

Al-Qaeda after Bin Laden

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Contents

Introduction	1
Al-Qaeda's adaptability	1
Al-Qaeda's motivations	3
The effects of the Arab Spring	5

Introduction

Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was killed by American special forces in Pakistan on 2 May 2011, only a few months before the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The killing of the movement's charismatic leader, particularly when viewed alongside the 'Arab Spring' that has swept the Middle East since the early months of 2011, has produced a near universal perception that al-Qaeda and the global jihadist cause will be terminally weakened. There are good reasons to believe that this conclusion is at least premature, and there is a possibility that the opposite will prove to be the case.

There are three main reasons for this caution:

1. Al-Qaeda's proven adaptability
2. The continuation of the motivations that spawned al-Qaeda
3. The contrarian effects of the Arab Spring.

Al-Qaeda's adaptability

The greatest threat to al-Qaeda came not with the death of bin Laden but with the huge worldwide American-led campaign to expunge it following the September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. That it survived this onslaught and, in the process, inspired (and to a degree directed) a decentralized global jihadist movement made up of many disparate organizations in a multitude of countries is a clear indication of the resilience of jihadism.

It is true that during this time al-Qaeda has failed to pull off another spectacular to match 9/11 but, nevertheless, the number of successful and unsuccessful plots it has launched in the past 10 years provides evidence, in the words of one expert, of "the tactical, geographic, and organizational variability of the violence emanating from the global jihad".

Examples of al-Qaeda-inspired attacks during this period, excluding the special case of Iraq, include:

- The October 2002 Bali bombings, killing 202 people and injuring 240 more.
- November 2003 Istanbul bombings, using four truck bombs on 15 and 20 November, killing 57 people and wounding 700.
- February 2004 SuperFerry-14 bombing in the Philippines, killing 116.

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- March 2004 Madrid train bombings.
- May 2004 Khobar massacre.
- 7 July 2005 London transport bombings, killing 56 people and wounding 700.
- July 2005 Sharm el-Sheikh attacks in Egypt.
- November 2005 Amman hotel bombing, killing 60.
- April 2007 Algiers bombings killing 33.
- February 2008 Kandahar bombing.
- June 2008 Danish-embassy bombing in Pakistan, killing six.
- June 2009 Little Rock recruiting office shooting.
- December 2009 Northwest Airlines Flight 253 attack.
- December 2009 Khost suicide bomb attack killing 7 CIA officers.
- October 2010 cargo plane bomb plot.

The ability of al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and its sympathizers to carry out such a range of attacks despite the fierce global onslaught launched against it after 9/11 and sustained for 10 years testifies to its adaptability.

One of its first post-9/11 strategies was to increase its use of the media to compensate for the loss of its training-camp infrastructure. AQ number two (now the duly appointed successor to bin Laden) Ayman al-Zawahiri said that half the battle against the "Crusader-Zionist foe" would take place in the media. Its media releases increased from about 10 a year in 2002 to around a 100 in 2007. It used these methods, for example, to make propaganda capital out of the US invasion of Iraq.

Al Qaeda has managed to build a geographically distributed and resilient communications architecture through use of the internet, and more recently it has been successful in using social media as a recruiting tool. The Taliban has a Twitter account and Al-Qaeda has support groups on Facebook. Islamist ideologues such as Anwar al-Awlaki and Abdullah al-Faisal, both of Western birth, have become key players in the jihad movement through their online activities. Through a deft combination of Islamic teachings, modern pop culture references, and age-old marketing techniques they have established a system to both recruit and radicalise people across the globe without needing them to travel abroad for indoctrination and training – monitoring travellers to particular countries has been one of the key ways intelligence groups have identified potential extremists in the past. As well as reducing the chances of capture, social media has also dramatically shrunk the cost of recruitment.

One of the most important elements of online recruitment campaigns is the distribution of digital copies of speeches and sermons given by al-Qaeda militants, including translated versions of speeches given by members of the core. In order to draw people towards these resources, mouthpieces have been developed on more widespread social media websites, such as Twitter and Facebook, which can act as a doorway into more serious chat rooms and web forums.

*Al-Qaeda now operates as
a multi-polar operation...*

Specific examples of internet-facilitated radicalisation include the Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan, who was radicalised through his online contact with Anwar al-Awlaki. Identifiable online influences also contributed to the radicalisation of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Christmas Day bomber. What is striking about these examples is that both the people who have been radicalised and those doing the radicalising have their roots in the West. It is to be expected that as people in the West become radicalised, or are 'home-grown', they will look to use the tools available to them, and that they are familiar with, to spread their message and further their cause. Social media has allowed al-Qaeda to target a new market that they may have previously found difficult to tap.

Another example of al-Qaeda's adaptability is the way it had tried with reasonable success to "aggregate" the world's disparate Islamic conflicts, thus providing a range of different options for would-be jihadists to participate in the global jihad. This has also led to a change in its structure, partnering with geographically dispersed groups. Rather than a group with cells spread around the world, al-Qaeda now operates as a multi-polar organization, albeit with a reference point back to the core al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan.

Terrorist organizations with links to al-Qaeda include:

- Egyptian Islamic Jihad
- The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group
- Islamic Army of Aden
- Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (Iraq)
- Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad (Kashmir)
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)
- Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
- Armed Islamic Group (Algeria)
- Abu Sayyaf Group (Malaysia, Philippines)
- Jemaah Islamiya (Southeast Asia)
- Boko Haram (Nigeria)

Perspectives on Terrorism notes: "The most consequential implication of al-Qaeda's structural transition into a multi-polar entity lies in the resulting locations, targets, and tactics of terrorist violence. Thus, the most likely theatres for current and future attacks against local and Western targets are those in proximity to the main territorial hubs of al-Qaeda Core and its affiliates, such as Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and their neighbours."

A good example of al-Qaeda's expansion by merger is the joining with the Algerian-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) to form Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). However, there can be difficulties with this strategy, as seen when al-Qaeda in Iraq under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi 'went rogue'.

Al-Qaeda's motivations

However important the death of bin Laden might be, he was only significant because he was able to tap into pre-existing deep-rooted resentments. He may have articulated them in a way not done before or so effectively, but he did not invent them.

Some of these resentments may have been dissipated by the Arab Spring (see below), and others have been mitigated in other ways (such as the substantial US military pullout from Saudi Arabia in 2003) but core ones remain, and there is no reason to suppose that they cannot be exploited equally effectively by bin Laden's successors.

Al-Qaeda grew out of the Services Office, a clearinghouse for the international Muslim brigade opposed to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which was run by bin Laden. The Afghan conflict attracted holy warriors from more than 50 countries, and bin Laden quickly saw that he could exploit this success to create an organization to continue the jihad beyond Afghanistan. He founded al-Qaeda in about 1988.

The key documents are bin Laden's founding statement in February 1998 forming the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders and his August 1996 Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places.

The February 1998 statement portrayed the world's Muslims as being in a grave situation necessitating immediate action. The three most compelling issues, it stated, were the occupation of the lands of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula by the US; the devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people by "the Crusader-Jewish alliance"; and the Jews' "petty state" with their occupation Jerusalem and their killing of Muslims there.

The August 1996 declaration of war against the US majored on the US presence in Saudi Arabia ('the country of the Two Holy Places') and on Israel's occupation of Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, but it also mentioned other areas of Islamic struggle. In one paragraph it said:

"It should not be hidden from you that the people of Islam had suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist Crusaders alliance and their collaborators to the extent that the Muslims blood became the cheapest and their wealth was spilled in Palestine and Iraq. The horrifying pictures of the massacre of Qana, in Lebanon, are still fresh in our memory. Massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, the Philippines, Fatani, Ogaden, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya and in Bosnia-Herzegovina took place, massacres that send shivers in the body and shake the conscience..."

It then prioritizes the mission for jihadists, saying: "Utmost effort should be made to prepare and instigate the Ummah against the enemy, the American Israeli alliance occupying the country of the Two Holy Places and the route of the Apostle...to the Furthest Mosque (Al Aqsa Mosque)..."

It could be argued that the US military withdrawal from Saudi Arabia in 2003 should have undermined al-Qaeda's appeal, but it did not for two main reasons.

The core resentments remain to be exploited by bin Laden's successor...

*A resurgence of the
Taleban means more
space for al-Qaeda...*

Firstly, the Saudi regime remains a close US ally in the region, and secondly because the US is still deeply engaged in the area, with some military presence still in the country and with its 5th Fleet based in neighbouring Bahrain where it has been protected by the recent Saudi Arabian military intervention to help suppress the Shia opposition.

And, of course, the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem persists, thanks in part to the enormous aid and diplomatic support that Israel receives from the United States. Further afield, injustices against Muslims are felt to persist around the world, including in Kashmir, the Philippines, and Chechnya.

Then there is the growing struggle for power between Sunnis and Shia in Iraq following the US withdrawal in December 2011. There is already evidence that Sunni-based al-Qaeda is playing an increasing role in this struggle, and exploiting it to its own ends.

A similar battle for power in Afghanistan is also still raging; and the death of Osama bin Laden makes a victory for the pro-Al-Qaeda Taleban in Afghanistan more not less likely. The domestic/financial pressure on the US to declare victory and leave is overwhelming, and the prime beneficiary will be the Taleban, which began a new spring offensive on the day that Bin Laden was killed. Already the Russians have decided that a negotiated settlement with the Taleban is essential, and that view will grow in strength. Immediately after the death of Bin Laden was announced, Afghanistan's President Hamed Karzai called on the US to stop the war on terrorism on Afghan soil. He said: "I call on Nato that war on terror should not be carried out in Afghan villages and houses. They should stop this. In yesterday's incident they found Osama in Abbottabad. Osama was not found in...[Afghanistan]. They found him in Abbottabad, Pakistan..."

A resurgence of the Taleban means more space for al-Qaeda.

The effects of the Arab Spring

It is widely assumed that the Arab Spring has fatally undermined the attraction of al-Qaeda and its philosophy. Democracy is seen in the West as the antidote to bin-Ladenism. But the fall of the secular Arab dictatorships (which bin Laden also desired) could lead to three broad categories of outcome, none of which is necessarily fatal to al-Qaeda.

The first is that genuine democracy is installed in Egypt and elsewhere, and there are two points to consider here. One is that economic advancement does not come particularly quickly and disillusion sets in. The challenge is immense. Egypt is a poor country with GDP per capita of \$6,367.43. Most significantly, it is estimated that 40 million Egyptians or 51% of the population lives below the poverty line of \$2 a day. The official unemployment rate is 9.2%, but the real figure could be 2-3 times that.

Yet opinion polls suggest that the Arab Spring has greatly increased economic expectations, with 74% saying economic advancement is the top priority. Nasserite Arab nationalism failed to deliver, and pro-Western secular authoritarianism failed to deliver. If democracy also fails, then non-democratic alternatives will once again come into play.

Bin Laden lived just long enough to see the beginnings of a decisive strategic shift against Israel...

The second point about democracy in Egypt is that it will take Egypt in a less pro-Western direction than under Mubarak. This can already be seen with the rapprochement with Hamas, the opening of the Rafah crossing with the Gaza Strip, and the moves towards re-establishing diplomatic relations with Iran. Full democracy would produce more of the same. Nearly 60% of Egyptians are from conservative rural backgrounds, and Islamist parties gained 65% of the vote in the first round of the general election in December 2011.

A post-Mubarak poll found only 20% have a favourable opinion of the US (down from 27% in 2009), while 68% oppose the US efforts to counter global terrorism. Some 62% of Egyptians support laws based strictly on the Koran with another 27% supporting laws based broadly on the Koran. Most significantly from the point of view of this report, more than one-in-five Egyptians (21%) have a favourable view of al-Qaeda, which is a high percentage for a mass-murdering terrorism organization (in Turkey, al-Qaeda elicits just 4% support, which is much closer to the level one would expect or hope for).

The second post-revolution scenario is that the old guard holds on to power. In this case, al-Qaeda's position is hardly weakened and could be strengthened if the view is that the old guard survived with Western support, which is likely to be the perception in Saudi Arabia and the other oil-rich Gulf States. The third scenario is that the Arab Spring is followed by a lengthy period of chaos, as seems likely in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. In this case, there will be more space for al-Qaeda to exist and recruit, as it already does effectively in Yemen.

The final point about the Arab Spring and al-Qaeda concerns Israel. Bin Laden's ultimate goal was the destruction of Israel, and he lived just long enough to see the possible beginnings of a decisive strategic shift against Israel. Almost as night follows day, every crisis in the Middle East is followed by Western calls for Israel to reach a swift compromise settlement with the Palestinians in order to reduce regional tension. The Arab Spring has been no different. But our sources say that Israel's top policymakers are taking exactly the opposite lesson from the Arab Spring and will not contemplate a territorial retreat until there is far more certainty about its strategic environment.

Israel has been unchallengeable since 1973, but it is now possible to envisage a strategic environment developing in which Egypt moves decisively away from Camp David; Iran survives the Arab Spring with its nuclear programme intact and with enhanced influence in the Gulf States; Turkey continues its drift away from the West and towards pro-Islamic activism; the Arab Spring pushes Jordan in a more Islamist and anti-Israel direction; and Syria (either under a surviving pro-Iranian Alawite regime or a successor Sunni regime) remains hostile to Israel. Further afield, a re-Talebanized Afghanistan could provide refuge for post-bin Laden al-Qaeda, with long-term instability in Libya and Yemen providing additional refuge and opportunities for recruitment.

These are not the circumstances in which Israel is likely to compromise with the Palestinians – and that could suit post-bin Laden al-Qaeda just fine. The struggle for Jerusalem has always been al-Qaeda's strongest rallying cry. The potency of this call may be diminished if post-revolution Arab states, particularly Egypt, take up the anti-Israel struggle with genuine vigour – but that is hardly a comforting thought for those with an interest in stability.

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