

ISAS Brief

No. 216 – 8 September 2011

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Al Qaeda, A Decade after the 9/11 Attacks

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Abstract

No major Al Qaeda attack has taken place since the 2 May 2011 killing of Osama Bin Laden. The organisation has lost quite a few important leaders. Its operations are said to be in shambles. It is merely attempting to survive rather than expand or even plan an attack. While the Arab spring is said to have depleted the Al Qaeda of its popular appeal, the difficult fiscal situation in the United States could be directing the Obama administration's public posturing of the outfit's reduced threat potential. While 11 September is a time for an introspection of a decade-long counter terrorism policy aimed at decimating and defeating the Al Qaeda, a trend analysis of the threat from Al Qaeda post-Abbotabad might have important pointers that speak otherwise.

Tactical Gains, Strategic Myopia?

Beginning with the 2 May killing of Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani city of Abbotabad, the organisation has suffered a series of setbacks. On 25 June, Ibrahim al Afghani, a senior terrorist leader belonging to the Somalia based al-Shabaab, an affiliate of the Al Qaeda, was killed in a drone strike in southern Somalia. On 5 July, Saifullah, a 50-year-old Australian, described to be a key aide to Osama bin Laden was killed in a drone attack in Pakistan's North Waziristan agency. On 22 August, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, the

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number two in the organisation was killed in yet another drone attack by the CIA in Pakistan. On 5 September, Pakistan announced the arrest of Younis al Mauritani, a senior Al Qaeda leader suspected of directing attacks against the US, Europe and Australia, along with two of his associates during a raid in the city of Quetta.

This series of losses of important leaders poses serious existential challenges for the organisation, apparently compelling it into a self preservation mode, rather than expand and execute any major attack against its purported enemies. As a result, not a single symbolic high visibility attack has been carried out by Al Qaeda since 2 May. This has propelled the US to a new high and several optimistic assessments have since emerged pointing at its new-found ability to strategically defeat the Al Qaeda, once and for all.

Riding a New Wave of confidence?

Not surprisingly, speaking on 31 August, White House counter-terrorism chief John Brennan described Al Qaeda as being ‘on a steady slide’, ‘on the ropes’ and ‘taking shots to the body and head.’² Leon E. Panetta, who took over as US Defence Secretary, affirmed that American focus has narrowed to capturing or killing 10 to 20 crucial leaders of the terrorist group in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.³ And within less than a month of Panetta’s declaration, a more forceful pronouncement surfaced. Media reports quoting unnamed CIA sources have indicated that only ‘a relatively small number of additional blows could effectively extinguish’ the Al Qaeda. According to these new assessments, 1,200 Al Qaeda militants have been killed since 2004 and 224 killed in 2011 alone. Violence by Al Qaeda proper ‘as the global, borderless, united jihad’⁴ may thus end soon.

Trend Analysis

Notwithstanding the public posturing, on closer examination of the trends identified by several other assessments of the Al Qaeda by different American agencies and authorities, the organisation's capacity to survive and even thrive does not, however, appear to be enormously bleak.

Firstly, Al Qaeda’s core leadership and structure is intact in Pakistan. The new chief, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is suspected to be hiding in Pakistan’s mountainous tribal regions, mostly because of the safety the region provides. Even after Atiyah Abd al-Rahman's death, attempts

² U.S. Counterterror Chief: Al Qaeda Now on the, *Fox News* (1 September 2011), <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/09/01/us-counterterror-chief-al-qaeda-now-on-ropes/>. Accessed on 3 September 2011.

³ Elisabeth Bumiller, ‘Panetta Says Defeat of Al Qaeda Is Within Reach’, *New York Times* (9 July 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/world/asia/10military.html>. Accessed on 3 September 2011.

⁴ Al-Qaeda on brink of collapse: Report, *Daily News & Analysis* (27 July 2011), http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report_al-qaeda-on-brink-of-collapse-report_1569936. Accessed on 3 September 2011.

to get these top leaders would prove difficult, especially with a bickering US-Pakistan relation in the background. Even with the 5 September arrest of Younis al Mauritani which appeared to have introduced some much needed sobriety into their bilateral relations⁵, it is appears unlikely that a period of normalcy would return soon. This would provide the terrorist leadership a fair chance to survive and resuscitate.

Second, while the Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) might have weakened considerably, the terrorist group's Algerian-based North African affiliate, the Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), remains the organisation's most dangerous affiliate. US Defence Secretary Robert Gates in March 2011 termed the AQAP 'the most active and at this point perhaps the most aggressive branch of Al Qaeda.'⁶ The 2010 State Department Country Report on Terrorism released in August 2011 highlighted the growing dangers from the AQAP and noted that the group's abilities to hatch terrorist plots outside of its stomping grounds.⁷ AQAP was behind the December 2009 failed attempt to blow up a Detroit-bound airliner and a 2010 plot to destroy several US-bound cargo planes.

Third, Al Qaeda continues to be supported by several anti-US regimes (Iran and North Korea in Bush administration's 'axis of evil' being the prominent ones) and will, thus, continue to survive the US military onslaughts. Iran has been accused by the US of aiding Al Qaeda. On 28 July, documents filed by the US Treasury Department accused Iran of facilitating an Al Qaeda- run support network that transfers large amounts of cash from Middle East donors to Al Qaeda's top leadership in Pakistan's tribal region⁸, debunking the myth that radical Shiites and Sunnis would never cooperate. The Treasury Department blacklisted six members of Al Qaeda working with Iran. In earlier times, Washington had accused Tehran of supporting militias inside Afghanistan and Iraq⁹ that carry out attacks against the American forces.

Fourth, a chemical or biological attack by Al Qaeda and its offshoots and even terrorists laying their hands on nuclear material and weapons remains a valid threat. Mike Leiter, who retired as director of the US National Counterterrorism Centre early July 2011 said that despite the killing of Osama bin Laden there are 'pockets of Al Qaeda around the world who see' the use of chemical and biological weapons 'as a key way to fight us, especially the

⁵ The arrest of Younis al Mauritani could be part of Pakistan's desperate efforts to win back US affection and normalise the bilateral relations, by being extra cooperative in its anti-Al Qaeda efforts.

⁶ Evan Harris, 'Defence Secretary: Yemen Gov't Collapse A Real Problem', *ABC News* (27 March 2011), <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/03/defense-secretary-yemen-govt-collapse-a-real-problem/>. Accessed on 4 September 2011.

⁷ 'U.S.: AQ Affiliates Have Grown Stronger', *Investigative Project on Terrorism* (19 August 2011), <http://www.investigativeproject.org/3119/us-aq-affiliates-have-grown-stronger>. Accessed on 4 September 2011.

⁸ Joby Warrick, 'U.S. accuses Iran of aiding al-Qaeda', *Washington Post* (29 July 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-accuses-iran-of-aiding-alaeda/2011/07/28/gIQARUPxfI_story.html. Accessed on 3 September 2011.

⁹ Megan Greenwell, 'Iran Trains Militiamen Inside Iraq, U.S. Says', *Washington Post* (20 August 2007), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/19/AR2007081901394.html>. Accessed on 7 September 2011.

offshoot in Yemen.¹⁰ While a biological attack may not end up creating a large massacre, the new breed of terrorists understand that killing a few Americans can cause as much fear as the massive symbolic plots bin Laden backed. The world has a bigger problem at hand if the unending search by the terrorists for nuclear weapons finally culminates in success. The worry of nuclear weapons falling into Al Qaeda hands in unstable Pakistan or prospects of proliferation from North Korea and other such countries remain a major worry.

Fifth, a substantial number of US citizens (including those with diaspora connections and networks) have been radicalised and some have even developed links with the Al Qaeda and they may prove to be 'strategic assets' for the terrorist organisation within the US homeland. White House National Security Advisor John Brennan in a May 2010 speech, noted: 'We have seen an increasing number of individuals here in the United States become captivated by extremist ideologies or causes.'¹¹ In June 2010, two US citizens from New Jersey were arrested at New York's JFK Airport following allegations that they planned to travel to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. These arrests indicate a growing trend in which radicalised Americans have become involved in terrorism-related activities.¹² The presence and expansion of ' sleeper cell ' is another worrisome development. A recent US congressional report indicates that the Somalia based al-Shabab has recruited 40 Muslim Americans and 20 Canadians¹³ to be part of its terrorist campaign in the African country. There is a possibility that these individuals may well return to the US undetected.

Sixth, Al Qaeda is functioning through 'sub contracting' into regional organisations, which are no less committed and lethal than their bigger counterparts. Regional affiliates like the al-Shabab in Somalia are taking up responsibility for carrying out attacks beyond its known area of operation. It was responsible for the twin suicide attacks in Uganda in 2010, killing 79 people. Similarly, outfits like the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), the Haqqani network and other such Pakistani Taliban affiliated groups have expanded their attack horizons considerably and are said to have attained capacities to replace Al Qaeda as the primary terrorist formation in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Recent reports indicate the creation of another Al Qaeda branch in Egypt. A statement from a group claiming to be the

¹⁰ Kimberly Dozier, 'Al Qaeda WMD Use Likely, Former U.S. Officials Say', *Huffington Post* (28 July 2011), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/28/al-qaeda-wmd_n_912779.html. Accessed on 5 September 2011.

¹¹ Among others, five Somali-Americans that left Minnesota to fight in Somalia. Stephanie Hanson, Al-Shabaab , Backgrounder, *Council of Foreign Relations*, (10 August , 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/somalia/al-shabaab/p18650>. Accessed on 1 September 2011.

¹² Liam Stack, New Jersey men arrested at JFK on way to join Al Shabab in Somalia, *The Christian Science Monitor*, (7 June 2010), <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0607/New-Jersey-men-arrested-at-JFK-on-way-to-join-Al-Shabab-in-Somalia>. Accessed on 1 September 2010.

¹³ 'Al-Shabaab has recruited more than 40 Americans, Congressman says', *CNN* (27 July 2011) http://articles.cnn.com/2011-07-27/politics/muslim.radicalization.hearing_1_shabaab-somali-americans-shirwa-ahmed?_s=PM:POLITICS. Accessed on 5 September 2011.

newest Al Qaeda branch was posted online in August 2011.¹⁴ In March 2011, a Libyan anti-Qaddafi rebel commander admitted that his fighters included some Al Qaeda militants who had fought in Iraq.¹⁵ Such coalescence of regional affiliates and splintering/formation of new groups would make the amoebic presence of these groups hard to detect and effectively counter.

Interestingly, the spectre of lone wolf terrorists adds to the complexity of existing threats. The failed plot to blow up an explosives-packed vehicle in Times Square in May 2010 was carried out by a lone Pakistani-American, trained by the Pakistani Taliban. The 22 July Norway attacks further demonstrated that capacity of a lone self-radicalised terrorist can equal or even surpass the efforts of an organised global terrorist outfit.¹⁶

Ostensibly, all these trends are derived from various recent assessments of the US government agencies and therefore it is not unconventional wisdom.

Early Declaration of Victory?

The inordinate hurry to declare a military victory against the Al Qaeda and even write its obituary is as much to do with the difficulty of financially sustaining an unsustainable military effort against a thoroughly dispersed enemy, as deriving political benefits from an assumed victory. In the backdrop of rising American disenchantment against such wasteful war efforts in economically difficult times, such public posturing would augment President Barack Obama's re-election bid in 2012. Opinion polls suggest that American citizens are no longer interested in the country's offshore wars, when there are pressing economic difficulties at home.

However, underplaying a latent but potent threat from the Al Qaeda and its affiliates exemplifies a hasty retreat, especially when the conditions for such organisations to revive and thrive have been least addressed. The existing infrastructure, training, funding, support networks and hold of the organisation, especially in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia remain factors to be reckoned with, in the immediate future. There are obvious requirements for engaging the radical Islamists, and launching effective preventive programmes of de-radicalisation as a part of the counter terrorism effort. These initiatives must continue along

¹⁴ 'Group Claims to Hoist al-Qaida Flag in Sinai', *Investigative Project on Terrorism* (5 August 2011), <http://www.investigativeproject.org/3084/group-claims-to-hoist-al-qaida-flag-in-sinai>. Accessed on 5 September 2011.

¹⁵ Praveen Swami, Nick Squires and Duncan Gardham, 'Libyan rebel commander admits his fighters have al-Qaeda links', *Telegraph* (25 March 2011), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8407047/Libyan-rebel-commander-admits-his-fighters-have-al-Qaeda-links.html>. Accessed on 7 September 2011.

¹⁶ Bibhu Prasad Routray, 'The Power of a lone terrorist', *The Straits Times*, 29 July 2011.

with the sustained and coordinated politico-military ‘whole of government approach’ with host nations, and not without it.

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