

Monthly Global Security Briefing – December 2013

AL-QAIDA: AN IDEA IN SEARCH OF A CAUSE

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Summary

Recent developments in Syria, Iraq and Iran must be understood within the wider context of the ineffective and counter-productive western response to the 9/11 attacks. This briefing argues that there is little attempt in western security thinking to take a hard look at the impact of the “war on terror”, in addition to a failure to recognise that the al-Qaida idea has evolved into a form that has serious long-term consequences for international security. It is vital to understand that if the al-Qaida movement is now primarily an idea, it is an idea that has the ability to form symbiotic relationships with other conflicts. It has become an idea that seeks new causes and then owns them. This briefing suggests there is an urgent need for a re-examination of the consequences of the “war in terror” to better understand the new emerging crises. Put bluntly, the “war on terror” has been disastrous and this must be acknowledged if further problems are to be avoided.

Introduction

The August briefing in this series, [The Evolution of the al-Qaida Movement](#) emphasised that al-Qaida has evolved from a movement to an idea; one that retains the movement’s potency. Its main conclusion was that:

“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. [In 2013] 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.”

Last month’s briefing, [Syria and Iraq: Planning for a Long War and a Long Recovery](#), pointed to the further consolidation of radical jihadist elements within the Syrian rebellion.

The aim here is to present such elements in a wider context to get a sense of where the al-Qaida movement is in the thirteenth year of what was once called the “war on terror”. In particular, this briefing argues that there is little attempt in western security thinking to take a really hard look at the experience of those years and a failure to recognise that the evolution of the al-Qaida idea after the death of Osama bin Laden and the Arab Spring may have greater long-term consequences for international security.

The Response to 9/11

The 9/11 attacks occasioned an immediate major military response by the United States and its coalition partners. This centred initially on the termination of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as the host government for the al-Qaida movement. By 1 May 2003, seven weeks after US, UK and allied forces invaded Iraq, President Bush gave his “mission accomplished” speech, pointing to success in Afghanistan and Iraq and the constraining of Iran – identified by Bush as an “Axis of Evil” state sponsor of terrorism and seeker of weapons of mass destruction

– which now faced US forces in Afghanistan to the east and Iraq to the west, as well as the US Navy’s powerful Fifth Fleet in the Gulf and Arabian Sea. In Bush’s analysis, the “war on terror” was succeeding and the United States had responded rightly to the atrocities of 9/11.

However, even then the reality was different, with attacks on coalition troops already under way in Iraq and an evolving insurgency causing security problems in Afghanistan. Security in both occupied countries deteriorated rapidly, with Iraq involving close to 180,000 western troops occupying the country by 2008 and deployment in Afghanistan peaking at 140,000 in 2011. The losses in the two wars were massive: over 200,000 people killed and at least that number seriously injured, many maimed for life. Some 8 million people were forced to leave their homes and the total war costs were expected to exceed \$3 trillion. Iranian influence expanded rapidly into Iraq under its Shi’a-dominated post-Saddam government.

Moreover, the apparently dispersed and dismembered al-Qaida movement and its loose affiliates became increasingly active across the world. Attacks from 2002 to 2005 included actions in Casablanca, Djerba Amman, Aqaba, Karachi, Islamabad, Istanbul, Mombasa, Bali, Jakarta, Madrid and London, as well as a number of failed attempts. The rate of attacks was greater than before 9/11 and most outside the immediate region were directed at western targets including banks, hotels and embassies.

With western forces having withdrawn from Iraq and being in the process of leaving Afghanistan, there is a renewed tendency for politicians like UK Prime Minister David Cameron to say “mission accomplished” in spite of deepening insecurity and violence in Iraq and a complex situation in Afghanistan, where there are strong indications of a post-occupation security environment that will be highly unstable. In many other parts of the world, al-Qaida affiliates present problems and there are frequent violent incidents in spite of hundreds of thousands of security, intelligence and police personnel involved in counter-terror activities.

In Britain, the police, intelligence and other agencies are estimated to have at least 15,000 personnel assigned solely to counter-terrorism work. Even so, the Head of the Security Service (MI5) could recently report that there were “thousands” of young radical Islamists active or potentially active in Britain. Other European intelligence agencies have reached similar conclusions in relation to their citizens and conflicts in Syria, Somalia, Mali and elsewhere.

An Idea in Search of Causes

The current status of al-Qaida is one of numerous affiliates with variable relations with each other and with what is left of the core of the movement, often with high degrees of individuality. By no means do all of them put global jihad at the top of their agenda, yet all share a vision of some kind of Islamist Caliphate. If the al-Qaida movement is now primarily an idea, it is one that latches on to other conflicts and has the ability to make them its own.

There are elements of this already happening in the North Caucasus, Yemen, Algeria, Somalia, Mali, Libya, Tunisia and Nigeria as the causes of suppressed or marginalised Muslim groups escalate, radicalise and become affiliated with the al-Qaida brand. This, for many, seems the best means to attract international attention, funds, arms, training and recruits. There is a strong likelihood of similar developments in Egypt due to frustration at the failure of both non-violent protest and the Muslim Brotherhood to deliver even modest economic redistributions, as well as the narrowing of space for political Islam to engage. For the al-Qaida idea, there is no lack of causes to be found.

Four particular elements of al-Qaida's current revival need to be recognised:

- Firstly, grievances arising from economic or social marginalisation and the failure of non-violent reform movements can easily aid the radicalisation of young people, especially young men. The al-Qaida idea does not allow readily for peaceful political and social change. If such changes succeed, the al-Qaida idea is undermined, but where they seem to fail, the idea is buoyed. Thus, the Arab Spring revolutions, which initially seemed to offer an alternative reform track, have largely worked in al-Qaida's favour. Syria is a powerful example of the steady radicalisation of a rebellion that initially pursued non-violent means of protest. Some of Libya's militia have followed the same radicalising path post-revolution. The suppression of electoral Islamism in Egypt also favours greater radicalisation.
- Secondly, the suppression of Sunni-led resistance in Syria is a beacon for idealistic young jihadists, from across the region and beyond, to aid the suffering of their co-religionists. Many are coming from western countries even if most are from the Middle East and South West Asia. Others are from the Caucasus, reversing the previous decade's flow of Arab jihadists to fight in Chechnya and Dagestan. Many of them, if they survive, will return to their own communities with additional fervour and proselytising potential. Tunisia, which may be the largest single supplier of foreign Sunni combatants to Syria, is worried enough to have imposed restrictions on young men travelling to countries neighbouring Syria.
- Thirdly, the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria has shifted the nature of Sunni radicalism including combatants, financiers and host communities - from anti-western to anti-Shi'a. This appears to have increased the appeal of al-Qaida affiliates among some core Sunni communities across the region and polarised social relations within several very fragile states, including Lebanon, Pakistan and Yemen. It may also have far-reaching consequences for US/western relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- Fourthly, many young men from the Middle East and South West Asia have recent combat experience gained most often in Iraq and Syria. While earlier elements of al-Qaida rose out of those with paramilitary experience against low-morale Soviet conscripts in Afghanistan in the 1980s, their more modern successors have gained much of their experience against well-armed and well-trained professional western militaries.

Much of the success of radical Islamists in Syria stems from deep ideological convictions coupled with combat experience and seasoned leadership, access to funds and arms, and the knowledge that they have support across the world. Indeed, Syria is in the process of becoming a crucible for a new generation of jihadists but its real implication may be as a model of radical mobilisation that can be replicated elsewhere.

Policy Implications

There is a strong tendency in western policy circles to find success in the war on terror where none exists. The Afghan and Iraq wars were disastrous in their outcomes, whatever the bravery and commitment of those involved. Radical jihadists are growing in numbers, particularly in new theatres of conflict such as Syria and there is a real possibility that this trend will be

replicated in Egypt and elsewhere. Western military analysts are reluctant to think this way, preferring narrow analysis of tactical aspects of the war on terror. 2014 should be the time for an independent and broadly based international commission to focus on the strategic implications of the last 12 years of war and to foster alternative responses.

Given that space for the al-Qaida idea to make causes its own is created through the perceived failure of alternative means of reform and/or suppression of groups along sectarian lines, the international community needs to pay special attention to processes of transition in states such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Mali, Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan, where the potential for violent radicalisation is still abundant.

In early 2014, the conflict in Syria is likely to continue to metastasise into a radical sectarian proxy war, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are likely to be exacerbated by wrangling over both the Syrian Geneva II peace process and the Iranian nuclear programme, and Iraq can expect its elections to further polarise the population. The international community should therefore pay particular attention to conflict prevention in two neighbouring countries with stark Sunni-Shi'a divides: Iraq and Lebanon.

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