

Monthly Global Security Briefing – August 2013

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AL-QAIDA MOVEMENT

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Summary

Is the al-Qaida idea in resurgence? What are the lessons from Syria, where al-Qaida affiliates like Jabat al-Nusra are increasingly effective and pose a serious threat to both the Assad regime and regional stability? August's high-level security alerts at US diplomatic missions across the Middle East and Africa, in particular, Yemen, have demonstrated that far from being in retreat, the al-Qaida movement is still very much alive – as an idea, if not as a centralised organisation. Sunni Jihadi groups inspired by and often affiliated to al-Qaida are increasingly active in Yemen, Nigeria, Iraq and beyond. In dealing with this resurgence, governments must now focus on addressing the localised grievances that feed the movement's growth, rather than holding on to an idea of a hierarchical and structured al-Qaida that never existed.

Introduction

Between 1 and 6 August, the US State Department closed 19 diplomatic missions across the Middle East and Africa and the US and British embassies in Sana'a, Yemen, were evacuated. Unconfirmed reports indicate that the decisions were based on intercepts of messages between Pakistan-based leader of al-Qaida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Nasser al-Wuhayshi, leader of Yemeni-based affiliate, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and related to intended attacks that were planned for the end of Ramadan. As a consequence, high levels of security were implemented by the Yemeni authorities, and there were several US armed drone attacks as well as the reported deployment of US Special Forces. There were subsequent reports of intended attacks on Yemen's oil and gas infrastructure, and even an attempt to take control of a port.

This sudden concern came at a time when the Obama administration had been indicating that the al-Qaida movement was in serious retreat and was unlikely to present further major problems. Yet, in its most recent analysis of the status of the al-Qaida movement (March 2013), *Oxford Research Group* had questioned this perceived retreat, arguing that the al-Qaida "idea" was still very much alive. The analysis in this briefing updates this assessment in the light of recent developments.

Context

The al-Qaida movement developed in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and within a decade had evolved into a dispersed transnational revolutionary movement, rooted in a rigid and fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. This religious base provided an eschatological dimension that was, and still is, unusual for a revolutionary movement, and meant that it embraced very long timescales for its aim to create a worldwide Islamist caliphate, measuring in decades instead of years. In seeking transitions to

Islamist governance, the movement identified regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and elsewhere as the “near enemy” and the United States as the “far enemy”. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks the al-Qaida movement was seen in the West primarily as a hierarchical entity located mainly in Afghanistan and north-west Pakistan. Recently, the movement is thought to have been thoroughly dispersed by the combination of bin Laden’s death and the killing of much of its middle-level leadership through armed drone and Special Forces operations.

The response to the Pakistan/Yemen message intercepts has given rise to the suggestion that al-Qaida remains more active and more centralised than had previously been acknowledged, and that elements of the centralised structure that existed in the early 2000s have been partially reconstituted. However, this may be a misreading of the situation in two ways. First, the communication between the two leaders does not necessarily indicate control from the centre since it appears to be a rare instance of such communication.

Second, the extent to which the movement was ever narrowly centralised and hierarchical a decade ago is seriously questionable. Prior to 9/11, transnational al-Qaida operations were few and far between, and though they became far more widespread in the period 2002-06, they were primarily undertaken by local groups that were little more than loose affiliates of “al-Qaida central”. These included operations in Egypt, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the UK. Thus, the current pattern of activities in a number of countries is not dissimilar to the situation a decade ago, which means that the apparent weakening of leadership in north-west Pakistan is simply not as significant as might be believed. So what is the status of the movement at present?

The following section serves to update assessments made in Oxford Research Group’s March briefing.

The Status of the Movement

The Russian authorities continue in their attempts to control the Caucasus Emirate but concerns over the security of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi remain. In Mali, the French are intent on handing over to a UN force and while the fighting has died down during what is the hottest part of the year, the recent elections have been attracting a barely 15% poll in some parts of the north of the country. The Swahili coast of Kenya and Tanzania has seen little violence of late, except for an acid attack on two British visitors in Zanzibar, which is as yet unclaimed by any group. In Somalia, progress made by African Union and Kenyan forces earlier in the year has been maintained, with further disruption of al-Shabaab operating bases in Mogadishu, but al-Shabaab still controls much of rural Somalia. Al-Qaida-linked groups in Sinai show signs of markedly increased activity and this has led to cross-border attacks by Israeli units. Prison breaks in Niger, Pakistan, Iraq and Libya have all recently aided Islamist movements by releasing many deeply committed prisoners.

Beyond these more limited elements of al-Qaida-linked groups, Yemen, Nigeria, Iraq and especially Syria are the locations of increased activities that together indicate an expansion of the al-Qaida idea, even if this is far short of a coordinated and coherent transnational movement.

Yemen: Until late last year, AQAP controlled substantial parts of Abyan province to the south-east of Sana'a but the level of control has diminished in recent months, even as support for the group remains high in some parts of Marib province, close to Sana'a. Yemen was already a focus for US drone attacks in 2012 before the recent State Department warnings. Following the recent increase in drone attacks – the Bureau for Investigative Journalism reports 8 confirmed US drone attacks in the period 27 July - 10 August - there is considerable evidence that these have resulted in a major increase in anti-Americanism, not just in the areas of drone operations but throughout the country. However, this does not appear to be recognised in Washington, where armed drone and Special Forces operations are still viewed as the most appropriate means of responding to perceived threats emanating from Yemen.

Nigeria: Following an increase in paramilitary activity in northern Nigeria by the Boko Haram Islamist movement and its much smaller and more internationally-orientated offshoot, Ansaru, the Federal Government declared a state of emergency in three north-eastern states - Adamawa, Borno and Yobe - in May. This was followed by the start of a major and sustained military operation, *Restore Order*, which has recently claimed success in diminishing Boko Haram's activities.

However, independent analysts are very dubious of claims of success made during June and July and there are many credible reports of sustained human rights abuses by the JTF. The authorities have encouraged the formation of vigilante groups that aid the authorities in identifying Boko Haram supporters. This has incentivised deadly score-settling on both sides. Many members of the Boko Haram leadership have left the country for the time being, casting doubts on Nigerian government claims that significant leadership elements have been killed or detained.

Displacing Boko Haram militants to weaker Niger and Chad threatens to internationalise what has been an intra-Nigerian campaign. In videoed comments distributed on 12 August, Boko Haram's leader linked US, France and Israel to Nigeria's counter-insurgency operation. Overall, Salafist-orientated groups in northern Nigeria may have relatively little contact with similar groups in North Africa and Somalia but they constitute a major security problem for Nigeria and there are serious concerns that *Restore Order* will increase rather than diminish support for the movement.

Syria: The situation in Syria is now entrenched in an evolving stalemate (see May and June briefings for further discussion), which has considerable implications for the wider al-Qaida movement. This stems from three elements:

- Although the Assad regime has considerable financial problems, it remains reasonably robust and can look to Iran and Russia for support. Its successes

against rebel groups in towns and cities to the north of Damascus have been mainly against the more secular rebel elements, but this has been enough to consolidate regime power in that key part of the country.

- However, in much of the north and east of the country jihadist paramilitaries have grown in strength and recently over-ran an important regime air base that had been under siege for more than nine months.
- This combination of regime success against more secular rebel elements and the growing prowess of more jihadist-orientated militias means that the stalemate is evolving much more into a conflict between the regime and jihadists.

Overall, the war in Syria represents the most significant increase in the status of the al-Qaida idea worldwide and certainly runs directly contrary to any analysis that suggests the movement is in decline. Moreover, possible western intervention in response to the use of chemical weapons raises the prospect of an even more complex conflict, in which any attempt to limit the radical jihadist elements following intervention will be seen as yet one more example of the “far enemy” of the United States intervening in the region.

Iraq: As the war in Syria has become more entrenched, the violence has escalated substantially across the border in Iraq. The inter-confessional attacks, primarily by Sunni jihadist paramilitaries against elements of the Shi’a majority and the government, are not yet at the level of the peak of the war in 2006-07, but are beginning to approach that intensity. The government of Nouri al-Malaki shows little sign of responding by attempting to minimise the marginalisation of the Sunni minority, seeing the threat as one to be met almost entirely by traditional counter-terrorism tactics.

Implications

The al-Qaida movement was never narrowly hierarchical and closely structured, and the idea that dispersal, assassination and detention would largely destroy it as a threat was little more than wishful thinking. Twelve years after the 9/11 attacks, and well over two decades since the movement first came to prominence in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, its existence as a centralised entity may be even more limited, but the idea remains potent. Its current expression is most clearly seen in different manifestations in Nigeria, Syria and Iraq, which, taken together, mean that the movement has substantial potential for further development.

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