al-Qaeda's leadership is less exclusively focused on attacking the United States than it was. Before September 11, al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden devoted almost all of their attention to attacking U.S. interests. These efforts were quite successful, most notably the attacks against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the USS Cole. The September 11 attacks were the culmination of a series of large-scale attacks on U.S. targets and represented the successful redirection of Sunni extremist groups' focus from their own governments to the United States, which bin Laden called "the head of the snake."

Since then, al-Qaeda has dramatically broadened its list of acceptable targets across the Western world. In a November 2002 audiotape, an individual believed to be bin Laden specifically called for attacks against European countries such as Germany, France, Italy, and Britain (as well as Canada and Australia). Thus, while American targets undoubtedly remain a high priority, the United States is no longer alone atop the target list.

More recent statements by al-Qaeda's leadership confirm this trend. Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's deputy, recently threatened Britain for knighting author Salman Rushdie, stating that a "very precise response" would be delivered. In a previous statement, al-Zawahiri had said that "the animosity of Britain towards Islam stretches over centuries." He has also singled out France. For example, in announcing the partnership between al-Qaeda and the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in September 2006, al-Zawahiri urged the affiliate group to become a "bone in the throat" not only of the United States, but of "the French crusaders." Moreover, he has publicly lauded the most recent devastating attacks on European targets, pointing to the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings as examples of attacks that have caused great damage to the "crusader West."

Maintaining International Efforts

Although al-Qaeda's target list may have expanded, U.S. officials are, not surprisingly, concentrating on the possibility of attacks on U.S. soil. The fact that al-Qaeda has not conducted such an attack since 2001 is not necessarily a cause for optimism. Al-Qaeda is an extremely patient organization, and its planning of individual operations can take years. The further we get from the September 11 attacks, the NIE notes, the more difficult it becomes to maintain international focus on al-Qaeda. Given the stakes, however, U.S. policymakers must find ways to encourage key countries, particularly in Europe, to continue improving their counterterrorism capabilities and devoting the resources and attention necessary to combat al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The

security of both Europe and the United States depends on it.

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