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*An analysis of international security issues compiled by security professionals for business leaders and those who advise them*

The shadow of Al Qaeda still hangs over the world despite significant successes with the War on Terror. Attacks in Riyadh and Jakarta clearly point to Al Qaeda's ability to adapt and restructure following the loss of key personnel. This issue explores the metamorphosis of the organisation and what we can expect in the future.

After the 9/11 attacks, the unprecedented scope of international co-operation placed Al Qaeda's leadership, finances and operational capabilities under intense pressure and denied the group freedom of movement in Afghanistan. A series of high profile arrests, the death of senior personnel, and the group's conspicuous failure to pull off a 'spectacular' in response to the US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom, drew Cofer Black, head of the US State Department's counter-terrorism office to pronounce, at the beginning of May 2003, *"It's no coincidence ... this was the big game for them. You put up or shut up and they have failed. It proves that the global war on terrorism has been effective, focused and has got these guys on the run"*.

Days later, on 8<sup>th</sup> May, in a statement to the UK-based Arabic magazine *Al-Majalla*, an Al Qaeda spokesman, Thabet bin Qais, delivered a challenging response. He claimed that the Al Qaeda network had been restructured and its leadership replaced by a new generation *"who have a very good security cover. The Americans only have predictions and old intelligence left. It will take them a long time to understand the new form of Al Qaeda"*.

### **Terrorism by proxy?**

The timing of bin Qais' warning was deliberate, heralding a trademark 'rolling wave' of co-ordinated, simultaneous attacks that demonstrated Al Qaeda's continued survival, albeit in a 'new form', as sponsor, inspiration and protagonist amidst a family of associated Islamist movements:

- May 12 2003. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Three compounds in the capital are simultaneously targeted with vehicle born explosives, while gunmen shoot at security guards and the wounded, resulting in 34 deaths (including the 9 suicide bombers) and 194 injured. Al-Muwahhidun (*Those who profess the oneness of God*), a front for Al Qaeda's Saudi branch, claims responsibility for the multiple attacks.
- May 12 & May 14 2003. Chechnya. Al Ansar Mujahidin, a group with links to Al Qaeda, mounts suicide bombings in Znamenskoye, killing 59 and injuring 200, and Iliskhan-Yurt, where two female 'martyrs' blow themselves up, killing 18 and injuring 100.
- May 15, Southern Karachi, Pakistan. The Muslim United Army (MUA), believed to be a front for Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, an Al Qaeda associated group in Pakistan, simultaneously bombs 19 Shell and 2 Caltex gasoline stations between 4 and 5am.
- May 16, Casablanca, Morocco. 12 suicide bombers orchestrate 5 simultaneous suicide bombings at a Jewish cemetery, Jewish-owned Italian restaurant, Jewish community

centre, a Spanish cultural centre and at Hotel Safir, an establishment popular with visiting Israelis. Suspicion centres on two groups: Assirat al-Moustaquim (*The Straight Path*) and Salifiya Jihadiya, an extremist group linked to plans to attack Western shipping in the straits of Gibraltar in 2002.

It is believed that the Iraqi Islamist group Ansar al-Islami, affiliated with Al Qaeda and located on the Iran/Iraq border, provided security to the cell who co-ordinated the Riyadh operation and sent its experts to assist the Casablanca bombers. These attacks occurred against a tense background of heightened threat and apparently thwarted plots. Days later, in Lebanon, a joint Syrian/Lebanese operation snared militants accused of plotting an attack on the US Embassy. As the week proceeded, the British government issued threat alerts for Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda. The United States warned of a growing threat in South East Asia, singling out Malaysia.

In all, this most recent wave of attacks involved Al Qaeda, operating in tandem with the four other groups listed above, 30 explosions and 24 suicide bombers. Four different countries between the Indian sub-Continent and North Africa were struck in the space of four days. To synchronise multiple attacks demands central direction, international communication, lengthy preparation and a willingness to work together towards a common goal.

Such a demonstration of capability undermines optimistic review of the coalition's achievements since the global War on Terror began. Concluding that Al Qaeda is 'on the run' may be justifiable if the organisation, being 'an unprecedented transnational phenomenon', is overly narrowly defined; it is likely that those of the pre-9/11 'core leadership' who remain alive and at large are now seriously compromised but it could be fatally complacent to disregard the reality - what spokesman Thabet bin Qais describes as Al Qaeda's 'new form' appears to be an international network of Islamist movements, operating alongside Al Qaeda's own surviving members, that is dedicated to a 'universal jihad' for which it enjoyed the luxury of years to prepare and a 'failed state' in which to do so.

The setbacks suffered by the group in the War on Terror have been well publicized. More than 3200 'foot soldiers/cell members' have been detained in over 102 countries, 55 leaders and planners killed or captured, several plots thwarted and severe financial disruption caused. The head of Al Qaeda's military wing, Mohamed Atef, was killed in Afghanistan and Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of the 9/11 operation is in custody, along with the group's 'financier' Mustafa Ahmed al-Hawsawi and other key operatives, Abu Zubaydah and Ramzi bin al'Shibh (amongst several others). Most recently, on 14<sup>th</sup> August, Riduan Isumuddin aka Hambali, the only non-Arab to sit on Al Qaeda's leadership committee was arrested in Thailand. He was believed to be 'operations chief' for Al Qaeda's 'south-east Asian arm', Jemaah Islamiyah.

US Terrorist Financing Operations Section has investigated '3,195 individuals and groups' suspected of financing terrorist organisations, while approximately \$125 million in assets and 600 accounts have been frozen around the world. Most significantly, Al Qaeda has also been denied its sanctuary and extensive training facilities in Afghanistan – a blow which has had such profound repercussions in forcing the group to co-opt allied Islamist movements and adapt to a fluid, decentralized structure.

Charting such successes in the War on Terror throws up impressive numbers - the millions seized, the thousands captured and the senior figures killed should justify an optimistic assessment of the achievements of the global anti-terror coalition. An alternative viewpoint, factoring in basic probabilities, could speculate that such a review merely profiles the visible tip of the iceberg, rather than gauging the true depths of Al Qaeda's human and financial resources that remain beyond scrutiny.

A more pessimistic assessment of the threat posed by Al Qaeda, in its 'new/post-Afghan' form, can be justified if the following arguments are considered. Firstly, as is becoming

apparent, the loss of sanctuary and facilities in Afghanistan did not prove a fatal blow, for the group had prepared well for a global operational future without a base. Al Qaeda took full advantage of the operational autonomy that they were able to purchase within the Taleban's Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: though exact numbers will never be known, it is estimated that Al Qaeda, pre-9/11, had dispatched across the globe, from its Afghan stable, 2,000 to 5,000 people who received specialized terrorist training and a possible 20,000 to 30,000 more, capable of training and advising a younger generation of militants. (A high-level inquiry into the 9/11 attacks, published in July, that draws on testimony provided by US intelligence officials goes as far as saying that between 70,000 and 120,000 terrorists received training in Afghanistan and raised questions about the nature of links between 9/11 and the Saudi regime).

Further, as part of a sophisticated training process, before being sent back to their homelands, recruits were given detailed instruction in how to function abroad within an autonomous cell structure. Such cells, like that of Mohammed Atta and his team in Hamburg, are able to plan and launch operations without central direction or leadership. During training, Al Qaeda placed particular emphasis on religious indoctrination and a specific focus on 'achieving martyrdom'; the increased number of suicide attacks worldwide during recent years is perhaps evidence of the ideological espousal and physical exportation of both martyrs and martyrdom, by Al Qaeda, from its Afghan base.

Jihadis from an estimated 40 Islamist groups across the Middle East, Africa and Caucasus received training in Al Qaeda's Afghan facilities and were encouraged to expand their Jihad beyond their regional horizons. To facilitate this, such groups were also taught how to establish training camps on their own territories. Though US-led action in Afghanistan destroyed Al Qaeda's haven and impacted on its leadership, it had little effect on neither Al Qaeda's already established global network nor on the various associate groups that now constitute Osama bin Laden's counter-coalition, or the group's 'new form'.

Secondly, Al Qaeda's financial network has been described as the 'most complex, robust and resilient money-generating and money-moving system yet seen'. If this is the case, it is difficult to estimate the impact that the seizure and freezing of financial assets and accounts may have had on the group. While Al Qaeda's 'above board' banking system has been hit hard this achievement is undermined by various factors. The network systematically infiltrated scores of Islamic charities / NGO's and other bodies while a variety of lucrative techniques were employed to raise revenue; Al Qaeda's 'Algerian family' in Europe specialized in credit card fraud, for example.

More significantly, much of Al Qaeda's revenue flows through the Hawala banking system, wherein money can change hands undetected. In any case, substantial sums are not a prerequisite for mounting operations – evidence suggests that the 9/11 'spectacular' involved a relatively small expenditure of under \$500,000.

Thirdly, the death or capture of senior figures within the Al Qaeda hierarchy is not necessarily calamitous for the movement. Although detainees can provide invaluable information to their captors, they, and their dead associates, are replaceable figures; within Al Qaeda itself there is evidence of a new generation of members assuming the responsibilities of compromised predecessors. Thabet bin Qais himself may be an example, as he makes his own the spokesman role formerly occupied by Suleiman Abu Ghaith (rumoured to be either in captivity or fugitive in Iran), while a Saif el Adel is understood to be Al Qaeda's new military commander, following Khaled Sheikh Mohammed's capture and Mohammed Atef's death.

In a wider context, and of real long term significance, Operation Iraqi Freedom may prove counterproductive in the campaign against Al Qaeda. War in Iraq has helped to radicalize and politicize a new 'third generation' of Islamists around the world, heightening the appeal of Al Qaeda's ideology, thus facilitating recruitment and unlocking financial assistance that might not have materialized otherwise. A United Nations spokesman recently explained: "The third

generation refers to people basically who never went to Afghanistan; they were never part of that element of Al Qaeda... The newness of what we are saying is the fact that we are seeing people who want to act and carry out attacks and work within the ideology". To justify his point and demonstrate that the international community had already witnessed this 'third generation' in action the UN spokesman drew attention to reports that none of the suspected Casablanca bombers had been 'anywhere near Afghanistan'.

## **The Future**

Because of the losses suffered by the 'original' Al Qaeda hierarchy, in terms of personnel and infrastructure, the group has had to undergo an enforced metamorphosis. Its emerging shape is not rigid and never will be, as flexibility, or an ability to remain amorphous, is vital in order to evade detection. Thus, though Al Qaeda's spokesmen would have us think otherwise, the group has not assumed its 'new form' through choice. However, because of the assets that the 'new' Al Qaeda has inherited from its pre-9/11 manifestation, namely experience, trained personnel, extreme ideology and an informal financial infrastructure, the current '3G' manifestation will pose a comparable threat across the Muslim world.

With its operational capabilities so challenged elsewhere, Al Qaeda will be compelled to focus on its short term aim of driving US forces and Western interests out of the Middle East whilst challenging the Arab world's various 'apostate' regimes that have allied themselves with the West. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, a day before the attacks began, an Al Qaeda member, Abu Mohammed Ablaj emailed the same Al-Majalla magazine and stated that "to target and execute operations in the Gulf countries and allies of the United States" is now a strategic priority.

In the following days, Morocco and Saudi Arabia suffered what might be termed their own 9/11. Since then, over 100 arrests have been made in Saudi Arabia, though figures vary, as do assessments of how willing and able Saudi security forces are to enforce a crackdown. On the 17<sup>th</sup> July, Morocco's Justice Minister announced that about 700 suspects will go on trials: "Some are directly linked to the attacks...others belonged to groups which have been preparing acts of violence in the country". Retaliation is likely to be provoked by the August 19<sup>th</sup> announcement that four suspects involved in the Casablanca face a death sentence.

The Saudi crackdown is more likely to snare experienced Al Qaeda operatives and should therefore impact significantly on the group's ability to operate in the Middle East (in the short term at least). If Saudi Arabia was Osama bin Laden's main recruiting ground, then 'Al Qaeda Central' is living through a defining moment. Further, by underestimating the revulsion the attacks would cause, Al Qaeda may have committed a strategic error that will deprive them of previously widely held sympathy amongst the Saudi population.

In the long term Al Qaeda will seek to take the Jihad out of the 'domestic' theatres in the Muslim lands by redeveloping an ability to strike its primary targets in the United States, Western Europe and Australasia. While this may be beyond its grasp for the moment, its desire to do so can never have been greater.

Because of sustained harassment, Al Qaeda has to evolve to survive. Groups in transition are vulnerable to disruption but their shifting nature complicates the process of intelligence gathering. Networks of loosely-organized terror groups have no single, integrated command structure to penetrate. Whilst leadership can be eliminated, those organizations do not necessarily cease functioning. Further, as a 'new generation' comes to the fore unknown characters and personalities will make it harder to detect activity and predict behaviour.

Unable to focus organizational energy on 'spectacular' attacks, terrorists will seek to achieve what they can. In the immediate future, outside the Middle East theatre where Al Qaeda may still have the type of capability that the May attacks demonstrated, terrorism committed in the group's name is likely to come in a form reflecting a slightly diminished operational capacity (like individual suicide bombers, car bombings or assassinations). However,

worryingly, the unknown 'third generation' has seen its predecessors 'achieve martyrdom' with a level of violence that they will seek to emulate and surpass, perhaps ushering in an age of 'mass-casualty' terrorism.

After 'the gloves came off' on 9/11, in an attack that may have initiated an increasingly violent trend for Islamist terrorists (and perhaps their non-Islamist counterparts too), Al Qaeda's wish to obtain and use chemical, biological or radiological weaponry is a clear and present danger. Osama bin Laden himself sanctioned the use of biological or chemical weapons when he issued a veiled instruction "to think intelligently and kill the Americans secretly". It is more disturbing that a prominent Saudi cleric should legitimize their use. In a fatwa entitled "The Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction Against Infidels" the Saudi preacher cleric Nasir Bin Hamd Al-Fahd explained "The arguments for the permissibility are many...If a bomb that killed ten million of them and burned as much of their land as they have burned Muslims' land were dropped on them, it would be permissible".

In the meantime, continued pressure will oblige Al Qaeda to refine their current capabilities and tactics. The employment of armed suicide bombers to storm more fortified targets, as was the case in Riyadh, demonstrates Al Qaeda's compulsion to innovate and adapt in response to 'target – hardening' post 9/11. If an interview with a female claiming to be a representative of Al Qaeda's 'Women's Wing' is to be believed, then another innovation may force security agencies to reassess counter terrorist measures built around the notion that Islamist terrorists are normally male. She said Al Qaeda was putting into place an 'infrastructure' of female suicide bombers that would make the 'US forget its own name'.

Though the successes of the War on Terror drive a wedge between the boastful rhetoric of its spokesmen and the actual capabilities of Al Qaeda's 'new form' the anti-terror campaign must be a sustained and truly international effort. Announcing that the group are 'on the run' creates a dangerous sense of complacency and could result in a relaxation of security measures that a terrorist network would be keen to exploit. It also bolsters an overly narrow perception of Al Qaeda's 'new form'- potentially disastrous if an understanding of a particular threat can provide the key to countering it.

### **Threat Profile**

Looking at the August 10<sup>th</sup> attack on the Hotel Marriott in Jakarta can provide a profile of the threat posed by the international network. Apparently executed by the affiliated group Jemaah Islamiyah, the attack is perhaps representative of the intention and capabilities of Al Qaeda's 'new form'. The following observations may assist the development of preventative counter-measures:

- The Marriott attack, like those in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Chechnya and Morocco in May, took place in a Muslim state. Al Qaeda will find it easier to seek to strike in these areas where its operatives / affiliated groups are indigenous, a quality that facilitates recruitment, planning and execution of attacks. Countries considered part of the 'Muslim World' are more likely to suffer a higher frequency of attacks than, for example, Paris or New York.
- Because of enhanced security in the West and target hardening around governmental, military and diplomatic installations across the world, attacks on 'softer targets' are more likely. Recent attacks on a nightclub (Bali), hotel (Jakarta or Mombasa), Spanish Cultural centre (Casablanca) or compound (Riyadh) demonstrate the range of areas in which Al Qaeda's preferred victims are at risk, be they tourists, expatriate residents, or foreign staff associated with Western business interests.
- Other than the petrol station bombings in Pakistan, all of these attacks were 'martyrdom operations'. While individual suicide bombers are hard to defend against, the recent tactical innovation of teams of suicide bombers (Casablanca) sometimes storming more

fortified targets (as in Riyadh) may necessitate further re-assessment and hardening of protective security measures around potential targets.

The regional campaign against Jemaah Islamiyah may reflect the broader successes and shortfalls of the global War on Terror. While the group, like Al Qaeda, has suffered losses to key personnel and had its operations challenged and thwarted, in the crackdown following the Bali attacks, sufficient capability has endured to allow Jemaah Islamiyah a significant strike against Western interests in Jakarta. Indonesian authorities suspect that the masterminds of the Bali and Jakarta attacks are still at large.

**Further information:** Janusian Security Risk Management is the specialist political risk and security subsidiary of The Risk Advisory Group Ltd. For further information please visit [www.janusian.com](http://www.janusian.com).