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TRAINING IN TERROR

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The recent capture of Abu Abbas, veteran Palestinian guerrilla leader and mastermind of the 1985 hijack of the Achille Lauro cruise ship, by US special forces in Iraq and the discovery of a sprawling terrorist training complex in Baghdad might just have given the Bush administration the opportunity to re-assert that its 'war on terror' continues to remain focused. The US State Department labelled the feat as a 'major victory in the global war against terrorism.' This is significant, given the concerns of some analysts about the impact of the war in Iraq on terrorism. The intervention in Iraq was seen to have provided 'an opportune moment' to terrorists, especially inspired by *jihadi* statements from a number of prominent Islamic clerics and bin Laden himself, to attempt attacks against the US targets.

Many intelligence analysts believe that the fall of the Iraqi regime has put tremendous pressure on Al Qaeda to demonstrate that it could still operate and carry out acts of vengeance. But as Marshall Billingslea, the US Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary put it, Al Qaeda had been placed under 'great stress' and its leadership is in disarray, which has placed a question mark on its ability to plan multiple large-scale attacks. Analysts like Rohan Gunaratna wonder whether 'Al Qaeda per se' now has the capacity to mount a large or spectacular attack - especially one with multiple targets - in Europe or North America and believe that attacks if any are more likely to be made by associated or sympathetic organizations in different theatres.

The target of an aggressive hunt post September 11 2001, Al Qaeda has suffered significant attrition and its regeneration rate has not been notable. This was largely because of a lack of facilities for training and finance that was lost to a sustained campaign. This paper addresses two issues. First, the importance of training for terrorist groups culling data from the training infrastructure and networks that Al Qaeda established all over. Second, the threat of attacks from its associates and sympathizers remains current because of the presence of a highly dispersed and well-trained cadre that passed out of these places. It is of interest to note that the appearance of new camouflaged training facilities, especially along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and now in Iraq, could be a precursor to more terrorist threats as borne out by incidents in Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan and in Europe, including increasing terror activity in Afghanistan.

Threat Assessment

Access to training and weaponry is a significant determinant for the threat projection capability of the terrorist groups, providing the cadres with capability for armament use and indoctrination to sustain the ideology that drives the members to action. For instance, Al-'Owhali, the man convicted in the Nairobi embassy bombings, told the FBI after his arrest that he had learned the basics of terrorism at the Al Qaeda training camp at Khaldan, where he also received military training in light weapons, and most importantly had periods of religious instruction, especially the one from bin Laden, which further solidified his religious feelings. The letters found in the deserted Khaldan camp in Afghanistan, where the September 11 hijackers are suspected to have trained, showed that the hundreds of men who passed through were angry, motivated and full of ideas for waging a violent 'jihad' against the West. All senior Al Qaeda functionaries - Mohamed Atta, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, Khalid Shaik Mohammed, Abu Zubaydah, and all three of the Hamburg hijackers have trained or received training, in Al Qaeda camps. Two senior Al Qaeda figures - Abu Musab al Zarqawi and Abu Khabab helped train the people now suspected of planning chemical and biological attacks in France and the United Kingdom. Both al Zarqawi and Abu Khabab also trained at camps in the Caucasus region, particularly in the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia and in nearby Chechnya. Zarqawi was also believed to have helped establish another poison and explosives training centre in an area controlled by Ansar al Islam in north-eastern Iraq.

One of the seven men arrested in London in a ricin poison investigation in January 2003 had trained in an Al Qaeda terrorist camp in Afghanistan. Numerous references to the making of ricin were in documents produced by the Al Qaeda terrorist network. References to ricin were part of the group's training course and in a manual that was spread worldwide. A number of Islamic terrorists trained in Europe in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, in l'Institut European des Sciences Humaines at the Chateau-Chinon in the Burgundy region of France and Hans's des Islam in Lutzelbach near Frankfurt, Germany. Some of the December 2001 Jemaah Islamiah arrestees in Singapore received training at Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and in the three camps - Camp Vietnam, Camp Palestine and Camp Hudaybiyya - in the MILF's Camp Abu Bakar complex in Mindanao, Philippines. Al Qaeda organized and funded training camps on the central Indonesian island of Sulawesi in 2001, where the nationals of many countries trained.

During the Cold War era, the USSR and its satellites, as well as the United States and its allies, provided training to a number of terrorist and guerrilla groups but controlled the level of training, weapons and targeting to keep the threat projection capability within manageable limits. The Al Qaeda network's 'terrorist university' made it possible for the terrorist groups to have access to the same level of training available to security forces personnel. Besides, with Al Qaeda, the terrorist training infrastructure moved from the Middle East (the Syrian-controlled Bekaa valley in Lebanon) to Asia (Afghanistan).

Al Qaeda was able to rope in various separatist Islamic groups all over the world, especially in Central and Southeast Asia, to establish training centres within the existing infrastructure of such groups. These include the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Libyan Jihad

Fighters, the Abu Sayyaf rebels of the Philippines, and what it called ‘jihad militants’ in Burma, Bosnia, Chechnya, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, even in Australia, Germany and France. This networking was necessary for Al Qaeda because it was becoming harder for its operatives to travel secretly to Afghanistan for training. Al Qaeda’s activities in Southeast Asia in particular were part of a larger plan to move Al Qaeda’s base of operations from Afghanistan to Southeast Asia, which may now have the highest concentration of Al Qaeda operatives outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Southeast Asia’s topographical peculiarities with porous borders, slack immigration controls, etc., were of particular advantage.

Such camps became the lifeblood of Al Qaeda, providing indoctrination and training for many of the estimated 5,000 foot soldiers, go-betweens, planners, document forgers, communications specialists, scouts, technicians, bombers and even hijackers from more than 50 countries. In addition to bin Laden’s training camps, the Taliban and militant Muslim groups affiliated with Al Qaeda have trained thousands more in similar facilities. Some estimates put the total number of veterans of these camps at more than 50,000. Much of the world’s contemporary high-calibre terrorists originated from these camps, and most of the camp veterans still remain unaccounted for.

New Camps - New Threats

Despite some significant disruption to its infrastructure there has been an apparent activation of new, albeit simple, training camps to train ‘high-level foot soldiers’. For example, in the desolate and largely un-patrolled tribal areas of Afghanistan, new volunteers are making their way to these camps, swelling the numbers of would-be Al Qaeda activists and the longer-term capabilities of the network. One or two camps have been discovered near Asadabad, northeast of Kabul and just west of the border with Pakistan. The new Al Qaeda camps are regularly dismantled and moved. They keep the camps as small, as discrete and as mobile as they can. Some of the captured militants involved in the recent spate of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan were believed to have trained in such camps. As gathered from various Al Qaeda operatives now in custody, the MILF reopened two training camps in south Philippines, in addition to one training camp in Indonesia. The one discovered in Iraq allegedly instructed recruits in bomb-making and martyrdom operations.

The spread and dispersal of the trained veterans are but vivid reminders about the enormity of the tasks and challenges. Given the importance of training facilities in terms of armament use, research in CBNR weapons and indoctrination, as well as their role as valuable links between various terrorist groups, the necessity of a more vigorous campaign to locate and disrupt the same can hardly be overemphasized. Unless the training infrastructures are completely rooted out, the threat from this terrorist hydra will remain as real as ever.

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