

Al-Qaeda's continued core strategy and disquieting leader-led trajectory

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Theme

Al-Qaeda has withstood arguably the greatest international onslaught directed against a terrorist organisation in history, but it has survived for nearly a quarter of a century and continues to pursue a core strategy. The ongoing unrest in the Middle East could potentially resuscitate al-Qaeda's waning fortunes and it may assume unpredicted forms. Its final elimination may take years, if not decades, more to achieve.

Summary

Al-Qaeda's core strategy aims at distracting and exhausting adversaries, creating divisions between counter-terrorism allies, forging close ties and assisting local affiliates, planning major international or global attacks and monitoring our Western security and defence systems. Despite vast inroads made against Core al-Qaeda in recent years, its command structure has proved capable of adapting and adjusting to even the most consequential countermeasures directed against it. The repercussions of the Arab Spring, and ongoing unrest and protracted civil war in Syria have endowed the al-Qaeda brand and, by extension, the core organisation, with new relevance and status. Al-Qaeda's obituary has been written many times since the September 11 2001 attacks, only to be proved to be prematurely wishful thinking. In coming years, this organisation, turned into a global terrorism structure, may assume new and different forms that have not been anticipated.

Analysis

In the years following September 11 2001, it was no longer possible to equate the global terrorism threat solely with the challenge posed by Core al-Qaeda. As it evolved into a polymorphous phenomenon, the global terrorism threat diversified both geographically and organisationally. Acts of jihadist terrorism became very frequent in a variety of countries in South Asia and the Middle East such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, a somewhat frequent reality in North and East-African countries such as Algeria and Somalia, and more sporadic in places as diverse as Kenya, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Spain and the UK. Organisations including the Islamic Emirate of

Afghanistan (IEA), TTP and AQI have presented the most serious and sustained threats in the countries in which they operated, often in alliance with other terrorist or insurgent groups active in those same operational venues.

At the same time, though, it is clear that even as al-Qaeda evolved into a different organisational entity than existed on September 11, it continued to pursue a core strategy that embraced six key –core– elements.

Key elements of al-Qaeda's continued strategy

First, al-Qaeda sought to overwhelm, distract and exhaust its adversaries, especially at a time of growing global economic travail. Al-Qaeda asserts that its ultimate victory will not be achieved militarily, with the use of physical weapons and arms, but rather by undermining the economies of its opponents, exhausting their finances and wearing out their militaries. The notion of this strategy of attrition has been tightly woven into the al-Qaeda narrative. In a bin Laden videotape message, released just days before the US presidential election in 2004, he claimed credit for having spent the comparatively modest sum of half a million dollars to implement the September 11 attacks. By comparison, bin Laden argued, the US had had to spend trillions of dollars on domestic security arrangements and foreign military expeditions. He therefore claimed credit for America's economic travails and the fiscal developments that led to the fall of the US financial juggernaut. Such assertions were of course completely divorced from reality. However, propaganda does not have to be true to be believed, it just has to be effectively communicated so that it is believed. Al-Qaeda's message in this respect acquired greater resonance than ever in light of the US and the West's very real and continuing economic troubles.

Secondly, throughout this period al-Qaeda actively sought to create, foster and encourage fissures and divisions within the global alliance arrayed against it. This accounted for its focus on either encouraging or itself mounting attacks within the territory of close US allies in Western Europe, such as the UK, Spain, the Netherlands and Germany, for instance. This entailed the selective targeting of coalition partners in the American-led war on terrorism both in the actual theatres of these operations (eg, attacks directed specifically against perceived 'weaker' NATO partners committed to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan such as the British, Canadian, Dutch, German and Italian contingents) and at home –through attacks on mass transit and other 'soft' targets in the national capitals and major cities of European countries allied with the US (eg, the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings and the terrorist plots with links back to Pakistan foiled in 2007 in Germany and in 2008 in Spain).

Third, al-Qaeda continued to prosecute local campaigns of subversion and destabilisation where failed or failing states provided new opportunities for the movement to extend its reach and consolidate its presence and/or forge close relations with local jihadist organisations. Countries and regions such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and other areas of East Africa, North Africa and, especially, Yemen fell within this category.

Fourth, al-Qaeda also actively continued to provide guidance, assistance and other help to local affiliates and associated terrorist movements. This support enhanced local and regional terrorist attack capabilities and strengthened the resilience of these groups, thus presenting more formidable challenges to national and local police, military forces and intelligence agencies. Al-Qaeda thus actively worked behind the scenes in these theatres as a ‘force multiplier’ of indigenous terrorist capacity both in terms of kinetic as well as essential non-kinetic operations –including information operations, propaganda and psychological warfare–.

Fifth, al-Qaeda continued to seek out citizens or legal permanent residents of enemy countries, especially converts to Islam, who possessed ‘clean’ passports that could deploy for attacks in Western countries without necessarily arousing suspicion. In other words, persons whose birth names remained in their passports rather than their adopted religious name, were intended to provide al-Qaeda with the ultimate fifth column –individuals whose appearance and names would not arouse the same scrutiny from immigration officials, border security officers, national police and security and intelligence services that persons from Muslim countries with distinctly Muslim names might–.

Finally, al-Qaeda remained as opportunistic as it was instrumental. In this respect, while its leaders planned and encouraged international terrorist attacks, they also continued to monitor al-Qaeda’s enemies’ defences, identifying gaps and vulnerabilities that could be transformed into opportunities and quickly exploited for attack.

Al-Qaeda’s disquieting leader-led trajectory

Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda’s co-founder and leader, is dead. Key lieutenants have similarly been eliminated. The fourfold increase in targeted assassinations undertaken since 2009 by the Obama Administration has killed some three dozen key al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan, as well as over 200 fighters, thus setting the core organisation –in the words of a 2011 US State Department analysis– ‘on a path of decline that will be difficult to reverse’.

Although one cannot deny the vast inroads made against Core al-Qaeda in recent years because of the developments described above, the al-Qaeda brand and ideology have proved themselves as resilient as they are attractive to hardcore militants and Salafist extremists around the globe. For more than a decade, too, the Core al-Qaeda command structure has consistently shown itself capable of adapting and adjusting to even the most consequential countermeasures directed against it, having, despite all the odds, survived for nearly a quarter of a century. In this respect, weakened though it currently is, the Core al-Qaeda organisation has astonishingly withstood arguably the greatest international onslaught directed against a terrorist organisation in history. The al-Qaeda organisation has thus lasted longer than the overwhelming majority of contemporary terrorist movements, thus suggesting that its final elimination may take years, if not decades, more to achieve.

The repercussions of the Arab Spring and the ongoing unrest and protracted civil war in Syria at the time of writing, have also endowed the al-Qaeda brand and, by extension, the core organisation, with a new relevance and status that, depending on the future course of events in both that country and the surrounding region, could potentially resuscitate its waning fortunes. The fact that the remnants of Core al-Qaeda remain entrenched in South Asia coupled with the planned withdrawal of US forces and ISAF troops from Afghanistan, further suggests that it may well regain the breathing space and cross-border physical sanctuary needed to promote and perhaps even ensure its continued existence.

Throughout its history, the oxygen that al-Qaeda ineluctably depended upon has been its possession of, or access to, physical sanctuaries and havens. In the turbulent wake of the Arab Spring and the political upheavals and instability that followed, al-Qaeda has the potential to transform the footholds that it has established over the past few years in the Levant and perhaps in the Sinai and in North and West Africa into footholds –thus complementing its established outposts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia–.

Al-Qaeda's obituary has been written many times since the September 11 attacks, only to be proved to be premature. At the time, these views fit neatly with the prevailing consensus among government officials, academicians and pundits alike that al-Qaeda had ceased to exist as an organisational entity and had become nothing more than a hollow shell –an ideology without a command structure or the leadership to advance it– a leaderless entity of disparate individuals unconnected to any central authority. Bin Laden was also believed to be completely estranged from the movement he created, isolated from his fighters, sympathizers and supporters, and unable to exercise any meaningful role in the movement's operations and future trajectory. The threat, it was argued, had therefore become primarily a bottom-up and not a top down affair –to the extent that terrorist organisations themselves were regarded as anachronistic and the command and control functions that they had traditionally exercised were said to no longer matter–. Instead, it was argued, the real threat now came from self-radicalised, self-selected lone wolves or groups and not from actual, existing identifiable terrorist organisations.

Then, just to focus on the US case, the 2009 plot to stage simultaneous suicide attacks on the New York City subway system, to coincide with the eighth anniversary of the September 11 2001 attacks, came to light. The ringleader, an Afghan-born Green Card holder who lived in Queens named Najibullah Zazi, testified that both he and two fellow conspirators had been trained at an al-Qaeda camp in Pakistan. Three senior Core al-Qaeda commanders –the late Rashid Rauf and Saleh al Somali, who were respectively killed in US drone strikes in 2008 and 2009, together with Adnan al Shukrijumah– had overseen and directed the plot, which was also linked to two other ambitious sets of attacks planned for April 2009 in Manchester, England, and July 2010 in Scandinavia. Hence, the profoundly simplistic notions both that al-Qaeda had ceased to exist as an operational entity and the myth that the only terrorist threat that any

longer mattered was that posed by self-radicalised, self-selected individuals were effectively shattered.

Osama bin Laden left behind a resilient movement

The Core al-Qaeda has stubbornly survived despite predictions or the conventional wisdom to the contrary and has persisted not only in providing ideological justification and guidance to the broader jihadist movement but also in the actual direction and implementation of terrorist operations. Indeed, given that virtually every major terrorist attack or plot, for instance, against either the US or the UK, during the period between September 11 2001 and bin Laden's killing was known either to have emanated from Core al-Qaeda or from close allies and associates often acting on its behalf –at a time when it was claimed that Core al-Qaeda had ceased to exist– calls into question many of the assumptions and arguments that gained currency throughout that long decade.

In this respect, while bin Laden's death inflicted a crushing blow on al-Qaeda, it is still unclear that it has been a lethal one. He left behind a resilient movement with an ideology that remains compelling and a brand that is still attractive even if the organisation behind both has seriously weakened. Despite its systematic attrition as a result of the US drone campaign, for instance, al-Qaeda has nonetheless been expanding and consolidating its presence in new and far-flung locales, including North and West Africa and the Levant and Iraq in particular. Al-Qaeda has thus been able to demonstrate a remarkable ability to continue to replenish its ranks with new recruits and adherents, project a message that still finds an audience in disparate parts of the globe, however modest that audience may perhaps be, and articulate a strategy that continues to inform both the movement's and the core's operations and activities and that today is championed by bin Laden's successor, Al Zawahiri.

Since 2002 al-Qaeda has followed a path that has enabled it to survive by becoming a de-centralised global structure within a networked, transnational movement rather than the single monolithic entity that it once was. In the midst of the group's expulsion from, and defeat in, Afghanistan, Al Zawahiri charted a way forward –at a moment, it is worth recalling, and when everyone else believed it was on the brink of annihilation–. His treatise, published in the London-based Arabic language newspaper *al Sharq al Aswat* in December 2001, and titled *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, explained how 'small groups could frighten the Americans' and their allies. It equally presciently described how '[t]he jihad movement must patiently build its structure until it is well established. It must pool enough resources and supporters and devise enough plans to fight the battle at the time and arena that it chooses'. At the heart of this approach remained al-Qaeda's enduring strategy of conceptualising its struggle in terms of 'far' and 'near' enemies. The US, as well as other Western liberal democracies, of course, were the 'far enemy', whose defeat was a prerequisite to the elimination of the 'near enemy' –the corrupt, reprobate and authoritarian anti-Islamic regimes in the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and South-East Asia that could not otherwise remain in power without American and other Western support–. In light of the Arab Spring, that strategy has now assumed almost a hybrid character, whereby the movement by

necessity has focused almost entirely on the 'near enemy', local struggles, while remaining characteristically poised to take advantage of any opportunity to attack the 'far enemy' that presents itself.

Conclusions

Today the conventional wisdom argues that, much like bin Laden's killing, the Arab Spring has sounded al-Qaeda's death knell. However, while the mostly non-violent, mass protests of the Arab Spring were successful in overturning hated despots and thus appeared to discredit al-Qaeda's longstanding message that only violence and jihad could achieve the same ends, in the years since these dramatic developments commenced, evidence has repeatedly come to light of al-Qaeda's ability to take advantage of the instability and upheaval across these two regions to re-assert its relevance and thereby attempt to revive its waning fortunes.

The final chapter of al-Qaeda's long and bloody history has yet to be written. Since the September 11 attacks to the killing of bin Laden in 2011, it has proved to be a highly resilient organisation capable of adaptation and adjustment that, despite grievous leadership losses and diminished resources, was still able to harness the energy of its constituent parts and marshal the powerful narrative and ideology that sustains the collective movement, to carry on the struggle proclaimed by bin Laden in 1988. These characteristics ensure both that the final battle against al-Qaeda has not yet been fought and in coming years the movement may assume new and different forms that could not have previously been anticipated or predicted and that therefore will require an entirely different approach and means to finally eliminate it.