

Monthly Global Security Briefing – March 2013

AL-QAIDA AND THE WIDER JIHADIST PHENOMENON

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Four months ago, the Oxford Research Group briefing analysed the status of the al-Qaida movement (*Al-Qaida - The Potency of an Idea*, November 2012). It argued that the assumption that the movement was in retreat should be treated with caution and that while al-Qaida was no longer a closely structured and integrated organisation, the idea was very much alive and had a potency that was not being fully recognised. Developments in the past four months support this view and make it advisable to update the analysis. Given the trend towards socio-economic marginalisation, it would be wise to assume that radical and violent social movements still have significant traction.

The al-Qaida Context

The movement originally developed in the late 1980s among committed jihadists who had gone to the aid of the Mujahidin in Afghanistan in their civil war against the Soviet occupiers. The expulsion of the Soviets and the subsequent collapse of the USSR were seen by some of the leadership as proof that a profoundly religious conviction was powerful enough to defeat a superpower. Al-Qaida then evolved into a transnational vision that superseded the more nationalist outlook of the Mujahidin and, by the late 1990s, was a transnational movement with some focus on bin Laden, Zawahiri and a small core centred once more in Afghanistan.

It had become an unusual eschatologically-orientated revolutionary movement opposing the many unacceptable Middle Eastern regimes of the “near enemy”, as well as Zionism and its backer - the “far enemy” of the United States. Support was also offered to other Islamist movements, whether in Chechnya, Kashmir, the Southern Philippines or Indonesia, but the key underlying factors were a puritanical religious underpinning and a timescale measured in many decades, if not a century, since it was rooted in an outlook that went beyond this life. This is crucial in understanding the potency of the idea and makes al-Qaida a very unusual transnational revolutionary movement.

Following 9/11, a vigorous and initially successful “war on terror” deteriorated into two hugely costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the latter extending into Pakistan. Both could be seen by al-Qaida supporters as proof that Islam was under attack. Over the period 2001-6, al-Qaida affiliates were active in staging attacks in many countries including Indonesia, Egypt, Jordan, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Tunisia, Turkey, Morocco, Spain and the UK, as well as sustained violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. By the end of the decade, though, a combination of much-strengthened security measures in western states and intensive drone and Special Forces attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan had done much to degrade the al-Qaida movement. By 2010, there was a developing consensus among counter-terrorism analysts that al-Qaida was rapidly diminishing as a transnational threat.

Al-Qaida Now

This idea of a diminished movement has been undermined by recent developments in a number of countries. These were discussed in the November briefing and may be summarised and updated as follows:

Nigeria: Boko Haram continues to constitute a major threat to the Nigerian state, and the government responds primarily with the use of force. While Boko Haram is primarily focused on the state, its offshoot, Ansaru, has a much broader transnational outlook, which is closer to the al-Qaida vision. Its recent kidnapping and killing of foreign workers has suddenly focused attention on what may be a trend towards making the whole of the Boko Haram movement more transnational.

Mali: As was argued in the January special briefing, the intervention in Mali is leading to a new western/jihadist confrontation. There was some expectation that the French intervention would lead to a period of quiet during the hot season, with the confrontation developing later in the year, but in scarcely reported developments, French and Chadian forces have faced unexpected resistance from jihadist paramilitaries. Chadian troops lost 24 killed and around 50 wounded on a single day (22 February). Paramilitaries even infiltrated the town of Gao, there was a suicide bomb attack in Kidal and a number of harassing attacks that contrast strongly with an expectation of jihadist paramilitaries restricted to a few remote mountainous areas. France still plans to withdraw most of its forces during April, but there are serious doubts that units from several West African countries, now slowly arriving in Mali, will prove to have the capacity to enhance security.

Yemen and East Africa: Drone and Special Forces operations continue in Yemen, but al-Qaida affiliates still control territory. There has been some African Union success in expelling Islamists from Mogadishu, and Kenyan troops control the southern border, but many parts of rural Somalia are untouched and remain in Islamist control. Meanwhile, the "Swahili coast" of Kenya and Northern Tanzania retains a potential for violence as Islamist elements capitalise on a perception of marginalisation.

Syria and Iraq: In the context of Jihadist evolution, Syria and Iraq should now be taken together. In Syria the importance of the Jihadist paramilitary groups continues to grow. They tend to be more determined, more coordinated and more competent in urban insurgency, with a significant minority having previous combat experience, often against US forces in Iraq. There are many examples of more secular paramilitary rebel groups working very closely with Jihadists and even being led by them. Because of support from Iran, the Assad regime may last some time yet, possibly through this year. This gives even more time for Jihadist elements within the rebellion to consolidate their influence so that if the regime does fall, they will have considerable power. There have recently been renewed calls for the arming of rebel groups, but this may well increase the levels of violence, especially as Iran is likely to be further emboldened to support the Assad regime.

In Iraq, two related elements are important. One is that there have been numerous mass protests by Sunnis against the Shi'a-dominated Maliki government. These have been near-daily occurrences, especially in Anbar Province and have been hardly covered in the western media. In parallel with this has been an upsurge in violent paramilitary actions against the government by Jihadists embracing the al-Qaida vision. A series of bombings and shootings across Baghdad and several other cities on 17 March were the worst for more than six months. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) is a coalition of many of these groups, which have collectively targeted government officials, police and security forces and, on occasions, Shi'a communities. The ISI regards Sunni politicians as having sold out to the Maliki regime. Significantly, some of the members within the coalition have very close links with the Syrian Islamist rebels, so that there

is a seamless trans-border connection. The Syria-Iraq connection is probably the strongest current expression of the al-Qaida vision and has potential for further development.

In addition to these major foci, the Caucasus region of southern Russia continues to experience the impact of the Caucasus Emirate insurgency and causes particular concern for the organisers on the forthcoming 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Islamist elements are active in many other countries, including Algeria, Niger, Mauretania and Sinai and there are regular arrests and trials of Islamists in some western countries, most notably France and the UK.

Overview – Motivations and Potential

Four aspects of the current evolution of Islamist paramilitaries are worth a brief assessment.

1. Distinctions may be made between orientations that are primarily nationalistic and state-centred, and those with a transnational orientation. The former include groups in Afghanistan, Somalia and Mali and Boko Haram in Nigeria, and the latter include Ansaru in Nigeria and elements in Yemen, Syria and Iraq. While Al-Qaida in Pakistan may be very limited in its capabilities, and there have been suggestions that the various offshoots and franchises are purely nationalistic, this is by no means always the case – transnational elements continue and may even be intensifying.
2. The new social media were hugely important in propagandising the al-Qaida mission in the early 2000s, and still remain important. Would-be supporters across the world have continuing and ready access to information from all the zones of conflict listed above. What is crucial here is that the idea of a global struggle has become embedded over the past decade and can be visualised even with reference to individual conflicts that are primarily state-centred. Thus suppression of Boko Haram may be an internal Nigerian matter but can be seen world-wide as one more example of the suppression of Islam.
3. The weight of opinion among counter-terror analysts is that there is little in the way of a causal link between poverty and Jihadist radicalisation. Recent analysis tends to challenge this (e.g. the report from the Norwegian group NOREF on [Poverty and Radicalisation](#), January 2013) and there is a strong case that while abject poverty may not inevitably be a factor, relative deprivation and marginalisation most certainly can be.
4. World-wide patterns of economic growth over the past four decades have produced substantial increases in GDP, but also a concentration of wealth in a minority of the population across the global south, but there is now a majority population benefiting from educational improvements and therefore knowledgeable of its own relative marginalisation. “Revolts from the margins” is a term now being used to characterise this dynamic and two of several expositions of this phenomenon are particularly significant. One is that elements of radical Islam benefit from this resentment and anger, and the other is the neo-Maoist movements, as witnessed in Nepal, and to an extent in the Philippines, but even more notably in the Naxalite rebellion in India. One has an eschatological dimension and the other does not. Which of these will be seen as the more significant in the long-term is not yet clear, but both should be seen, at least in part, as representing “revolts from the margins” with considerable potential for further development.

Conclusion

While al-Qaida as a movement may be diminished, as an idea, it retains considerable potency. Its enduring strength lies partly as a means of responding to marginalisation, but other responses, including neo-Maoist orientations are also relevant. The concept of “revolts from the margins” merits far more attention than it currently receives. While this does not mean that conventional counter-terror policies and tactics are irrelevant, it does suggest that they should be seen as more of a treatment of symptoms than of underlying causes. Unless those are addressed, especially the trend towards socio-economic marginalisation, it would be wise to assume that radical and violent social movements, of which al-Qaida and neo-Maoism are examples, will remain significant threats to national and international security.

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