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**The al-Qaida Movement – Status and Prospects**

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**The Afghanistan Context**

As discussed in the October briefing (*The Afghanistan Decision*), the Obama administration has gone ahead with a substantial increase in US forces in Afghanistan. The new deployments, which will be completed around the middle of 2010, will bring total US troop numbers in the country to about 100,000, by far the largest number since the war began over eight years ago. In addition to the US presence, coalition troops drawn mainly from NATO states number well over 30,000, with nearly a third of them contributed by the United Kingdom, which ended its troop deployments in southern Iraq six months ago.

Although the decision of the Obama administration to undertake a “surge” in Afghanistan was similar to that advocated by John McCain in the 2008 Presidential election, the Obama approach is different in two respects. One is that the increase in military deployments will be accompanied by further efforts to aid the civil development of the country, notwithstanding the severe problems of corruption and maladministration that are endemic to the Karzai government in Kabul. The other difference is that President Bush and Senator McCain both approached the war in Afghanistan from the perspective that a comprehensive victory over the Taliban and other paramilitaries was essential, whereas the Obama administration believes that negotiation and even compromise with some elements of the Taliban will be necessary.

In taking this view, however, the administration believes that negotiated agreements will best be achieved from a position of military strength, and it is on this basis that the surge is going ahead. What is uncertain is whether the impact of the increased troop numbers will serve mainly to strengthen the hands of the insurgents as they portray the surge as an increased occupation by a foreign power. The experience of the past four years, which has already seen a very large increase in the number of foreign troops, does support this assessment, given that the force expansion has indeed been accompanied by greatly increased insurgent activity. It could be argued that increased troop numbers have brought more insurgents into contact with well-trained troops, and that the insurgents are therefore in retreat. This does not, in practice, fit in with experience on the ground where the Taliban and other insurgents have actually increased their areas of control and influence right across Afghanistan.

Whatever happens in Afghanistan over the next two to three years, the conflict is still largely seen in Washington as a “good war”, in contrast to the Obama administration’s view of Iraq as a “bad war”. The argument, which is persuasive in the domestic environment, is that the Taliban must be defeated or at least brought under control because of linkages with al-Qaida and the 9/11 atrocities. Afghanistan therefore relates to homeland security in a way which Iraq simply does not. It is a country that must be made safe in order for it not to become a secure base for the al-Qaida movement, this being the primary focus of US security concerns.

**The Current Status of al-Qaida**

In the past eight years the al-Qaida movement has evolved into a very unusual combination of a trans-national revolutionary entity with elements of a loose network, a franchise and even at times just an idea. It retains short and long-term aims. Among the former are opposition to the “near enemy” of unacceptable regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere, a bitter anti-Zionism and support for regional movements as diverse as those in Chechnya and Southern Thailand. Its long-term aim is the progressive establishment of a new Caliphate, puritan/fundamentalist in approach,

centred initially on the Middle East and South West Asia but expanding outwards. The short-term aims are measured in decades not years, and the long-term aim could take fifty to a hundred years to achieve.

Two further aspects of the movement are important. One is its persistent concern with the “far enemy” of the United States, seen improbably as an implacable enemy of Islam and the greatest obstacle to achieving its aims. The other is the essentially eschatological basis of the movement. It is rooted in a perverse orientation of one of the world’s major religions and, unlike most revolutionary movements, its leaders look beyond their own live-spans to achieve their ultimate aims.

While these aspects of the movement and its post-9/11 dispersal make it difficult to counter, a view has developed in the past three years among many western security analysts that the movement is actually in retreat. This is based partly on the lack of major incidents in that time frame that are broadly on the scale of 9/11, London, Madrid or Bali. While Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan have experienced huge levels of violence, one of the few international incidents on a par with any of the previous attacks was the Mumbai assault, and this has been seen more as an attack linked to Pakistani paramilitaries that were not fundamentally al-Qaida operatives.

Several explanations have been put forward to account for the decline. They include the markedly increasing antagonism of many Moslems to the movement not least because of the violence that has often been directed by it against fellow Moslems, combined with a widely recognised need to promote Islam as essentially a religion of peace. There is also a belief that the movement itself has been far more constrained geographically - to a relatively restricted area of western Pakistan. Furthermore, there is evidence that the use of armed drones in Pakistan and also Afghanistan has done serious damage to the middle ranks of the al-Qaida leadership, Saudi counter-terrorism activities have become more professional and counter-terrorism measures across the western world have been greatly strengthened, whatever the problems that have arisen for civil liberties from all three of these developments.

All of these explanations seek to account for the decline, but other analysts have warned against any view of al-Qaida that sees it as a narrowly structured organisation. They also point to indications that those middle-ranking leaders who have been killed have been replaced by more radical younger people, often with direct recent combat experience, to the manner in which the movement has learnt from experience and, at a more general level, to the success of the Taliban in Pakistan, with which it has many links. Above all, they argue that this is an evolving movement with capacity for innovation. Whatever the veracity of these two views of the al-Qaida movement, it is still fair to say that at the beginning of December the general perception was of a movement in decline.

### **Khost and Detroit**

Two quite separate incidents towards the end of the month gave reason for reconsidering that image of a weakened movement – a highly effective attack on a CIA operating base in Khost Province in eastern Afghanistan, and the attempt to destroy a North West Airlines passenger jet as it approached the city of Detroit in the United States.

In the Khost incident, a Jordanian agent, Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, who was believed to have valuable information about the location of Osama bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was brought from Pakistan to Forward Operating Base Chapman, just ten miles inside Afghanistan. Although bin Laden may be the leader of the movement, Zawahiri is seen as the key strategist and ideologue, and there was apparently an intention to use information available from the Jordanian source to determine his location and seek to kill him. In the event, the agent was actually working with and for the al-Qaida movement and detonated a bomb killing himself and the station chief, another senior CIA al-Qaida specialist, five colleagues and a Jordanian intelligence officer, also wounding six others.

The attack was particularly serious because it indicated a major lapse in security as well as casting doubt on the reliability of the Jordanian intelligence community that had previously been seen as a trusted source of cooperation. Furthermore, the station chief was one of the most highly-regarded CIA specialists on al-Qaida. It suggested that the al-Qaida movement had the capability to penetrate deeply into the US intelligence machinery. As such, this was far more serious than Taliban infiltrators into the Afghan police or Army or even some of the Pakistani Taliban attacks on Army and ISI facilities in Islamabad, Peshawar and elsewhere across Pakistan. As a large forward operating base, Chapman was a key location for intelligence gathering and the planning of raids against al-Qaida personnel across the border. That a bomber could get inside the base and kill such significant CIA officers was of great concern.

The second incident was the attempt by a Nigerian student, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, to detonate an explosive device on a passenger jet approaching Detroit from Amsterdam. The attempt failed, partly because of prompt action by other passengers, but it still had a much greater impact on US public opinion than most people outside the country realised. Since 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there have been a number of attempts to stage attacks in the continental United States. All have failed and there has been a sense that although the wars overseas have been problematic, at least the United States itself has avoided another catastrophic attack. Not only did the Detroit incident come close to succeeding, but it involved a crowded passenger jet close to a major American city, re-kindling many of the memories of 9/11. What made this attack even more significant was that the perpetrator had apparently been trained for the attack in Yemen, as part of the activities of Islamist groups with close links to al-Qaida.

Although the United States has been heavily involved in security assistance in Yemen, there has been a tendency to think of any al-Qaida activities outside Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq as being mainly focused on North Africa, the Sahel and Somalia. Yemen itself is the poorest Arab state and has declining oil revenues. It is governed by the narrowly focused regime of President Saleh, which is contending with an insurgency in the north and a powerful secessionist movement in the south. There is much ungoverned space and a pervasive conservatism coupled with an anti-American mood. Within such an environment, groups linked to the al-Qaida movement have grown in significance, yet any overt US action against them would almost certainly be counterproductive. Indeed, such action could all too easily be represented by al-Qaida propaganda outlets as an assault by the “far enemy” on yet another Islamic country.

### **Al-Qaida Prospects**

The Khost and Detroit incidents are powerful reminders that the al-Qaida movement retains considerable potential, in spite of two major wars and sustained counter-terrorism activity across the world. Furthermore it is that rare combination of movements in that it is rapidly evolving but is also operating on a very long timescale. Central to its current approach is the belief that the “far enemy” can be worn down both militarily and by unacceptable economic costs. The primary focus may be Afghanistan but it extends to Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq and elsewhere, eventually causing the United States to withdraw forces from across the region, much as the Soviets were forced out of Afghanistan twenty years ago.

What makes the analysis particularly difficult is the recourse to “it” when referring to al-Qaida, since there is an inevitable tendency to see “it” in terms of a tightly defined organisation. Instead, al-Qaida is much looser than this, and is therefore difficult to categorise or, indeed, counter. There are, perhaps, three things that must always be born in mind. One is that the movement is operating on a very long timescale, the second is that it is still a learning entity, however dispersed it is, and thirdly, because of

its very dispersal, the prospect of a takeover of any one state, leading to the creation of “al-Qaida in power”, is highly unlikely.

That is some compensation in a difficult situation. What is also important, though, is to recognise that the dedicated adherents to the movement may be few in number but there is far more informal and low level support. Much of that support comes from a constantly stressed emphasis on the idea of “Islam under attack by the far enemy”. This, in turn, is made much easier to promote by the US emphasis over the last eight years on a military response to 9/11, which has extended to two wars, millions of refugees, hundreds of thousands of people killed or injured and over one hundred thousand people detained without trial. That may now be changing with the rather different approach of the Obama administration, since it is likely to be very cautious about expanding military commitments in Yemen. The surge in Afghanistan remains, though, and that may be one element of the current situation that gives al-Qaida planners cause for comfort.

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