

## Global Terrorism: A Polymorphous Phenomenon

*Fernando Reinares*\*

**Theme:** This ARI describes and analyses the various components observed in the current web of global terrorism. The risks and threats that terrorism related directly or indirectly to al-Qaeda pose for a given country or region of the world depend on how the various components eventually combine.

**Summary:** Seven and a half years after the 11 September attacks in the US, the current web of global terrorism includes a reconstituted al-Qaeda, the territorial extensions it has managed to establish, a heterogeneous set of affiliated groups and organisations, and finally an indefinite number of self-constituted and spontaneously formed independent local cells. It would be a mistake to confuse the latter part for the whole, implying that global terrorism today is an amorphous phenomenon, when in fact it is polymorphous. The nature of the global terrorist threat for a given country or region of the world depends precisely on how these different components eventually combine.

**Analysis:** Much speculation has recently arisen as to the configuration of today's global terrorism, which is related one way or another to al-Qaeda. It is a debate which has spread widely through academic circles and intelligence communities, not to mention the press and the interested public, with implications for the approach that is to be given to national security policies and international co-operation on the matter. The discussion focuses basically on how global terrorism has evolved since the attacks of 11 September 2001, and on what kind of threat it now poses both for countries with predominantly Muslim populations and for other societies, including, of course, those of the western world.

As a consequence of the US reaction to what happened that infamous day in New York and Washington, the terrorist structure led by Osama bin Laden lost the sanctuary it had enjoyed since the mid 1990s in Afghanistan and ended up seriously undermined. Quite a few like-minded armed groups, which also had training camps and other infrastructure under the protection of the Taliban regime, were similarly affected. And organisations that were directly or indirectly linked to al-Qaeda and had their bases outside Afghanistan came progressively under tough repression from governments with authority over the different state jurisdictions where they were located.

---

\* *Senior Analyst for International Terrorism and Director of the Elcano Royal Institute's Programme on Global Terrorism, and professor of Political Science and Security Studies at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos.*

These and other related events are sufficiently well known and as such do not appear to stir much controversy among close observers of the global terrorism phenomenon. However, on the basis of those same events, many experts and analysts came to conclude that al-Qaeda had ceased to exist and had instead transformed itself into an ideology or a movement. They also reached the conclusion that global terrorism had become an amorphous phenomenon, lacking formal articulation, strategy and leadership. Finally, they concluded that the true terrorist threat now stems from independent informal local cells that form more or less spontaneously and are made up of individuals who had become radicalised on their own under the influence of ideas spread mainly over the Internet.

The work of someone who is considered an influential advocate of jihadist terrorism contributed much to this vision of things. Namely, a Syrian-born but naturalised Spaniard known as Abu Musab al Suri, who was a founding member of the cell that al-Qaeda established in Spain a decade before the Madrid training bombings of 11 March 2004, and in the middle 1990s was taken into Osama bin Laden's inner circle. He was arrested in Pakistan in 2005, but not before publishing his book *Call for World Islamic Resistance*. Nonetheless, to say that al-Qaeda has vanished, that global terrorism is an amorphous phenomenon and that the threat today stems from local cells that pop up spontaneously does not seem to reflect reality.

#### *Al-Qaeda, Continuity and Transformation*

First of all, al-Qaeda still exists. It has transformed in recent years, showing great resiliency and a tremendous capacity to adapt. Re-located in the tribal areas of Pakistan on the border with Afghanistan, it has re-generated as a terrorist structure and today its organisational status is one of relative strength. Even if a more than significant number of its most senior members have been arrested or killed over the course of the past seven and a half years, the leadership nucleus has been rebuilt several times, especially with regard to those who integrate the consultative council called the *Majlis Shura*. It is estimated that, at its new base of operations, al-Qaeda has several hundred, perhaps even a few thousand, of its own activists.

But al-Qaeda also has networks and cells, as well as agents and collaborators outside that area, for instance, in Central Asia, South-East Asia, in the Middle East, the Gulf region, East Africa and the northern Caucasus. The presence and circulation of notorious members of the terrorist structure in these areas results in part from the fact that many of them dispersed after losing Afghanistan as a sanctuary in late 2001. Also, these regions are home to individuals who, in the second half of the 1990s, received training in camps that al-Qaeda operated there. In fact, since 2006 people fitting this bill have been arrested or killed in countries such as Russia, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen and Kenya.

But, yes, al-Qaeda has been building back what remained of its terrorist structure after the 11 September attacks through an extraordinary propaganda campaign waged mainly, although not exclusively, over the Internet. And this does not mean that al-Qaeda has stopped being an organisation and transformed into an ideology, as is so often improperly argued. Rather, it is a terrorist structure that has largely recovered and in the meantime has made maximum use of symbolic assets, paying special attention to the tasks of ideological production and reproduction. And it has done this for itself, for other forces involved in the web of global terrorism and, of course, for its population of reference.

Although al-Qaeda's operational capabilities are not what they used to be, the least that can be said is that they are once again considerable. Its leaders continue to work in fundraising and recruitment, in training adepts at new camps set up in between North and South Waziristan, and in expanding al-Qaeda's presence, consolidating alliances and disseminating aligned networks. But they also remain determined to plan terrorist attacks both inside and outside the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In these territories they tend to work in collaboration with the Taliban and with groups of foreign adepts, as well as with autochthonous terrorist groups as regards attacks perpetrated in other zones of Pakistan.

Outside this scenario, the control exerted by al-Qaeda on the planning and execution of terrorist attacks seems more limited, although it continues to aspire to carry out spectacular operations, mainly but not exclusively against Western targets and even inside the West. Indeed, since the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, al-Qaeda has gone beyond simply instigating attacks. Examples are those on the Tunisian island of Djerba and in Mombasa, Kenya, in 2002, in Istanbul in 2003 and in London in 2005, besides many other failed attacks. Al-Qaeda can be involved in attacks executed by people under its direct command or through people belonging to its territorial extensions and associated organisations, which in turn can also mobilise local cells.

#### *Al-Qaeda's Territorial Extensions*

Indeed, al-Qaeda seems to have reacted to the inner fragmentation triggered by the loss of its Afghan haven in the autumn of 2001 and the management problems that this entailed, both by decentralising itself and by extending its influence inside and outside the Islamic world. On the one hand, it has sought to establish its own territorial extensions, in some cases achieving this goal; on the other, it has paid special attention to nurturing relations with groups and organisations of a similar orientation in various countries or regions of the world. It has also encouraged the emergence of new jihadist entities predisposed to aligning themselves with al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda has managed to establish some territorial extensions of its own. At times it has done this by working through its own structure and leading members, spread around concrete geopolitical areas but who maintained contact with the central leadership. Such could be the case of the so-called al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (*Tanzim Qaedat fi al-Jazeeraatul Arab*), that launched a terrorism campaign in 2003. In other cases it has done so by reaching agreements with associated groups at the national or regional level for the same purpose. These alliances show that al-Qaeda has faced serious obstacles in developing its own branches in areas where a prominent armed Islamist organisation was already active. However, these alliances enhanced al-Qaeda's geographical reach.

It was in this second way that in the autumn of 2004 an organisation called al-Qaeda for Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers (*Qaida al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidain*) was formed in Iraqi territory. This was the name adopted by 'Monotheism and Jihad' (*Tawhid wal Jihad*), which had been formed as such the previous year, on occasion of the US and international coalition invasion of Iraq, and was led by a Jordanian citizen known as Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who became the senior leader of al-Qaeda's Iraqi extension until his death in June 2006. He was then replaced by Abu Ayub al Masri, also known as Abu Hamza al Muhayir, with the explicit approval of Osama bin Laden. This, along with the fact that he is Egyptian, seems to prove the control exerted by al-Qaeda over its Iraqi branch.

In early 2007, the 'al-Qaeda Organisation in the Land of Islamic Maghreb' (*Tanzim Qaeda bi-Bilad al-Maghreb al-Islami*) emerged formally as the result of a merger between al-Qaeda and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). The latter, of Algerian origin and formed in the late 1990s, had gradually internationalised its activities over the previous years, favouring the creation of cells and associated networks in other countries of North Africa and even in the Sahel region. Its transformation into a North African extension of al-Qaeda was preceded by close interaction and exchanges with the Iraqi extension of al-Qaeda. At present, it reportedly continues to operate under a single regional leadership, in turn dependent on the core al-Qaeda directorate, jihadist elements from the area and their respective diasporas outside it, particularly in Western Europe.

It can reasonably be assumed that contacts between the central leadership of al-Qaeda and the heads of these territorial extensions are direct and regular, though not necessarily immediate. It also seems reasonable to believe that contacts should address, among other issues, modes and procedures for carrying out attacks and the criteria for target designation with respect to ongoing terrorist campaigns. But this does not rule out that there is scope for operational autonomy, although not in any overall sense and perhaps with very wide variations from case to case. Nor does it rule out the possibility of contrasting points of view between the central al-Qaeda leadership's global strategy and the tactical decisions adopted by those leading the territorial extensions.

#### *Affiliated Groups and Organisations*

After losing its sanctuary in Afghanistan and relocating further east, in the tribal areas of Pakistan, al-Qaeda has adapted to the changing circumstances by also fostering relations with groups and organisations of a similar persuasion. In fact, as far back as February 1998 some groups were already affiliated with al-Qaeda in the so-called World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders, created at al-Qaeda's behest. But it was only later that these groups increased in number and importance within the web of global terrorism, acquiring operational predominance among its various components. These like-minded groups and organisations differ significantly in terms of their size, degree of formal articulation, internal make-up and operational scope.

The character of these group's relations with al-Qaeda vary from one case to the next, and variations can be marked. Their leaders have frequently pledged loyalty to Osama bin Laden over the Internet and by other means. It is often enough for them to simply embrace explicitly the doctrine and methods expounded by al-Qaeda. But the ties can also be seen in the presence of individuals with compatible leadership functions or who have personal bonds between themselves across groups, the transfer of money and other material resources in one or another direction, mutual assistance in indoctrination or training, and even collaboration in planning and executing terrorist attacks.

No fewer than 30 groups and organisations, active in different parts of the world, maintain some kind of association with al-Qaeda. In general, these entities act without the core leadership of al-Qaida exercising command and control over their operations, although the latter tend to be carried out in line with a series of overall guidelines supplied by Osama bin Laden and especially by his lieutenant and major global terrorism strategist, Ayman al Zawahiri. The degree of command and control that these two men have over the leaders of groups and organisations that are directly or indirectly linked to al-Qaeda is in principle lesser than that which they have over al-Qaeda's territorial extensions, although this might not necessarily always be the case.

Over the past three to four years, terrorist attacks have been blamed on a number of groups affiliated to al-Qaeda, chiefly among them the Afghan Taliban. But the list also includes: the neo-Taliban group known as *Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan* (Taliban Movement of Pakistan); *Lashkar e Tayyiba* (Army of the Pure), based in Pakistan but active in India; the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, active in the Xinjiang region of China; *Abu Sayaf* (Bearers of the Sword) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Group in the Philippines; *Yemaaf Islamiya* (Islamic Assembly) in South-East Asia as a whole; *Jund as Sham* (Army of the Levant) in Syria; *Asbat al Ansar* (League of the Followers) and *Fatah al Islam* (Conquest of Islam) in Lebanon; the Union of Islamic Tribunals and *As Shabab* (Movement of the Young Combatants) in Somalia; and the groups included under the umbrella of the 'Islamic State of Iraq' active in Iraq, where *Ansar al Islam* (Supporters of Islam) and *Ansar as Sunna* (Defenders of the Tradition) also operate.

Since at least 2006, various national authorities have arrested or killed members of these and other groups affiliated to al-Qaeda, such as, for instance: *Lashkar e Yangvi* (Army of Yangvi) and *Jaish e Muhammad* (Soldiers of Mohammed) in Pakistan; *Harakat ul Mujahedeen* (Movement of the Holy Warriors) in Pakistan and India; *Harakat ul Jihad ul Islami* (Islamic Jihad Movement) in Bangladesh; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or its splinter group, the Islamic Jihad Union, in South Asia, Central Asia and Western Europe; and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which was finally absorbed by al-Qaeda itself in 2007. Nor should the following be left out of the list: the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group in North Africa and Western Europe and the Riyadhus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs in the Russian Federation, among several others.

#### *Independent Cells and Grassroots Support*

Besides establishing territorial extensions and fostering links with like-minded armed groups and organisations, al-Qaeda has inspired the formation and development of small networks or independent cells throughout the world, and in Western countries in particular. In other words, small networks and local cells that do not in principle have ties to any of the other components of the current global terrorist web. That said, these small networks or local cells that arise on their own and are influenced by the goals and means espoused by the al-Qaeda core, can establish such links. This enhances their operational capabilities and the possibility of them being involved in carrying out terrorist attacks.

In any case, these small networks and spontaneously created cells –rarely isolated individuals– should not be confused, as often occurs, with active or sleeper cells that are under the direct command of al-Qaeda's leadership and located on the fringe of its territorial extensions or as part of associated groups and organisations. Nor should their importance with respect to other components of the global terrorist web be exaggerated. It should be borne in mind that the vast majority of al-Qaeda-related attacks carried out over the past seven-and-a-half years have been, when not the work of al-Qaeda itself, the work of its territorial extensions and of associated groups or organisations.

These three components of the current web of global terrorism stand out in general because they have a significant degree of organisational articulation, with their respective internal rules of behaviour, codes of discipline, functional specialisation, hierarchy among members and acknowledged leadership. This does not sit well with the idea of global terrorism being a disorganised phenomenon that is basically the sum of small independent networks and spontaneously formed cells which, taken as a whole, have no real leadership or act with a shared strategy. These local and independent forces are no

---

doubt part of the overall web of global terrorism. But, again, the part should not be confused with the whole, nor even perceived as its most outstanding component.

Al-Qaeda and its territorial extensions, its associated groups and organisations, and these small independent networks and cells together make up a relatively heterogeneous but clearly defined international network. It evolves in response to both endogenous and exogenous factors, and its components are inter-connected in different ways and can vary over time in relative importance. At the same time, the specific entities that correspond to each of these components can also vary in number as some disappear and others join up, or as they combine either through fusion or absorption. Furthermore, each entity can modify its own features or the characteristics of the relations it maintains with others.

This web of global terrorism has in common both an ideology we can refer to as Salafi jihadism and the ultimate goal of establishing of a new pan-Islamic caliphate. In the absence of state sponsorship, whether or not the web of global terrorism persists depends on its components being able to mobilise sufficient resources among their populations of reference. Al-Qaeda and the other actors involved in global terrorism enjoy a more than significant amount of popular support in predominantly Muslim societies and even among Muslim in other societies. However, support seems to have been waning since around 2002, perhaps due to the fact that the victims of al-Qaeda-related terrorism are mainly Muslims and that the legitimacy of al-Qaeda's violence is being questioned by relevant religious authorities in the Muslim world.

**Conclusions:** Al-Qaeda still exists. It has offset its reduction in size by disseminating propaganda, but it is more than just an ideology. It has compensated for its fragmentation by establishing territorial extensions and fostering links with like-minded groups and organisations. But al-Qaeda has not dissolved into a movement. Whereas more than seven-and-a-half years ago it was practically synonymous with global terrorism, it is now part of a highly diversified web that it provides with both leadership and strategy. Al-Qaeda has made up for its operational limitations by instigating or facilitating the activities of other actors in global terrorism, and it has a new haven in the tribal areas of western Pakistan and renewed capabilities.

Of course, the challenge posed by small networks and local cells that are apparently independent should not be underestimated, especially in Western societies. However, neither should the part be taken for the whole, forgetting that al-Qaeda has not vanished, that the current web of global terrorism has other components and that most attacks blamed directly or indirectly on that terrorist structure are in fact the work of its territorial extensions (such as a-Qaeda in Iraq or al-Qaida in the Maghreb) or of its associated groups and organisations (such as the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban). The risks and threats that global terrorism now poses for different countries or regions of the world depend precisely on the way on which these different components combine.

Even the Madrid train bombings of 11 March 2004 show how complex these risks and threats became after 9/11. Although the incident has been presented as a prototypical example of an independent local cell at work, the truth is that among those involved and convicted were individuals who were already integrated in the cell established by al-Qaeda in Spain during the 1990s, prominent members of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group and other individuals having important international connections with the current web of global terrorism, not only in Europe but also in North Africa and South Asia. To this should be added the small collective of Maghreb immigrants previously

---

involved in ordinary criminal activities, who were mobilised from above for the purpose of transforming them into actual bombers in the ongoing terrorist plans. It would be a mistake to take this part for the whole when speaking about who was behind the Madrid train bombings.

The current web of global terrorism is not an amorphous phenomenon but a polymorphous one. It is not Abu Musab Al Suri's model that seems to be predominant, but rather one designed by another ideologue of violent jihadism, namely Abu Bakar Naji, in his *Management of Savagery*. All of this has implications for how Western democracies should prevent and respond to global terrorism. They must deal not only with the challenges of local independent cells or small jihadist networks that have sprung up spontaneously in Western societies, but also with the risks and threats posed by elements corresponding to other components within the current web of global terrorism; more specifically, with the risks and threats posed by a reconstituted al-Qaeda, by its territorial extensions and by its associated groups and organisations.

Moreover, it is highly likely for two or more of these exogenous components to combine with smaller networks and local cells, formed as a result of endogenous processes of radicalisation and terrorist recruitment that take place in Western countries. Inasmuch as the largest and best articulated actors of global terrorism have their operational bases outside the Western world, it is impossible to overstate the importance of complementing progress in intelligence and internal security with maintaining high levels of international cooperation, in particular with countries that are a priority according to assessments on both the origins of these risks and threats for a given society and their transnational connections. These are risks and threats that, seven-and-a-half years after 9/11, have not decreased in the Western world and that, furthermore, have increased in complexity.

*Fernando Reinares*

*Senior Analyst for International Terrorism and Director of the Elcano Royal Institute's Programme on Global Terrorism, and professor of Political Science and Security Studies at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos*