

The Post-Madrid Face of Al Qaeda¹⁴¹

ROHAN GUNARATNA

For two and a half years after the 9/11 attacks on the United States' most iconic landmarks, Al Qaeda and its associated groups struck Western targets only in the global South, in places such as Bali, Casablanca, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Chechnya, and Tunisia. Despite the 9/11 attacks and the continuing threat, Europe remained an active center for terrorist support activity – propaganda, recruitment, fundraising, and procurement. As support cells were enmeshed in the socioeconomic, cultural, and political fabric of migrant and diaspora Muslims, European law enforcement, security, and intelligence services targeted only the operational cells that appeared on their radar screen. It was considered politically incorrect to revise the legislative framework to target several hundred terrorist support cells active on European soil. Some Europeans even believed that Al Qaeda had spared the continent because of its policy tolerating terrorist support infrastructure.

Although successive attacks against Jewish and British targets in Istanbul in November 2003 demonstrated Al Qaeda's intentions, capabilities, and opportunities for attack on the continent, European law enforcement, intelligence, and security services did not take the threat seriously. Although the Turkish case clearly demonstrated that terrorists planning to strike could survive undetected for years, there was neither a proper appreciation of the threat nor an appreciable effort to increase the quality of intelligence by penetrating the politicized and radicalized segments of Europe's diaspora and migrant communities. Even the fact that three of the four 9/11 suicide pilots were recruited from the heart of Europe did not generate the same sense of urgency in Europe that prevailed in the United States. Without becoming a victim of a major terrorist attack on its soil, European leaders refused to do what was necessary to protect Europe. Like many countries around the world, European countries unfortunately needed their own wake-up call.

Al Qaeda as an organization has learned and adapted its structure and strategy to combat measures implemented to destroy it after the

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9/11 attacks. First, having lost their own state-of-the-art training and operational infrastructure in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda members had to rely on the organization's associated groups for survival. As the most-hunted terrorist group in history, Al Qaeda began to operate through these associated groups. Although the threat has shifted, European security and intelligence services have continued to focus on Al Qaeda. Furthermore, the terrorist cells in Europe knew the risk of being monitored by European security and intelligence agencies. To evade technical methods of monitoring, they developed greater discipline and operational security.

As human sources were sparse within the security services – the guardians of Europe – there was no way of knowing what was happening in radical pockets within the diaspora and migrant communities. Preemptive arrests were an anathema in Europe. The only methodology available for detecting terrorist planning and preparation was investment in human source penetration, a capability that could not be developed in the short term. The United States' unilateral invasion of Iraq, the adaptation of the terrorist network in Europe, and the unwillingness of Europeans to change their way of life to deal with terrorists steadfastly escalated the threat to, and increased the vulnerability of, Europe to terrorist attack. The 11 March 2004 Al Qaeda attacks in Madrid clearly revealed Europe's false sense of security and reaffirmed that the West remains the primary target of Al Qaeda and its associated groups.

Al Qaeda since September 11

Three overarching developments mark the post-9/11 trajectory of Al Qaeda and its associated groups, helping to explain the status of the terrorist threat today. First, Al Qaeda, with Usama bin Laden as its leader, has evolved into a movement of two dozen groups. In its founding charter, authored by Palestinian-Jordanian Abdullah Azzam in 1988, Al Qaeda was to play the role of a pioneering vanguard of the Islamic movements. Every attack by Al Qaeda, including the group's watershed 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, was intended to inspire and instigate its associated groups to take the fight against both nearby enemies (apostate regimes and rulers) and distant enemies (infidels) of Islam. By ideologically inciting local and regional Islamist groups to fight not only corrupt Muslim regimes and false Muslim rulers such as those in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Kuwait, Indonesia, and Pakistan but also those governments' patrons, the United States and its allies, Al Qaeda has achieved its goal. Al Qaeda itself has not been responsible for the bulk of terrorist attacks since 11 September 2001. Rather, they have been carried out by its as-

sociated groups with origins in the Middle East, East Africa, Asia, and the Caucasus, such as the Al Zarkawi group, Al Ansar Al Islami, Al Ansar Mujahidin, Jemmah Islamiyah, Salafi Jehadiya, the Salafi Group for Call and Combat, and the Abu Sayyaf Group. Even as the international intelligence community continues to focus on Al Qaeda, the threat has shifted to Al Qaeda's associated groups.

Since the 9/11 attacks, Al Qaeda's strength shrank from about 4,000 members to a few hundred members, and nearly 80 percent of Al Qaeda's operational leadership and membership in 102 countries have been killed or captured. Al Qaeda adapted, however, instilling its mission and vision in associated groups and transferring its capabilities to them. The United States' focus on Iraq, Al Qaeda, and eliminating the Al Qaeda leadership limited the ability for American officials to understand and respond better to the changing threat.

Second, despite all efforts and resources applied to the U.S.-led war on terrorism, the terrorist threat has escalated several-fold since 11 September 2001. Although Al Qaeda itself has conducted an average of only one terrorist attack a year since that time, four times that number, or an average of one attack every three months, has been mounted by its associated groups. The drastic increase in the terrorist threat has been a result of Al Qaeda's transformation from a group into a movement. Al Qaeda has demonstrated its ability to coordinate operations despite the loss of its traditional sanctuary, the death or capture of leaders and members, the seizure of resources, and the disruption to the network. During the past two and a half years, law enforcement authorities worldwide have detected, disrupted, or deterred more than 100 terrorist attacks in the planning, preparation, and execution phases. In the United States alone, the government has disrupted more than forty attacks.

Despite enhanced law enforcement and detection capabilities in the worldwide hunt for members and supporters of Al Qaeda, the incidents of terrorism have increased. Although the ability of terrorist groups to mount attacks, especially against well-defended facilities or hard targets such as diplomatic missions, military bases, and other government targets, has declined, terrorists remain just as intent to attack. The terrorist threat has instead shifted from hard targets to soft ones, such as commercial infrastructure and population centers, making mass fatalities and casualties inevitable. Such vulnerable targets are too numerous to protect. Considering the sustained terrorist drive to attack, the West is not likely to stop suffering periodic terrorist attacks any time soon.

Third, Al Qaeda has adapted its organization significantly during the past two and a half years, increasing the terrorist threat worldwide. Although the heightened security environment has forced some terrorist cells to abort operations, others have merely postponed their operations, so that the threat has been delayed rather than defeated. Al

Qaeda believes it can, and has shown the ability to, mount operations even in the now heightened security environment. According to a Central Intelligence Agency debriefing of the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (alias Mokhtar “The Brain”), Al Qaeda was planning an operation to attack Heathrow even in the current security environment. As the coordinated simultaneous attacks in Turkey and Madrid demonstrated, Al Qaeda and its associated groups will continue to mount operations amid government security measures and countermeasures, even in Western countries.

The Reformulated Threat

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, arrests in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and Italy, among other countries, damaged Al Qaeda cells in Europe. Nevertheless, European Islamists that currently subscribe to Al Qaeda’s ideology have learned rapidly from the past mistakes of Al Qaeda and its associated cells. Current dedicated operational cells of Al Qaeda and its associated groups are now familiar with and can easily circumvent governmental measures, making the cells difficult to detect, particularly using technical methods such as phone monitoring.

U.S. and European counterterrorist strategies differ markedly. After suffering the greatest terrorist attack in world history, Americans changed their strategy of fighting terrorism from a reactive to a proactive one. Prior to 11 September 2001, the Federal Bureau of Investigation waited for a lead to start an investigation. Highly trained terrorist operatives left no leads or traces. After 11 September 2001, it became a matter of survival to target cells at home proactively and strike them overseas preemptively. One way of understanding this shift is to think of it as a shift from fishing to hunting. When fishing, a fisherman waits until fish attacks the bait; a hunter, conversely, requires initiative and creativity to target its prey proactively. Even after the 9/11 attacks, however, European countries continued to behave like fishermen.

One particular flaw of the European counterterrorism approach that might have increased Europe’s vulnerability to attack has been its tendency to target operational (attack/combat) cells and overlook support cells that disseminate propaganda, recruit members, procure supplies, maintain transport, forge false and adapted identities, facilitate travel, and organize safe houses. Operating through front, cover, and sympathetic organizations, Al Qaeda and its associated groups established charities, human rights groups, humanitarian organizations, community centers, and religious associations to raise funds and recruit youth. Traditionally, financial support generated and members recruited in Eu-

rope, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have gone to terrorist groups active in Chechnya, Algeria, Yemen, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and the Philippines. As Al Qaeda preferred operatives with Western passports, Muslim converts and those from the European cradle were treated equally, warmly received, ideologically as well as physically trained, and dispatched back to the West. Those introduced back to the migrant and diaspora communities were in no hurry to commence operations. Although they reintegrated back into their Western communities, they maintained contact with their comrades, trainers, and handlers. Taking advantage of freedoms enshrined in the liberal democracies of the West, such as the freedom of movement, association, and dissent, Al Qaeda and its associated groups slowly and steadily built a robust network of members, collaborators, supporters, and sympathizers in the West.

Host enforcement and intelligence services tolerated these support cells in the United States until 11 September 2001, and in Europe until 11 March, 2004, because those support activities seemed to pose no immediate and direct threat to host countries. When regimes in the global South asked Western governments to detain or deport some of the terrorist ideologues or fundraisers, they were told that Western criminal justice and prison systems were incompatible with Third World standards. The governments of the global South essentially were told that Western governments did not find these support networks all that great a threat. To evade the issue, some governments such as those of Canada and the United States spoke of human rights, while others such as Switzerland and Germany spoke of political asylum throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Some Europeans opposed targeting charities and other Islamic institutions in Europe used by terrorists for fundraising or as cover for reasons of "political correctness." They turned a blind eye to the terrorist infiltration of Muslim migrant and diaspora communities, permitting terrorists and extremists to take control of Muslim institutions including mosques, schools, and charities.

Under the cover of human rights, humanitarian, socioeconomic, cultural, political, educational, welfare, and religious organizations, terrorist ideologues and operatives built state-of-the-art support networks that raised millions of U.S. dollars throughout the European continent and in the United States. Western neglect created the conditions for terrorist support cells to grow in size and strength within the socioeconomic, political, and religious fabric of Muslim communities. Even if European law enforcement had made good faith efforts to detect and eliminate terrorist contingencies, disabling them became politically, legislatively, and operationally difficult. With Usama bin Laden's constant call to jihad as the duty of every good Muslim after 11 September 2001, these support cells began to mutate into operational cells.

For example, the north London cell that authorities discovered in January 2003 that had manufactured ricin was originally an Algerian support cell. Throughout Europe, Algerian terrorist support cells had generated propaganda, funds, and supplies for their campaign to replace the military government in Algeria with an Islamic state. Except for the French, who suffered from Algerian terrorism, the rest of Europe was soft on the Algerian support cells until recently. Historically, terrorist groups in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa have looked toward Europe for support and sanctuary. For example, Al Ansar Al Islami and the Abu Musab Al Zarkawi group, the most active groups in Iraq, have established cells in Europe to generate support as well as to recruit fighters, including suicide terrorists.

The Effects of Iraq and Afghanistan

As the conflict in Iraq worsens, Muslims living in Europe will grieve. Muslim anger and resolve will create the conditions for terrorist support and operational cells to spawn and function more easily in Europe. Just as European Muslims had gone to train and fight in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya, while a small percentage had participated directly in terrorist operations back in Europe, the continuing conditions bred by European laxity in counterterrorism will tacitly draw terrorists from the new breeding grounds in Iraq to Europe.

For the foreseeable future, Iraq and Afghanistan will remain the land of jihad. After its training infrastructure was destroyed by Operation Enduring Freedom in the fall of 2001, Al Qaeda decentralized its operations. In the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the Caucasus, Al Qaeda began to work with the associated groups it financed, armed, trained, and indoctrinated. After Al Qaeda lost its Afghanistan base, it desperately needed another land of jihad in which to train and fight. Iraq has provided such a place. The United States' unilateral actions in Iraq unified and enraged the wrath of the Muslim community. The very imams in Egypt that condemned the 9/11 attacks as un-Islamic are now encouraging Muslim youth to go to Iraq and fight the invaders.

A terrorist group can sustain itself and conduct operations on the support it is able to generate. As a result of the highly successful U.S.-led global coalition against terrorism, several terrorist groups have suffered, especially Al Qaeda. Nonetheless, the U.S. invasion of Iraq increased the worldwide threat of terrorism many times over. Even moderate Muslims are angry about the invasion and post-invasion developments. This animosity toward the United States makes it easier for terrorist and extremist groups to continue to generate recruits and support from the suffering and grieving Muslims of Iraq. Because of perceived

injustices attributed to the West in general, particularly in Pakistan and Iraq, there will be significant support for the new generation of mujahideen in Iraq. Groups that were dying are making a comeback, and several new groups have emerged in Iraq, Indonesia, Pakistan, and even in Europe.

Considering the significance Al Qaeda and its associated groups attach to Iraq, one can expect them to continue to focus on Iraq's political developments in coming years. Before Saudi security forces killed Al Qaeda ideological mastermind Yousef Al Ayyeri in early June 2003, he defined the stakes for the war, or the insurgency against the U.S. occupation, in Iraq. Previously, he had been a bodyguard to Usama bin Laden, an instructor in the Al Farooq training camp in Afghanistan, and the webmaster of Al Qaeda's main Web site. He stated that the establishment of democracy in Iraq would be the death knell for Islam. According to him, democracy is manmade law, and Muslims should only respect Islamic law, or God's law. Gradually, Muslims from the Levant and the Persian Gulf region, from North Africa and the European cradle, and converted Muslims will gravitate to Iraq. It is seen as a land of symbolic value. Iraq is likely to provide the same experience to radicalized Muslims in this decade as Afghanistan and Bosnia did in the 1980s and 1990s.

Even more than those of the United States, Europe's long-term strategic interests demand that it play an active role in Iraq, given that country's location on the doorstep of Europe. Although the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was a fatal mistake, withdrawing from Iraq would be an even greater one. U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and turning responsibility over to the United Nations would only strengthen terrorist capabilities in general and Al Qaeda more specifically. Europe must remain engaged in Iraq because an Iraq in conflict holds adverse implications for European security. It is only a matter of time until Al Ansar Al Islami, founded by Mullah Krekar, now living in Norway, and other groups active in Iraq will expand their theater of operations into Europe. Failure to stabilize Iraq will increase the threat of terrorism to Europe and beyond.

What Now?

With the terrorist threat moving beyond the star of Al Qaeda into the galaxy of violent Islamist groups, the international security and intelligence communities will have to expand the range of their focus. With Al Qaeda's strength now estimated by the U.S. intelligence community to be fewer than 1,000 members, better understanding and targeting of its associated and equally committed and skilled groups is necessary. As the target moves, intelligence must evolve to reflect the new reality. If

the agencies of Western governments had focused only on Al Qaeda, they never would have detected the Salafi Group for Call and Combat in the United States, Al Tawhidin Germany, Takfir Wal Hijra in the United Kingdom, or the Moroccan Islamist terrorists in Spain.

Overemphasis on Al Qaeda will be detrimental to Western governments. Accomplishing a transformation in Western enforcement and intelligence services from a single focus on Al Qaeda to a broader focus will require specialists on various terrorist groups. Traditionally, most governments provide cross-training and produce generalists to work both on a policy and a strategic level. They had no incentive to specialize on a group or country. With the dispersal of the terrorist threat and sophistication of these groups, producing specialists who can work at tactical and operational levels is essential.

There are early indications that the terrorist threat is further shifting from small groups to motivated and resourceful individuals. To emphasize the evolving nature of the threat beyond various groups to individuals, for example, Al Musab Al Zarkawi, the Palestinian-Jordanian who is responsible for coordinating the largest number of suicide and no suicide attacks in Iraq, works with a dozen groups, serving to amplify the threat. Although he trained with Al Qaeda in the Herat camp and even lost a leg in combat, he works not only with Al Qaeda but also with Al Ansar Al Islami in Iraq and Al Tawhid in Europe. Thus, as much as groups are important, tracking individuals of concern is becoming more important as well. In the post-Iraq War environment, violent Islamists will use any group to advance their objectives or the greater objective of jihad.

Unless Western law enforcement, security, and intelligence services develop the ability to penetrate Islamist organizations with human sources, Al Qaeda and its associated cells will remain invisible to them. As Islamist terrorist groups develop in sophistication, leads in the planning and preparation phases of attack operations will become scarcer. Thus, counterterrorism operations must not be dependent only on intelligence to attack operational cells but also develop intelligence-led operations to target support and operational cells proactively. The West, and Europe in particular, has recognized that it is not immune from the terrorist threat. Unless European authorities and agencies develop a proactive mindset to target both support and operational cells, Al Qaeda will survive in Europe, and another attack will be inevitable. Furthermore, Al Qaeda could once again use Europe as a staging area from which to infiltrate the United States and conduct another terrorist attack.

Today, the terrorist threat has moved beyond the individual and the group to an ideology. Even if bin Laden and his principal strategist Ayman Al Zawahiri are killed or captured, the terrorist threat will not di-

minish. Even if Al Qaeda is completely destroyed, the terrorist threat will continue.

In many ways, Al Qaeda has completed its mission of being the vanguard or spearhead of Islamic movements envisioned by Azzam. Before it dies, it will have inspired a generation of existing groups and shown the way for an emerging generation of them.

It is therefore crucial to develop a truly multipronged strategy to fight the multidimensional character of violent Islamists. Instead of only tactically targeting identifiable terrorist cells, it is essential to prevent the creation of terrorists strategically. The bloc of nations with staying power in the West must work with the Muslim countries—their governments and nongovernmental organizations—to target the ideology that is producing the terrorists. It is necessary to send the message that Al Qaeda and its associated groups are not Koran organizations and that they are presenting a corrupt version of Islam by misinterpreting and misrepresenting the Koran and other texts. Only by countering the belief that it is the duty of every good Muslim to wage jihad can the existent and emerging terrorist threat be reduced. As Al Qaeda is constantly adapting to the changing security environment and morphing its structure, the key to defeating Al Qaeda and reducing the terrorist threat is to develop a multiagency, multijuristic, and multinational strategy to combat this ideology.