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London, Sharm al Sheikh and the al-Qaida movement

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In the four-year period since the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, there have been numerous further attacks across the world. However we describe the al-Qaida group – as a network, a dispersed movement or almost a syndicate – it has been involved in orchestrating far more attacks than in the equivalent period before 9/11. These have included two double bombings in Istanbul and two attacks in Djakarta, attacks in Karachi and Islamabad and several in Saudi Arabia. There have also been bombings in Kenya, Morocco and Tunisia, the attack on the Sari nightclub in Bali, and attempted attacks in Rome, Paris and Singapore. The tempo of the attacks appeared to diminish after the multiple bombing of commuter trains in Madrid in March of last year, with a long pause of nine months following last October's attack on the Taba Hilton and a camp site in Sinai, both frequented by Israeli tourists.

During this nine-month period, there was a considerable increase in the number of suicide bombings in Iraq, and there has been a more recent upsurge in violence in Afghanistan, yet there was a view among some analysts that the al-Qaida phenomenon was beginning to run its course, at least as a globally active group. It was thought that a combination of an increasing concentration of jihadist paramilitaries in Iraq, combined with the killing or long-term detention of many al-Qaida operatives meant that the risk of attacks elsewhere in the world was diminishing.

There were two parallel trends in this analysis that were not particularly complementary. One was that the overall problem of paramilitary action was likely to diminish because of the combination of attacks on the al-Qaida movement with the probability of containing and then defeating the insurgents in Iraq, including the foreign elements that had been drawn to the conflict. The other was that jihadist action was certainly being concentrated in Iraq but that it was far too early to say that the insurgency could be brought under control. On this more pessimistic assessment, if Iraq was to become a long-term focus for jihadist action it might even serve to revitalise the al-Qaida movement.

The overall view was still that the al-Qaida movement was diminishing in capability, and it is this view that has been hugely damaged by the major incidents in London and Sinai during the course of July. Moreover, this surge in activity has coincided with further problems in Iraq, so much so that any realistic analysis has to conclude that the global war on terror is not going as planned and that the al-Qaida phenomenon is still evolving, often in quite unexpected ways.

Sharm al-Sheikh

The attacks on two hotels and a market place in the Sinai resort of Sharm al-Sheikh on 23 July killed 88 people and injured over 200, even worse than the multiple bombings in Taba the previous October. There had been two much smaller attacks in Cairo in

the intervening months, but there was a belief that the Mubarak government in Cairo had acted so forcefully against radical Islamist groups in Egypt in recent years that there was little risk of major attacks arising from domestic groups.

It is not at present clear whether the Sharm al-Sheikh attacks involved foreign elements, and there were initial reports that several people of Pakistani nationality had been detained shortly afterwards. Such an international connection was later denied by the Egyptian authorities and there were subsequent arrests of Egyptian nationals. If there was direct international involvement then this points to a loose al-Qaida connection, but if the origins were domestic, then it means that Egyptian government efforts at control have not been effective.

In any case, the al-Qaida organisation is now so diffuse that it appears to involve a multiplicity of groups with only the loosest of connections, so that a group of primarily domestic origins would see itself very much as part of a wider struggle, even if it directs its efforts at undermining what it sees as an unaccountable and elitist regime in Cairo.

The London Bombs

In London, four coordinated attacks on the transport system on 7th July left 56 people dead, including four bombers, and several hundred injured. Those responsible were all long-term residents in Britain, three of Pakistani origin from West Yorkshire and one Afro-Caribbean man who had lived most of the time in West Yorkshire. Two weeks later, there was an attempt at a further coordinated attack, but the four explosive devices failed to detonate. Twenty people were subsequently arrested, including three alleged bombers originating from the Horn of Africa, with a fourth person detained in Rome. Taken together, the London and Sharm al-Sheikh attacks suggest that al-Qaida and its associates retain a marked capability for actions across the world, a situation that largely counteracts the more positive assessment, from a western perspective, that was outlined earlier.

There are other features of the London attacks that are particularly worthy of note. The first is that there was no warning of the first attacks – indeed the level of security alert had recently been eased in Britain, even though the Group of Eight Summit at Gleneagles in Scotland was due to take place early in the month. While there had been periodic warnings of UK vulnerability, and possibly the detention of potential bombers the previous year, these particular attacks came out of the blue.

The second issue is that there is considerable evidence that the first group of bombers had set in motion their plan in conditions of considerable secrecy, so that even close family and friends were unaware of their intentions, even if some of them had become somewhat withdrawn from their previous social circles. The third is that there were at least two cells operating in Britain, with the second cell that undertook the failed attacks on 21st July having very little connection with the first.

The final issue is that determined efforts have been made across many of Britain's more multicultural cities to prevent a deterioration in community relations, but these have so far only been partially successful, with a marked increase in attacks on Islamic communities in the weeks following the attacks.

One focus in the wake of the attacks has been the determination of the UK government to separate out any perceived motive for the attacks arising from Britain's ongoing involvement with the United States in the occupation of Iraq. Instead, the British Government's representation of the attackers has been of nihilist groups that had little in the way of clear-cut aims and whose motivation had stemmed from a thoroughly warped and unrepresentative version of Islam, with no direct connection with Iraq. Determining whether this is a tenable position relates, in part, to the current state of the insurgency in Iraq.

The Iraq Insurgency

During the course of July, the insurgency in Iraq continued at an unrelieved intensity, especially in terms of attacks against Iraqi police and security forces but with hundreds of civilians being killed too. Iraq Body Count and Oxford Research Group, in a jointly-published report in the middle of July, estimated civilian casualties in Iraq at close to 25,000 in the first two years of the war, with over 40,000 injured. In the compilation of these figures, now widely used across the world by policy makers and journalists, a careful and conservative methodology is used, so that the figures, while an accurate report of individuals killed and injured, probably underestimate the full toll.

Furthermore, Iraq Body Count has not attempted the almost impossible task of estimating the Iraqi military casualties in the three-week period immediately prior to regime termination in early April 2003. On the limited information available from coalition sources and some "embedded" journalists, many thousands of conscripts and Republican Guard soldiers were killed then. If the reliable estimates for Iraqi civilian casualties are taken together with information on Iraqi military casualties and civil and military losses in Afghanistan, the global war on terror has so far cost 40-50,000 lives, about ten times the number of people killed so far by al-Qaida and its associates in the 9/11 attacks and the many other incidents since.

In Iraq, US military losses during July were lower than May and June but still higher than March or April, with 54 killed. In the five-week period from 30th June to 2nd August, 579 US troops were wounded, 169 of them seriously. One of the most significant developments in the country has been the aftermath of the US assault on Fallujah last November. The city had previously been seen as a core location for the insurgents and not under Iraqi Government or American control. It was therefore considered to be a substantial focus for insurgent action affecting much of Central Iraq, so much so that US military commanders believed that it was essential to take control of the city, especially with national elections planned for last January. As a consequence, a major assault on the city was launched using considerable firepower, with the control of the whole urban area being achieved within two weeks.

The human costs were considerable, with perhaps a thousand people killed, many of them civilians, and the great majority of the 300,000 inhabitants fleeing the city as refugees. Around three-quarters of the housing stock was destroyed or damaged, as were most of the mosques, schools and public buildings.

Fallujah is relevant for two quite different reasons. The first is that the city is now under very tight security control, yet insurgents are still able to operate. Some 8,000

US Marines and Iraqi security personnel now control the city, supplementing a large Iraqi police presence, there is a nightly curfew and only six entry and exit points with long periods of waiting and personal searches. In spite of these security measures, insurgents within the city have been manufacturing car bombs and detonating them in the immediate area, including one that killed six US Marines. They have also firebombed two of the five new police forts constructed in the city, have narrowly missed killing the Iraqi special paramilitary force commander in the city, and have also caused several members of the new city council to resign their posts.

The implications for the wider insurgency are considerable. While it is the case that Fallujah was a key centre for the insurgency, the current level of security involving many thousands of US and Iraqi troops should be sufficient to maintain a very high level of control. That this has not proved possible demonstrates how deep-seated the insurgency is, as well as the extent of support for the insurgents.

The second reason for Fallujah's significance goes well beyond Iraq and takes us back to the wider global war on terror. One of the features of the current Iraq War is the presence of major news media that are not under the control of the coalition. These include the Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya satellite-based TV news channels that are watched by tens of millions of people across the region, as well as a number of mainstream web sites.

These sources provide 24-hour news coverage of what is happening in the country, with particular attention being paid to the civilian casualties. The events in Fallujah, in particular, have had a major impact across the Arab and wider Islamic world, with the "city of mosques" acquiring an iconic status in terms of perceived foreign brutality. While the main satellite TV channels maintain relatively high standards of presentation and reporting there is, in addition, a very well-developed industry based on diverse groups producing videos, DVDs and web resources that are much more markedly propagandistic.

On their own, such items would have some effect in aiding support for the al-Qaida movement, but their effect is even greater when added to the very widespread availability of satellite TV news output. In one sense, the situation was made even more complicated by the western TV coverage of the Fallujah assault. At that time, the US military was convinced of the central importance of the city to the insurgency, and wanted to demonstrate the military capabilities of the US forces. As a consequence, TV reporters were embedded with troops and TV crews were able to get substantial footage of the assault from outside the city. Little was seen of the damage being caused by the aerial and artillery assault, but the footage of the munitions being directed towards the city from the perimeter was extraordinarily powerful. To an American TV audience it demonstrated the power available to the armed forces, suggesting that the insurgency could be controlled with little difficulty. To an Arab audience, on the other hand, it was little short of an outrage. Even many of the people across the region who had been adamantly opposed to Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime became increasingly and bitterly opposed to the US actions.

Al-Qaida and Iraq

The value of the coalition involvement in Iraq to the al-Qaida movement is difficult to judge, but there is copious evidence from opinion surveys that anti-Americanism has increased substantially across the Middle East since the war in Iraq began nearly two and a half years ago. In the immediate aftermath of the London bombings, there were many media interviews with people from Britain's Muslim communities and what was repeatedly forthcoming was a combination of views. There was persistent and trenchant condemnation of the London bombers and an abhorrence of what they had done, but there was also real anger expressed at events in Iraq. The loss of life in Iraq was not remotely used to justify the London attacks, but the impact of the destruction in Iraq was still evident.

For al-Qaida itself, Iraq has provided a substantial boost in support. It has been possible to represent the conflict as an American neo-Christian occupation of a key Arab state. In this view, Washington is engaged in an assault on Islam, aided by Zionist Israel, and is intent on maintaining control of the region's huge oil reserves. Recognising the propaganda value of this situation, al-Qaida associates have specifically linked Iraq to the wider war with the West, threatening continuing violence as long as the occupation continues.

In practice, the great majority of the insurgents in Iraq are from indigenous groups, including largely secular Ba'athists, but this is not of great concern to al-Qaida, as the movement may confidently expect the number of foreign recruits to the insurgency to grow substantially in the coming years. Moreover, there certainly are radical jihadists taking part in the insurgency, even if these are probably numbered in the very low thousands at present. One effect of their presence is that some of these young paramilitaries from other countries in the Middle East are spending time in Iraq with the insurgents, gaining first hand training and combat experience, and are then returning to their own countries. This is already a matter of substantial concern to the Saudi security authorities and there is also some evidence that some Afghan paramilitaries have gained combat experience in Iraq and are then taking that experience back to Afghanistan. This is a remarkable change, given that it was Afghanistan that was the combat training zone for al-Qaida a decade ago. Now it is Iraq, with the experience being carried back to Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most difficult issue to unravel is al-Qaida's longer-term aim in relation to Iraq. The direct influence of the movement in that country is currently minimal, but the wider value of the conflict is recognised and messages from the leadership now make this clear. Such messages talk of violence against coalition members continuing until the occupation of Iraq is ended, and this therefore consolidates George Bush's view that the Iraq conflict is part of the global war on terror.

Given Iraq's oil reserves, and the current establishment of several large US bases in the country, it is highly unlikely that the United States will want to withdraw from the country, and thereby forfeit influence, any time in the next decade, but this may well be exactly what the al-Qaida movement most wants. While calling resolutely for a coalition withdrawal, it is more likely that the movement would greatly prefer the insurgency to continue with at least the current intensity for as many years as possible. The reason for this is straightforward – the al-Qaida movement is engaged in a

conflict intended to replace what it sees as corrupt, elitist and pro-western regimes in the Middle East with what it considers to be true Islamist rule, leading eventually to the creation of a region-wide Caliphate. This is not a process that is likely to be measured in years, but in decades, and an essential part of the struggle is recruiting far larger numbers of supporters.

Afghanistan had its value, not least in terms of training camps, even if much of the effort was directed towards supporting the Taliban in their civil war with the Northern Alliance. Iraq is becoming far more significant than Afghanistan to the achievement of al-Qaida's long-term aims. It has a fundamental resonance with the re-creation of an Islamic Caliphate, given that Baghdad was the seat of the most notable example, the Abbasid Caliphate of over a thousand years ago. Now under western occupation, and already forming a rallying point for supporters within the region, the natural extension of this is to attract support from across the wider Islamic world.

If the insurgency does continue for many years, then there is ample opportunity for many thousands of young paramilitaries to work with the insurgents over the next decade or so, coming to Iraq from across the world and getting training and even direct combat experience. Moreover, Iraq is an even more effective training environment than was Afghanistan in the 1990s, since the conflict is primarily one of an urban guerrilla insurgency involving many techniques of asymmetric warfare. This is actually more relevant to future jihadist actions than was Afghanistan, which involved much more in the way of conventional military actions in rural and mountainous regions, hardly similar to environments in London, Madrid, Istanbul or Casablanca.

In short, al-Qaida sources may talk of the imperative of a coalition withdrawal from Iraq, but it is highly unlikely that this is what they wish to see happen. For them, Iraq becomes not so much the immediate core focus of a war against western forces and local elites, but much more of a means of developing the paramilitary forces to enhance a decades-long conflict. In this respect, Iraq really does have the potential to be a major part of the global war on terror, but hardly in the way that Mr Bush or Mr Blair might expect.

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