AL QAEDA AND U.S. HOMELAND SECURITY AFTER BIN LADEN

RICK "OZZIE" NELSON

CERI STRATEGY PAPERS

SciencesPo.

CERI CNRS

Al Qaeda and U.S. Homeland Security after Bin Laden

Rick "Ozzie" NELSON

The author is the Director of the Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C. Portions of this paper relating to al Qaeda and its affiliates are drawn from *The Al Qaeda and Associate Movements (AQAM) Futures Project*, a collaboration between the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program and the CSIS Transnational Threats Project. More information on The AQAM Futures Project can be found at http://csis.org/program/future-al-qaeda-and-associated-movements-aqam.

Introduction

In the past year al Qaeda has suffered a series of staggering blows that have severely damaged the group and will irrevocably alter the way it operates. Last spring, Osama bin Laden was killed in a dramatic raid on his compound in Pakistan, followed by strikes on a number of other prominent al Qaeda leaders, including Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman in Pakistan, and Fazul Abdullah Mohammed in Somalia, among others[1]. Further, al Qaeda was caught off-guard by the "Arab Spring" revolutions that broke out across the Middle East and North Africa. These revolutions have since succeeded in toppling several regional strongmen, an avowed goal of al Qaeda that it has been unable to accomplish through terrorism. With al Qaeda's leaders on the defensive and the efficacy of its ideology threatened by a new generation of political activists, many policymakers are increasingly questioning the future of the group[2].

Just as al Qaeda is confronted with a shifting and uncertain environment, so too are the organizations responsible for countering the movement. In particular, the U.S. homeland security enterprise, including but not limited to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), will be faced not only with a dynamic and evolving terrorist threat, but an increasingly difficult fiscal and political environment. Given these challenges, DHS will have to make critical decisions about programs and resources in order to maximize their ability to prevent future attacks on the homeland. In such a daunting environment, information about the terrorist threat will prove absolutely vital to crafting an effective

[1] Aamer Madhani, David Jackson, Kevin Johnson and Donna Leinwand Leger, "Obama: Cleric's death 'major blow to al-Qaeda'" *USA Today*, September 30, 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-09-30/anwar-al-awlaki-killed-yemen/50613048/1.

[2] Craig Whitlock, "Panetta: U.S. 'Within Reach' of Defeating al Qaeda", *The Washington Post*, July 9, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/panetta-us-within-reach-of-defeating-al-qaeda/2011/07/09/gIQAvPpG5H_story.html.

and efficient defense. If we are to determine the best path forward for the homeland security enterprise, we must examine the current state and potential future of the al Qaeda movement.

A Three-Tiered Movement

The al Qaeda we see today is inherently different from the group bin Laden founded two decades ago, having evolved from a hierarchical organization to a much more diffuse movement. Al Qaeda has become a network of like-minded groups, physically reaching across the globe but centered on a core ideology. Since September 11, al Qaeda has proven itself to be an adaptable enemy. The group was decimated following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, however many members, including those in top leadership positions, were able to regroup in the poorly governed tribal regions along the border of Pakistan[3]. Since this time, al Qaeda has transformed from a centrally organized group into a three-tiered structure composed of al Qaeda core, al Qaeda-affiliated groups, and al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals[4]. Regional groups branded with the al Qaeda name have arisen in Iraq, Yemen, Algeria, and elsewhere. "Homegrown" terrorist individuals and cells, inspired by bin Laden's example, and occasionally receiving support from al Qaeda, have also sprung up in Western countries[5].

Al Qaeda Core

In spite of the massive counterterrorism efforts directed against the organization, al Qaeda core reemerged in the mid-2000s, albeit as an operationally diminished entity. Since this time, al Qaeda core's primary role in the transnational terrorist movement has been to provide ideological direction and inspiration, with bin Laden acting as the symbolic figurehead. The larger affiliated movement coalesced under his leadership and his rhetoric motivated new recruits, encouraged attacks, and engendered public support. However, intelligence gathered from bin Laden's Abbottabad compound indicates that al Qaeda core remained more involved in directing the operations of its affiliates than some believed. For example, it has been reported that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) sought bin Laden's permission to appoint as their leader the charismatic American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. Bin Laden ultimately denied AQAP's request, leaving the current leadership in place[6]. However, Al Qaeda core's direction was not always heeded by its affiliates, and bin Laden's ability to control them was seemingly tenuous at times. When Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of al

---

[3] Rick "Ozzie" Nelson and Thomas Sanderson, "A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011," Center for Strategic and International Studies, http://csis.org/files/publication/110203_Nelson_AThreatTransformed_web.pdf, 5.
[4] Ibid., VII.
[5] For a definition of "homegrown" terrorism, see Rick "Ozzie" Nelson and Ben Bodurian, "A Growing Terrorist Threat? Assessing 'Homegrown' Extremism in the United States", Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2010, http://csis.org/files/publication/100304_Nelson_GrowingTerroristThreat_Web.pdf.
[6] Mark Mazzetti, "Signs that Bin Laden Weighed Seeking Pakistani Protection," *The New York Times,* May 26, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/27/world/middleeast/27binladen.html?_r=1.

Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), engaged in particularly brutal sectarian fighting, causing significant casualties, al Qaeda urged him to show greater restraint, only to be ignored[7].

With bin Laden dead, al Qaeda core's hold over its affiliates may be even less firm. Much of al Qaeda core's ability to attract and influence various affiliates was a direct result of bin Laden's strong personality and the unifying effect he had. Without him at the center, peripheral groups may no longer see the need to swear allegiance to al Qaeda core, perhaps adopting the al Qaeda moniker to gain recognition while ignoring the core and its guidance. Thus far, all of al Qaeda core's affiliates and close allies have pledged allegiance to bin Laden's replacement, Ayman al-Zawahiri. However, recent evidence may indicate that some groups are seeking to circumvent direct affiliation with al Qaeda core and are instead working with affiliate movements, potentially portending an alternative dominant group. In the case of Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram, the organization has reportedly increased ties to al Qaeda-affiliates al Shabaab[8] and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) rather than to al Qaeda core[9].

The loss of charismatic leadership also leaves the group and its supporters vulnerable to alternate ideological movements such as the Arab Spring. These uprisings were not brought on by religious fanaticism or a desire for an Islamic caliphate, as al Qaeda's narrative would suggest is necessary. Instead, they were organic demonstrations in response to widespread popular grievances such as unemployment, corruption and lack of individual rights. Moreover, the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia showed that change can occur without resorting to widespread violence, in contradiction to al Qaeda's *modus operandi*. In two months, peaceful protestors brought down an entrenched regime in Egypt, while al Qaeda's era of terror and bloodshed was unable to effect any change in Arab governance in its two decades of existence. Depending on whether the Arab Spring can deliver on its promises of progress, the populace may increasingly question the utility of al Qaeda's philosophy and tactics as a means to affect positive change[10].

Al Qaeda-Associated Movements

In terms of al Qaeda's affiliates, the groups of greatest concern to the United States are those that have both the intention to strike Western interests and the capability to do

---

[7] "Letter Exposes New Leader in Al-Qa'ida High Command," Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, September 25, 2006, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-exposes-new-leader-in-al-qaida-high-command. "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi," dated July 9, 2005, translated and accessed from "Harmony Project" of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, released October 11, 2005, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zaraqawi-english-translation.

[8] In December 2011, senior al Shabaab leaders reportedly elected to change the group's name to 'Imaarah Islamiya' (Islamic Authority). See Mohamed Odowa, "Al-Shabaab to Change Name to Imaarah Islamiya" *Somalia Report*, December 5, 2011,
http://www.somaliareport.com/index.php/post/2212/Al-Shabaab_to_Change_Name_to_Imaarah_Islamiyah

[9] "Boko Haram: An Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland", U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, November 30, 2011,
http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Boko%20Haram-%20Emerging%20Threat%20to%20the%20US%20Homeland.pdf

[10] Juan Zarate and David Gordon, "The Battle for Reform with Al Qaeda," *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2011, 103-108.

so[11]. At present there are a number of groups that do not yet possess both these characteristics, but are nonetheless worrisome. Groups such as AQIM currently lack the operational capability to strike outside their immediate area, but profits from various illicit activities could serve to increase their capabilities[12]. AQIM's involvement in the narcotics trade and kidnapping for ransom could provide the group with the financial means to expand, while access to advanced weapons looted from Qaddafi's abandoned arms caches, including portable ground-to-air missiles, could increase its lethality[13]. When coupled with its increased ties to other African terror groups like al Shabaab and Boko Haram, these additional inputs could strengthen AQIM's capabilities enough to support significant attacks on Western targets.

Other affiliated groups, however, are already sufficiently equipped to threaten U.S. interests. AQAP is perhaps the greatest of these threats, despite the fact that Anwar al-Awlaki, the group's charismatic American spokesman, was recently killed. The group has risen to prominence due to several attempted high-profile attacks targeting the West. The Christmas Day attack of 2009 and the parcel bombs of 2010 had the potential to cause significant damage and demonstrated AQAP's strategy of launching frequent, inexpensive attacks in an attempt to provoke costly security responses that could potentially drain the U.S. economy[14].

Al Shabaab in Somalia is also a cause for concern. While most of its attacks have been within Somali borders, the group has carried out international operations as well, most notably a double bombing in Uganda that targeted football fans watching the World Cup in 2010[15]. Over the past several years, al Shabaab has also exploited the large Somali-American diaspora community, recruiting several dozen youths from Minneapolis to join the fighting in Somalia. Of these American recruits, at least three have been utilized by al Shabaab as suicide bombers. Al Shabaab recruitment in the U.S. appears to have declined, but there remains the possibility that radicalized American members trained by al Shabaab could be dispatched to carry out attacks within the United States.

Al Qaeda-Inspired Cells and Individuals

"Lone wolves" and independent cells, the third strand of al Qaeda's three-tiered organization, also represent a potentially serious threat to Western nations. So far, many would-be-attackers have done little more than demonstrate their own incompetence. Faisal Shahzad, the Times Square bomber, failed to construct his bomb correctly, which resulted only in black smoke. Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly, who attempted to detonate two bombs in downtown Stockholm, killed only himself when he

---

[11] Nelson and Sanderson, "A Threat Transformed", 15-174.

[12] Nelson and Sanderson, "A Threat Transformed", 16.

[13] Felipe Pathe Duarte, "Maghrebian Militant Maneuvers: AQIM as a Strategic Challenge", Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 28, 2011, http://csis.org/publication/maghrebian-militant-maneuvers-aqim-strategic-challenge.

[14] Matthew Cole, "Al Qaeda Promises U.S. Death By A 'Thousand Cuts'", *ABC News,* November 21, 2010, http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/al-qaeda-promises-us-death-thousand-cuts/story?id=12204726

[15] Rob Wise, "Al Shabaab", Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2011, http://csis.org/files/publication/110715_Wise_AlShabaab_AQAM%20Futures%20Case%20Study_WEB.pdf, 4.

apparently accidentally triggered his suicide vest prematurely[16]. Yet these individuals and cells still likely possess the capacity to cause damage and create panic, despite their limited sophistication.

Homegrown extremists operating in the United States and Europe are comparatively more desirable assets to al Qaeda groups looking to strike the West than their foreign counterparts. Homegrown extremists face relatively few restrictions on global travel in general and can more easily travel abroad and interact directly with al Qaeda trainers and operatives. Their familiarity with Western languages and customs also allow them to attract less attention from law enforcement than a foreigner might. Detection is a challenge, as few tools exist to target isolated self-starters, especially those with no criminal records[17].

These potential homegrown terrorists are largely motivated by the perception that the U.S. is leading a war on Islam, one of the main themes of al Qaeda's propaganda. Major Nidal Hasan, the alleged Fort Hood shooter, had severe objections to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A number of Somali-Americans from Minnesota who would later join al Shabaab condemned Ethiopia's U.S.-supported overthrow of Somalia's Islamist government in 2006. Ahmed Abdullah Minni, the ringleader of the group of Northern Virginian youth who traveled to Pakistan to receive terrorist training, used social media to praise Taliban attacks against American troops[18]. Many of these homegrown radicals have relied on an "intermediary," such as an extremist cleric or a terrorist recruiter, to catalyze and facilitate radicalization, recruitment, and planning[19]. These intermediaries connect with would-be terrorists either in person or through social media, using these interactions to cement radical thought and encourage violent action. Efforts to counter both al Qaeda's toxic narrative and its intermediaries are thus essential to mitigating the homegrown threat.

The Future of the Al Qaeda network

Although the path ahead for al Qaeda is uncertain, three basic trajectories for the movement can be explored in order to evaluate potential futures. First, there could be a resurgence of the core-driven al Qaeda, with the central group once again becoming the vanguard force that Osama bin Laden originally envisioned. Second, the affiliated groups could increasingly drive the movement as the core loses prominence. Or third, both al Qaeda core and the associated movements may be removed, leaving highly networked but independent lone wolves and small cells to continue al Qaeda's

---

[16] John F. Burns and Ravi Somaiya, "Police Say Early Detonation of Bomb Averted Disaster in Sweden", *The New York Times*, December 14, 2010,
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/15/world/europe/15sweden.html?ref=taimourabdaly.
[17] Emily Burke and Ally Pregulman, "Homegrown Extremism", Center for Strategic and International Studies (forthcoming).
[18] Nelson and Bodurian, "A Growing Terrorist Threat?", 2-6, 11-12.
[19] Ibid.

struggle[20]. In all likelihood the organization's future will contain some elements of each of these three trajectories, however for analytic purposes it is helpful to examine each possibility as a discrete scenario.

A Resurgent Core

For al Qaeda core to return to the forefront, the group will need a respite from unrelenting counterterrorism pressure. Recent successes against al Qaeda core may result in a decrease of public and U.S. Congressional pressure to continue counterterrorism efforts at their current level of intensity, especially in the face of looming budget cuts. In addition, as al Qaeda core has weakened, some of its affiliates, notably AQAP, have grown stronger, drawing increased focus and a larger share of counterterrorism resources. Taking pressure off of al Qaeda core before it is fully defeated may offer the freedom the group needs to renew its efforts and reemerge as a potent force once again[21].

If it faces reduced counterterrorism pressure, al Qaeda core would have the chance to slip into a new safe haven. It will be impossible for the United States and its partners to prevent failed states everywhere in the world, and so safe havens hospitable to global terrorist groups will likely remain a permanent fixture. Another key to the reemergence of al Qaeda core would be the rise of a strong, charismatic emir. While bin Laden could rely on his charisma and unifying personality to drive international appeal, Zawahiri is a much more divisive figure. In order to maintain leadership over the diverse al Qaeda network, he will have to overcome his own limitations and project a unifying message. Zawahiri or any potential successor's ability to fill the void left by al Qaeda's founder will largely determine the importance of the core group. Al Qaeda core will need a strong hand to rally the group back into a cohesive entity and re-launch it as the primary actor in the global terrorist operations[22].

For a new leader to have any effect, however, the al Qaeda narrative and its ideology must continue to resonate with the disaffected elements of society. This will be predicated on the continued anger at Western policies in the Muslim world and ineffectual governance by Middle Eastern regimes. One way this narrative might stay relevant is through increased large-scale kinetic operations against al Qaeda's affiliates. These attacks could reinforce al Qaeda's stock narrative that the United States is carrying out a war against Islam, buttressing support for a larger "resistance" movement[23].

Rise of the Affiliates

A second possible scenario for the future of al Qaeda is one in which the affiliate groups become the focal point of the movement. The decentralization of al Qaeda could

---

[20] Nelson and Sanderson, "A Threat Transformed", 12.
[21] Nelson and Sanderson, "Confronting an Uncertain Threat", 15.
[22] Ibid., 16-17.
[23] Ibid., 17-18.

continue on its current trend, ultimately transforming the network into a constellation of loosely aligned groups with no central leadership. For this to happen though, al Qaeda core would first have to be rendered operationally and inspirationally obsolete, either from continued counterterrorism pressure or mismanagement by its leadership[24]. Some of al Qaeda core's role as the inspirational center of the movement seems to have already been usurped. Prior to his death, AQAP's Anwar al-Awlaki had gained a wide following and proven his skill as a terrorist recruiter. A similar leader's emergence could shift attention and power away from al Qaeda core, due in part to Zawahiri's limitations as a unifying force.

While the loss of the core would reduce the cohesiveness of al Qaeda's associated movements, it would not necessarily bring about their collapse. The affiliated groups have successfully woven local grievances, such as poor governance and regional conflict, into the global movement. Since the destruction of al Qaeda core would not do anything to improve conditions for those living in the areas in which the affiliates operate, these groups would still be able to draw upon these grievances for support and recruitment.

Instability in the Middle East and North Africa could also play into a rise of an affiliate-driven al Qaeda. A failure on the part of the Arab Spring revolutions to deliver on promises of economic advancement and social equality could lead a new generation of frustrated youths to embrace al Qaeda's world view. A chaotic Yemen will likely give affiliates the chance to establish safe havens, build up bases, and ingratiate themselves further into communities. Even in those countries with relatively successful transitions, new governments are unlikely to prioritize counterterrorism missions. For example, as the National Transition Council takes power in Libya, it will be facing a multitude of challenges related to establishing a new democratic government. This will make it exceedingly difficult for them to worry about rooting out terrorist cells at the same time[25].

In the face of an affiliate-driven al Qaeda, the counterterrorism landscape would grow even more challenging and complex than it is presently. Attacking one group would not necessarily degrade the capabilities of another. The United States and its allies could potentially be faced with several durable and self-sustaining groups, each with its own operational capabilities and local sympathies to draw upon for support.

A Movement of Lone Wolves

Another long-term possibility for al Qaeda and its associated movements, and one that is particularly troublesome, is a scenario in which the movement is driven entirely by lone wolves. It is possible that in the coming years, counterterrorism pressure will degrade al Qaeda and its affiliates to the point that they can no longer function as organizations, and are forced to dissolve. But this dissolution of al Qaeda would not necessarily lead to the end of its ideology; the movement's virulent message might

---

[24] Ibid., 23.
[25] Ibid., 23-24.

continue to be spouted by radical orators, attracting disaffected individuals and inspiring them to take violent action on their own. This would not be a new tactic for al Qaeda spokesman, but simply an escalation in their focus on encouraging individual action[26].

Evolving without a central group structure, lone wolves could be even more difficult to detect and disrupt than traditional plotters. They would not be reporting back to a central commander, traveling to foreign countries to train, or receiving outside funding, thereby reducing the tangible links that have, in the past, provided opportunities to identify terrorist plots. Lone wolf terrorists and small cells would also have the benefit of advanced and widespread information and communication technology, including access to social media, video hosting, and vast amounts of easily accessible information. For years al Qaeda and its affiliates have used the Internet to radicalize individuals, facilitate the spread of tactical knowledge, and conduct operational planning. This trend will only accelerate as the pace of technological advancement increases. In the near future, it may become a relatively simple and effective process to create virtual training exercises, eliminating the need for training camps or bases of operation run by a well-organized terrorist group. Individuals also may be able to coordinate activities with each other from across the globe without ever needing to meet, making it possible for terrorists in several different countries to plan simultaneous attacks. Language barriers prohibiting communication between people from different backgrounds will be reduced as translation programs become more and more sophisticated, allowing a tactician in Yemen to communicate directly with a radicalized American who only speaks English, or letting a charismatic orator instantaneously send out a video dubbed in different languages to a large international audience[27].

For this lone wolf-driven scenario to occur, al Qaeda core and its affiliated movements would first have to be dissolved or greatly diminished. In addition, just as in the other two scenarios, the ideological resonance of the al Qaeda message will need to be sustained, but this time without a strong central group to continue propagating it. However, as long as it's message of violent struggle against the West taps into the frustration of individual actors and provides them an avenue to violently express it, attacks will continue[28].

The larger theme that runs through each of these possible future scenarios is al Qaeda's continued ideological resonance. Even if the current core al Qaeda organization is defeated and its members are killed or captured, it is not certain that the movement at large or its ideology would suffer the same fate. The al Qaeda mantle may have become self-sustaining, able to tap into a groundswell of support and continue on even without direct leadership, exactly as bin Laden originally intended[29]. Therefore, a central question for those seeking to divine the future of al Qaeda as an organization and as a unifying principle is whether he succeeded. We know that in the immediate aftermath of his death, al Qaeda has not disbanded. Yet we must ask, as the group

---

[26] Ibid., 28-29.
[27] Ibid., 27-30.
[28] Ibid., 30.
[29] Rick "Ozzie" Nelson and Thomas Sanderson, "What Bin Laden's Death Means for al Qaeda," Center for Strategic and International Studies, http://csis.org/files/publication/110610_nelson_sanderson_GlobalForecast2011.pdf.

continues to take punishment and losses and leaders continue to fall: will its message inspire the second, third, and even fourth generation of al Qaeda leaders and foot soldiers to step forward? Or, alternatively, will their message lose credibility without the original leaders to sustain it? It is under this uncertainty that the U.S. homeland security enterprise must prepare for the future.

The Future of U.S. Homeland Security

Although al Qaeda has undergone a number of changes in recent years, it is still actively seeking to strike the United States and the West. In particular, groups such as AQAP and a number of homegrown extremists have attempted to launch smaller, less sophisticated strikes against the U.S. homeland. While this strategy is less spectacular than that implemented on 9/11, such attacks still have the potential to be disruptive and to cause significant damage, especially to the economy. The U.S. homeland security enterprise will be critical to countering this threat, no matter what form the movement may take. Yet even as the terrorist threat shifts, the U.S. homeland security enterprise is faced with a declining budget, potentially diminishing its capacity to provide security.

However, the homeland security enterprise has an opportunity to not only meet these challenges, but reduce the threat posed by al Qaeda through the implementation of a variety of measures, including a program of risk-based security, increased information sharing, closer international partnerships, strong community relations and a focus on counterradicalization.

The current economic downturn and its effects on the federal budget present a significant challenge to maintaining an effective homeland security enterprise. Since its creation, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has never experienced a budget cut, but major cuts now appear likely. DHS, as well as the larger homeland security enterprise, will be forced to operate in an environment of limited funds, potentially forcing cuts to programs and initiatives. However, this difficult situation also presents the homeland security enterprise an opportunity to work towards a smarter, more efficient model for security.

DHS has already begun taking the first steps towards a model that may represent the future direction of homeland security efforts. Through various programs, DHS is experimenting with the concept of risk-based security. A risk-based model would not apply security measures to all situations uniformly, but instead according to where risk is believed to be highest. Since 9/11, the United States has been laboring under the mistaken assumption that it can provide absolute security. This belief, at times, has fueled bad policy and bad practice, and has required incredible expense. The reality is that it is not possible to protect all people, places, and things at all times. Risk-based security represents an opportunity to apply limited resources strategically, concentrating them where they are likely to be needed most. John Pistole, Administrator of the TSA, recently noted that a flight full of World War II veterans is unlikely to require the same

level of scrutiny as does a flight full of individuals about which nothing is known[30]. This sort of risk-based model can and should be applied more widely.

Critical to implementing a system of risk-based security will be the sharing of information and intelligence. Risk-based security is, by its very nature, a process driven by information. If various agencies increase the amount and quality of information shared with one another, the likelihood of properly identifying and preventing a threat is increased. To this end, the U.S. government and homeland security enterprise have been working diligently to improve the sharing of information through the establishment of entities such as the National Counterterrorism Center, the Information Sharing Environment, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Further, a series of "fusion centers" have been created in order to facilitate information sharing between the federal government and state and local law enforcement, who are often the first line of defense against terrorism and the most likely to detect suspicious activity associated with a terrorist plot. For example, in June 2011, Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif and Walli Mujahidk were arrested based on information shared between the Seattle Police Department and the FBI regarding a plot to attack a Seattle military facility[31].

However, this system can and should be strengthened and expanded. An effective means for sharing information with the private sector, which owns 85% of all critical infrastructures in the United States, has yet to be perfected. Furthermore, questions of how to properly secure shared information have become increasingly pressing following the alleged Wikileaks release of classified U.S. government documents. In order for risk-based security to succeed, the homeland security enterprise must continue to work to strengthen the sharing architecture, so that information can be shared between all partners without fear of a security breach.

The U.S. homeland security enterprise must also look beyond America's borders in order to better counter al Qaeda and the global threat of terrorism. In recent years the Department of Homeland Security has begun building strong partnerships in a variety of nations, including with important European allies. Stationed across more than 75 nations, DHS personnel are working with international partners to implement a range of security programs, including mutual information sharing systems[32]. In a recent speech, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano emphasized the vital role these systems play in providing the homeland security enterprise with the information it needs to anticipate and defend against terrorist threats[33]. As part of these efforts, the U.S. and European Union are in the midst of updating an agreement to share airline Passenger

---

[30] John Pistole, "The Evolution of Aviation Security since 9/11", September 6, 2011, http://csis.org/event/john-s-pistole-administrator-transportation-security-administration-evolution-aviation-securit
[31] "Two Men Charged in Plot to Attack Seattle Military Processing Center: Defendants Sought Firearms and Grenades to Attack Complex Where Enlistees Report", U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of Washington, June 23, 2011, http://www.fbi.gov/seattle/press-releases/2011/two-men-charged-in-plot-to-attack-seattle-military-processing-center.
[32] Remarks by Janet Napolitano, "Our Shared Responsibility: The Importance of Strong International Homeland Security Partnerships", December 2, 2011, http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/speeches/20111202-napolitano-remarks-paris-international-partnerships.shtm.
[33] Ibid.

Name Records[34]. This vital information could be used to identify potential terrorists attempting to strike at commercial aviation, whether they are entering the aviation system in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere. Further, in much the same way that DHS has worked to train local U.S. law enforcement to recognize and report suspicious activity potentially related to terrorism, the Department is also working with Europol to provide European law enforcement agencies similar information[35]. These types of information sharing partnerships have already begun to pay dividends; Program Global Shield, a recent agreement between more than 70 nations to share information on the smuggling of materials used in bomb-making, has resulted in the seizure of more than 33 metric tons of chemical precursors and the arrests of 19 individuals[36]. As DHS increasingly moves towards a risk-based model for security, these international efforts, especially those related to information sharing, will only become more critical.

As the flow of information is increased and new, risk-based systems are implemented, DHS will need to work constantly to strike the right balance between security and privacy. The Department is confronted not only with the challenge of providing security while upholding the larger publics' fundamental rights, but must also find ways to work effectively with specific communities at risk for terrorist radicalization. A strong relationship between the government and these communities, built on mutual trust and a shared goal for a secure America, is critical to countering the growth of violent extremism. In many cases, it has been the family, friends, and peers of would-be homegrown terrorists who have alerted the authorities to their plans. The activities of Mohamed Osman Mohamud, who attempted to bomb Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square, were reportedly first brought to the attention of the FBI by his concerned father[37]. If not managed with intelligence and respect, security efforts within these communities run the risk of alienating the very people whose help DHS needs the most. If communities in the United States see their own government as overbearing, intrusive, unfair or prejudicial, it will be difficult to rely on their trust and assistance. DHS must continue to engage these communities across the spectrum, so that they feel they are partners, rather than adversaries.

These relationships will be all the more important if the United States is to take necessary action to address the threat of violent extremism within its own borders. Where once the United States thought itself largely immune from extremism, in the last few years extremist activity has risen significantly. A small but significant number of individuals, young and old, poor and prosperous, devout and lapsed, have embraced al Qaeda's narrative and attempted to launch attacks against the very nation they claim as home. In recent days the United States has released a strategy to address the radicalization process that has driven these individuals into the arms of al Qaeda, but

---

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] "Program Global Shield Keeps Bomb-making Chemicals out of Terrorist's Hands", U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, November 21, 2011, http://m.ice.gov/news/releases/1111/111121washingtondc.htm.

[37] Caryn Brooks, "Portland's Bomb Plot: Who is Mohamed Mohamud?", *TIME*, November 28, 2010, http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2033372,00.html.

for any such strategy to be effective, proper implementation will be vital[38]. While nations such as Great Britain and Saudi Arabia have experimented with programs for "deradicalizing" existing extremists, the United States instead must focus on "counterradicalization". Just as al Qaeda's narrative must be combated abroad, efforts must be taken to decrease its appeal domestically as well. Yet a program of counterradicalization cannot come primarily from the federal government in Washington, D.C., but will require the efforts of those closest to at-risk communities, whether they be community groups, local leaders, law enforcement, schools, imams, and any other credible voices that are willing to stand up to help protect their sons, brothers, husbands, and friends from al Qaeda's attempts to turn them towards terror. If implemented effectively, such a program could strip al Qaeda of domestic support, significantly diminishing the threat from homegrown terrorists. At present such efforts are only beginning to be implemented, yet in conjunction with the steps proposed, they have the potential to significantly reshape the homeland security landscape.

Conclusion

Al Qaeda is once again at a crossroads in its evolution, giving rise to number of questions regarding the movement's future. The loss of prominent al Qaeda leaders and the emergence of an alternate ideology in the Arab Spring protests have been damaging to the group, yet they remain a potent threat. The future direction of the movement is not yet known, but the homeland security enterprise must stand ready to meet it. In spite of budget cuts, by implementing efforts such as risk-based security and counterradicalization programs, the United States has an opportunity to counter al Qaeda, no matter what form the movement may take.

---

[38] "Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States", Executive Office of the President of the United States, December 2011, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf.