

Discussion Paper

The Changing Face of Al Qaeda

Introduction

It is now ten years since 11 September 2001, and in only a few months we will mark the first anniversary of the death of the event's mastermind, Osama bin Laden. They say that a day is a long time in politics; the last decade has certainly felt like a long ten years, during which so much has changed. 2001 was the year that saw the launch of Wikipedia and the demise of Enron, and which brought George W. Bush to power and Milosevic into the hands of police special forces.

In the intervening period, over 100,000 people have died around the world in Al Qaeda-related or inspired terrorist attacks. In the UK alone, we have spent many hundreds, if not thousands, of millions of pounds on new counter-terrorism measures. The nature of the threat has changed from a centralised and hierarchical organisation controlled from Afghanistan in the lead-up to 9/11, to the freelance and franchise model that dominates today. The threat from Al Qaeda-related and inspired groups has changed considerably, due in large part to four key

trends: a shift from a centralised to de-centralised organisational model; the rise of so-called independent 'lone wolf' operators; an increased use of the Internet and social media; and a shifting geography, towards Africa. This essay considers the key trends as they impact upon Europe.

Al Qaeda's new organisational model

One only has to look at how the attacks themselves have changed, to realise that Al Qaeda's operations are becoming less centrally coordinated. Compare the highly orchestrated attacks of 9/11, Madrid, London and the plot to bring down ten trans-Atlantic planes in 2006 with more recent efforts. Taimur Abdulwahab al-Abdaly, who blew himself up and ignited a car bomb injuring two in Stockholm in December 2011. Arid Uka, who opened fire on a bus of US military personnel at Frankfurt Airport in 2011, killing two service personnel. And Nicky Reilly, the young man who attempted to set off a bomb in a restaurant in Exeter in 2008. In terms of the threat within Europe, attacks are becoming less

complex, because the organisational structure has become fragmented following the incarceration or assassination of key terrorist personnel. The intelligence services have also tightened their grip, constricting Al Qaeda's ability to operate.

In ground-breaking research for the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Jytte Klausen undertook a painstaking network analysis of Al Qaeda's key people between 1999 and 2010. She mapped who was in touch with whom, why, and how often, based on open and closed intelligence sources. What she found was very dense networks, both between different UK-related plots, and between these and individuals involved in plots overseas. This points to a centralised control function, with a small number of people orchestrating, planning, and funding operations delivered by local cells. Her research also showed that these links have been progressively broken down over time, with local groups working in a more autonomous way. They take inspiration from Al Qaeda, but less and less technical, financial or logistical support.

The rise of the 'lone wolf' terrorist

One of the most interesting and worrying developments in this new era of terrorism is the rise of the so-called 'lone wolf' terrorist. These are individuals who are inspired by the Al Qaeda narrative of jihad, anger against the Western occupation of Muslim lands, rejection of

Western foreign policy, and hatred of what they see as the humiliation of Muslims in Europe and the US. Motivated by this narrative, they act alone or with minimal support, facilitation and financing from the wider network.

One of the signs that this is a new trend we should take seriously is the fact that Al Qaeda itself is promoting this *modus operandi*. For example, in the January 2011 edition of *Inspire*, Al Qaeda's online journal, an article appeared celebrating individuals such as Roshonara Choudhry, the British woman who tried to kill MP Steven Timms. Al Qaeda talks about 'lone wolves' as individuals drawn by a 'borderless idea', and its new strategy seems to be to empower and motivate individuals to commit violence outside of any chain of command.

Jihadist use of the Internet

The growing use of the Internet by Al Qaeda and those inspired by its messages is one of the factors that enable the rise of these so-called 'lone wolves'. *Inspire* helps Al Qaeda reach out directly to a truly global audience, enabling it to recruit a new generation of young people to deliver its mission; recruiting to a cause rather than to a network. The fact that they are initiated into a virtual rather than 'real world' network is largely irrelevant; after all, Al Qaeda doesn't need many of them to come close to a successful attack to have made its propaganda efforts worthwhile.

Al Qaeda has also helped to seed a veritable online jihadi information highway. A handful of virtual media organisations create publications and audio-visual materials, which can be picked up and disseminated by others. For example, As-Sahab ('The Cloud') is a professional outfit that has run out of Pakistan, and publishes in a number of different languages. The Global Islamic Media Front is run by Muslims in Europe and is a more amateur set-up. And Al-Fajr ('The Daybreak') focuses on jihadists in Iraq, North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and, alongside propaganda, produces training manuals and videos. These online media units increasingly act like news agencies, similar to Reuters or Bloomberg. They produce pictures, interviews and newsfeed services, and in so doing are narrowing the credibility gap between themselves and the established news media.

Along with jihadist Internet forums, they also provide practical information and know-how for would-be bombers. These individuals or small networks are able to find information on how to build a bomb, and password protected forums allow them to communicate with one another for the purpose of planning attacks. They also act as 'extremist echo chambers', reinforcing the distorted views of their participants. Al Qaeda has also been known to issue guidance to its followers on how to use social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube for communication purposes and to spread propaganda.

We know of a number of individuals who have been recruited virtually. For example, Younis Tsouli – who called himself Irhabi007 – created a virtual terrorist cell before being arrested by the British authorities. Hamad Minshi, a British 16 year old, was recruited online and when arrested was found to have amassed instructions for making napalm, high explosives, and suicide vests. Abdul Benbrika was part of the Australian Benbrika group who downloaded, collated and distributed extremist material including manuals that contained recipes for the manufacture of explosives. Humam al-Balawi, a Jordanian doctor, was an eager online 'jihobbyist' and later blew himself up at a CIA base in Afghanistan. And Hussain Osman, one of the 7/7 London bombers, claims to have been influenced by watching video footage of the Iraq War on the Internet.

However, it is important not to exaggerate the role of the Internet. It still only features in the active recruitment of a small minority of those who have gone on to mount successful attacks. As a communication channel, it leaves those without advanced technical know-how vulnerable to detection by the authorities. And the trust and camaraderie that can only be developed through close physical proximity seems to be crucial for those attacks that have worked, especially spectaculars like 9/11, 7/7 and the Madrid attacks in 2004. As one terrorism expert has put it, most terrorist cells are a 'bunch of guys' – the social aspect as important as individual motivations and know-

how. In fact, evidence given to the 7/7 Inquests by the friends, acquaintances and neighbours of the London bombers showed that they were a very close-knit group. Three of the four lived together for many months in the lead up to the attacks, they attended training camps and martial arts classes together, and regularly went to the gym as a group.

One of the trends that is worth watching in relation to the Internet is that relating to gender. The ability of users to operate anonymously and without face-to-face contact means it is easier for women to play a more prominent role than it would be in a real life setting, particularly given the very fixed gender roles and separation of the sexes within some conservative Muslim communities. In the real world, women feature little in terrorist plots beyond aiding and abetting their male counterpart would-be jihadists.

On the Internet, they are able to play a more frontal role. One study of jihadist discussion forums found that the women had more extreme views than the men and appeared to play more of a leadership role. In cases such as the Toronto 16 gang in Canada, women were observed playing a role in online forums, encouraging the men to realise their ambitions. There is still much to learn about the role of women within terrorist networks, but the signs are that the Internet offers the potential for them to play a more prominent role than has been the case to date.

A geographical realignment

Finally, there has been a geographical shift over the last decade. There is no question that Pakistan remains the single most important country for Al Qaeda in terms of the scale of the threat and the recruitment of jihadists. But in recent years a small number of other countries in Africa and the Middle East have risen in prominence under the influence of Al Qaeda linked groups, Al-Shabaab, and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Yemen, in particular, has been an important node in international terrorist networks, especially because some Yemenis appear to have developed highly sophisticated technical capability in bomb making. The bombs planted in ink cartridges on UPS cargo planes grounded at airports in the UK and USA in 2010 were made in Yemen. The bombs were difficult to detect and illustrated an exceptionally high level of technical expertise. Following the death of their leader Anwar-al-Awlaki, at the hands of a US drone in 2011, it is unclear whether Yemeni jihadist forces will be able to recover.

The threat continues to emanate from other countries in the area, especially Somalia, which is one of the UK government's top targets for intelligence gathering and counter-terrorism activities. Somalia is interesting because it is attracting significant numbers of foreigners who travel to the country to engage in training and jihad. Most come from African countries, but

others come from the Middle East, the US, Canada and Australia. Europe exports the largest number of foreign fighters, particularly from Scandinavia and the UK. Almost 100 foreign fighters have travelled to Somalia from the UK since 2004, including a 21 year-old student, Abu Ayoub al-Muhajir from West London, who became the first British suicide bomber in Somalia. In Scandinavia, estimates of the number who have travelled to Somalia range from 25-80, and most have been ethnic Somalis. The most notable example of a Somali connection to jihad violence in the UK was the 21/7 London bombing. All four bombers were from the Horn of Africa: two were Somalis, one was from Eritrea, and the fourth was an ethnic Somali from Ethiopia.

As well as mounting attacks in the West, jihadists have also targeted Westerners living, working or travelling in these countries. In recent years, there has been a spate of kidnappings of tourists, businesspeople and even aid workers, who until recently had been seen as 'untouchable' by kidnappers on the basis of the positive contribution they often make to these countries. For now, most make it out alive after the payment of a sizeable ransom, but those taken for political reasons are usually not so lucky. The big fear is that links could be forged between the financially-motivated pirates working off the coast of Somalia and the politically motivated jihadists working on shore, although this hasn't been observed to date.

Conclusions

The last decade has been a long one in international security. Al Qaeda has gone from a terrorist network known to those working within the security arena to being a household name. Hundreds of thousands of people have died and billions of pounds has been spent by the UK and other Western countries in their fight against Al Qaeda and associated groups. On a number of measures, the threat from Al Qaeda has diminished as key leaders have been incarcerated or killed, intelligence agencies have stepped up their efforts on the ground, and the ideas of Al Qaeda have run out of steam.

Partly because of this, as well as a need to make significant spending savings in cash-strapped Europe and North America, the priority given to international terrorism is likely to decrease in the years ahead. We are already beginning to see this in mainland Europe, where budgets have been slashed, and once the London Olympics have passed – hopefully without event – the UK is likely to follow suit. Countries are also looking for ways to consolidate their efforts, pool their knowledge, and work collaboratively together on the ground. In other words, they hope that by working together they can be more cost-effective and deliver better results.

At the same time, Europe is seeing the resurgence of new forms of violent extremism, from far right and far left to new forms of single-issue extremist movements happy to use

violence to realise their ambitions. Governments must also, therefore, think about how approaches to one form of extremism can be applied to others to avoid reinventing the wheel and making costly mistakes for a second or even third time. These countries are also planning contingencies for widespread civil unrest and violence linked to the ongoing financial and economic crisis.

The last decade has seen a singular focus on Al Qaeda and our efforts are finally paying off. The challenge for the decade ahead will be to fight multiple forms of violent extremism on many different fronts. No easy task at all.

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