

THE GLOBAL TERRORIST THREAT: IS AL-QAEDA ON THE RUN OR ON THE MARCH?

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Five-and-a-half years ago, 19 terrorists hijacked four airplanes and changed the course of history. Just as we underestimated al-Qaeda then, we risk repeating the same mistake now. Al-Qaeda today is frequently spoken of as if it is in retreat: a broken and beaten organization, its leadership living in caves, cut off somewhere in remotest Waziristan incapable of mounting further attacks on its own and instead having devolved operational authority either to its various affiliates and associates or to entirely organically-produced, homegrown, terrorist entities. Isolated and demoralized, al-Qaeda is thus imagined to have been reduced to a purely symbolic role, inspiring copycat terrorist groups, perhaps, but lacking any operational capability of its own — a toothless tiger.

“Al-Qaeda,” President Bush declared last October, “is on the run.”¹ But al-Qaeda, in fact, is on the march. It has regrouped and reorganized from the setbacks meted out to it by the United States and our coalition partners and allies during the initial phases of the global war on terrorism (GWOT)² and is marshalling its forces to continue the epic struggle begun more than ten years ago. More than ever, al-Qaeda’s revival reminds us of our continued failure to heed the advice of the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu. “If you know the enemy and know yourself,” he famously advised centuries ago, “you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.” Yet, if there has been one consistent theme in both America’s war on terrorism and our melancholy involvement in Iraq, it is our serial failure to fulfill Sun Tzu’s timeless admonition. The Bush administration’s new strategy to “surge” 21,000 American troops into Iraq is the latest fundamental misreading of our enemy’s mindset and intentions.

AL-QAEDA TODAY: EVOLUTION, ADAPTION AND ADJUSTMENT

Al-Qaeda’s obituary has already been written often since 9/11. “Al-Qaeda’s Top Primed to Collapse, U.S. Says,” trumpeted a *Washington Post* headline two weeks after

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks, was arrested in March 2003. “I believe the tide has turned in terms of al-Qaeda,” Congressman Porter J. Goss, then-chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Intelligence Committee and himself a former CIA case officer who became its director a year later, was quoted as saying. “We’ve got them nailed,” an unidentified intelligence expert stated, continuing more expansively, “we’re close to dismantling them.”³ These upbeat assessments continued the following month with the nearly bloodless capture of Baghdad and the failure of al-Qaeda to make good on threats of renewed attacks in retaliation for the invasion.⁴ Citing administration sources, an article in the *Washington Times* on April 24, 2003, reported the prevailing view in official Washington that al-Qaeda’s “failure to carry out a successful strike during the U.S.-led military campaign to topple Saddam Hussein has raised questions about their ability to carry out major new attacks.”⁵ Despite major terrorist attacks in Jakarta and Istanbul during the latter half of that same year and the escalating insurgency in Iraq, this optimism carried into 2004. “The al-Qaeda of the 9/11 period is under catastrophic stress,” Ambassador Cofer Black, at the time the U.S. State Department’s Counterterrorism Coordinator, declared. “They are being hunted down, their days are numbered.”⁶ Then came the Madrid bombings six weeks later and the deaths of 191 persons. The most accurate assessment, perhaps, was therefore the one offered by al-Qaeda itself. “The Americans,” Thabet bin Qais, a spokesperson for the movement, said in May 2003, “only have predications and old intelligence left. It will take them a long time to understand the new form of al-Qaeda.”⁷ Four years later we are indeed still struggling to understand the changing character and nature of al-Qaeda and the shifting dimensions of the terrorist threat as it has evolved since 9/11.

Al-Qaeda, in fact, is now functioning exactly as its founder and leader, Osama bin Laden, envisioned it. On the one hand, true to the meaning of the Arabic word for the “base of operation”⁸ or “foundation” — meaning the base or foundation from which worldwide Islamic revolution can be waged (or, as other translations have it, the “precept” or “method”)⁹ and thus simultaneously inspiring, motivating and animating, radicalized Muslims to join the movement’s fight. While, on the other hand, continuing to exercise its core operational and command-and-control capabilities and directing the implementing terrorist attacks.

The al-Qaeda of today combines, as it always has, both a “bottom up” approach — encouraging independent thought and action from low- (or lower-) level operatives — and a “top down” one — issuing orders and still coordinating a far-flung terrorist enterprise with both highly synchronized and autonomous moving parts. Mixing and matching organizational and operational styles whether dictated by particular missions or imposed by circumstances, the al-Qaeda movement, accordingly, can perhaps most usefully be conceptualized as comprising four distinct, though not mutually exclusive, dimensions. In descending order of sophistication, they are:

1. Al-Qaeda Central. This category comprises the remnants of the pre-9/11 al-Qaeda organization. Although its core leadership includes some of the familiar established commanders of the past, there are a number of new players who have advanced through the ranks as a result of the death or capture of key al-Qaeda senior-level managers such

as Abu Atef, KSM, Hambali and, more recently, Abu Faraj al-Libi and Abu Hamza Rabia.¹⁰ It is believed that this hardcore remains centered in or around the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders and continues to exert actual coordination, if not some direct command-and-control capability, in terms of commissioning attacks, directing surveillance, collating reconnaissance, planning operations, and approving their execution.

This category comes closest to the al-Qaeda operational template or model evident in the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings and 9/11 attacks. Such high value, “spectacular” attacks are entrusted only to al-Qaeda’s professional cadre: the most dedicated, committed and absolutely reliable element of the movement. Previous patterns suggest that these “professional” terrorists are deployed in predetermined and carefully selected teams. They will also have been provided with very specific targeting instructions. In some cases, such as the East Africa bombings, they may establish contact with, and enlist the assistance of, local sympathizers and supporters. This will be solely for logistical and other attack-support purposes or to enlist these locals to actually execute the attack(s). The operation, however, will be planned and directed by the “professional” element with the locals clearly subordinate and playing strictly a supporting role (albeit a critical one).

2. Al-Qaeda Affiliates and Associates. This category embraces formally established insurgent or terrorist groups that over the years have benefited from Bin Laden’s largesse and/or spiritual guidance and/or have received training, arms, money and other assistance from al-Qaeda. Among the recipients of this assistance have been terrorist groups and insurgent forces in Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Morocco, the Philippines, Bosnia and Kashmir, among other places. By supporting these groups, Bin Laden’s intentions were threefold. First, he sought to co-opt these movements’ mostly local agendas and channel their efforts towards the cause of global jihad. Second, he hoped to create a jihadi “critical mass” from these geographically scattered, disparate movements that would one day coalesce into a single, unstoppable force. And, third, he wanted to foster a dependent relationship whereby as a quid pro quo for prior al-Qaeda support, these movements would either undertake attacks at al-Qaeda’s behest or provide essential local, logistical and other support to facilitate strikes by the al-Qaeda “professional” cadre noted above.

This category includes groups such as al-Ittihad al-Islami (AI), the late Abu Musab Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (formerly Jamaat al Tawhid wal Jihad), Asbat al-Ansar, Ansar al Islam, Islamic Army of Aden, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Jemaah Islamiya (JI), Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC), and the various Kashmiri Islamic groups based in Pakistan — e.g., Harakat ul Mujahidin (HuM), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Laskar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), and Laskar i Jhangvi (LiJ). Both the number and geographical diversity of these entities is proof of al-Qaeda’s continued influence and vitality.

3. Al-Qaeda Locals. These are dispersed cells of al-Qaeda adherents who have or have had some direct connection with al-Qaeda — no matter how tenuous or evanescent. They appear to fall into two subcategories.

One category comprises persons who have had some prior terrorism experience — having been bloodied in battle as part of some previous jihadi campaign in Algeria, the Balkans, Chechnya, and perhaps more recently in Iraq, and may have trained in some al-Qaeda facility, whether in Afghanistan or Yemen or the Sudan before 9/11. Specific examples of this adversary include Ahmed Ressay, who was arrested in December 1999 at Port Angeles, Washington State, shortly after he had entered the United States from Canada. Ressay, for instance, had a prior background in terrorism, having belonged to Algeria’s Armed Islamic Group (GIA). After being recruited to al-Qaeda, he was provided with a modicum of basic terrorist training in Afghanistan. In contrast to the professional cadre detailed above, however, Ressay was given very non-specific, virtually open-ended targeting instructions before being dispatched to North America. Also, unlike the well-funded professional cadre, Ressay was given only \$12,000 in “seed money” and instructed to raise the rest of his operational funds from petty thievery. He was also told by KSM to recruit members for his terrorist cell from among the expatriate Muslim communities in Canada and the United States.¹¹ The al-Qaeda operative, Andrew Rowe, a British national and Muslim convert convicted for his involvement in the 2003 al-Qaeda plot to attack London’s Heathrow Airport, is another example of this category.

The other category, as is described in the detailed discussion of the 7/7 London attacks below, conforms to the profile of the four British Muslims responsible for the 2005 bombings of mass transit targets in London. In contrast to Ressay and Rowe, none of the four London bombers had previously fought in any of the contemporary, iconic Muslim

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conflicts (e.g., Algeria, Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia and Afghanistan) nor is there conclusive evidence of their having received any training in an al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan, Yemen, or the Sudan *prior* to 9/11.¹² Rather, the ringleader of the London cell — Mohammed Siddique Khan — and an accomplice, Shahzad Tanweer, were brought to Pakistan for training and then returned to their homeland with both an attack plan and the knowledge to implement it. They then recruited others locally, as needed, into the cell and undertook a relatively simple, but nonetheless sophisticated and highly consequential, attack.¹³

In both the above categories, however, the terrorists will have some link with al-Qaeda. Their current relationship, and communication, with a central al-Qaeda command-and-control apparatus, may be either active or dormant and similarly their targeting choices may either be specifically directed or else entirely left to the cell to decide. The distinguishing characteristic of this category, however, is that there is some direct connection of some kind with al-Qaeda.

4. Al-Qaeda Network. These are homegrown Islamic radicals — from North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia — as well as local converts to Islam mostly living in Europe, Africa and perhaps Latin America and North America as well, who have no direct connection with al-Qaeda (or any other identifiable terrorist group), but nonetheless are prepared to carry out attacks in solidarity with or support of al-Qaeda’s radical jihadi agenda. Like the “al-Qaeda Locals,” they too are motivated by a shared sense of enmity and grievance felt towards the United States and the West in general and their host-nations in particular. In this specific instance, however, the relationship with al-Qaeda is more inspirational than actual, abetted by profound rage over the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and the oppression of Muslims in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, and elsewhere. Critically, these persons are neither directly members of a known, organized terrorist group nor necessarily even a very cohesive entity unto themselves.

Examples of this category, which comprises small collections of like-minded locals who gravitate towards one another to plan and mount terrorist attacks completely independent of any direction provided by al-Qaeda, include the so-called Hofstad Group in the Netherlands, a member of which (Mohammed Bouyeri) murdered the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam in November 2004, and the so-called “trolley bombers”: the two Lebanese nationals who placed bombs that failed to explode on two German commuter trains near Dortmund and Koblenz in July 2006.¹⁴

The most salient threat posed by the above categories, however, continues to come from al-Qaeda Central and from its affiliates and associates. However, an additional and equally challenging threat is now posed by less discernible and more unpredictable entities drawn from the vast Muslim diaspora in Europe. As far back as 2001, the Netherlands’ intelligence and security service had detected increased terrorist recruitment efforts among Muslim youth living in the Netherlands who it was previously assumed had been completely assimilated into Dutch society and culture.¹⁵ Thus, representatives of Muslim extremist organizations — including, presumably, al-Qaeda — had already succeeded in embedding themselves in, and drawing new sources of support from, receptive elements within established diaspora communities. In this way, new recruits could be drawn into the movement who likely had not previously come under the scrutiny of local or national law enforcement agencies. Indeed, according to a BBC News documentary report broadcast in July 2006, Khan, the London bombing cell’s ringleader, may have acted precisely as such an al-Qaeda “talent spotter”: trawling Britain’s Muslim communities during the summer of 2001 — literally weeks before 9/11 — trying to attract new recruits to the movement.¹⁶

This new category of terrorist adversary, moreover, also has proven more difficult for the authorities in these countries to track, predict and anticipate. Sir David Pepper, the director of Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), Britain’s equivalent of our National Security Agency (NSA) admitted this in testimony before a Parliamentary committee investigating the 7/7 attacks.

We had said before July [2005], there are probably groups out there that we do not know anything about, and because we do not know anything about them we

do not know how many there are. What happened in July [the 2005 London bombings] was a demonstration that there were [material redacted for security reasons] conspiracies going on about which we essentially knew nothing, and that rather sharpens the perception of how big, if I can use [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld's term, the unknown unknown was.¹⁷

This adversary, comprising hitherto unknown cells, is difficult, if not impossible, to effectively profile. Indeed, this was precisely the conclusion reached by the above-mentioned Parliamentary committee in their report on the London bombings.¹⁸ Although the members of these terrorist cells may be marginalized individuals working in menial jobs from the lower socioeconomic strata of society, some with long criminal records or histories of juvenile delinquency, others may well come from solidly middle and upper-middle class backgrounds with university and perhaps even graduate degrees and prior passions for cars, sports, rock music and other completely secular, material interests. For example, in the case of radicalized British Muslims, since 9/11 we have seen terrorists of South Asian and North African descent as well as those hailing both from the Middle East and Caribbean. They have included lifelong devout Muslims as well as recent converts; persons from the margins of society who made a living as thieves or from drug dealing, and students at the London School Economics and the University of London, two of the UK's premiere universities.¹⁹ What they will have in common is a combination of a deep commitment to their faith, often recently rediscovered; admiration of Bin Laden for the cathartic blow struck against America on 9/11; hatred of the United States and the West; and, a profoundly shared sense of alienation from their host countries. "There appear to be a number of common features to this grooming," the report of the Intelligence and Security Committee of the UK House of Commons concluded.

In the early stages, group conversation may be around being a good Muslim and staying away from drugs and crime, with no hint of an extremist agenda. Gradually individuals may be exposed to propaganda about perceived injustices to Muslims across the world with international conflict involving Muslims interpreted as examples of widespread war against Islam; leaders of the Muslim world perceived as corrupt and non-Islamic; with some domestic policies added as 'evidence' of a persecuted Islam; and conspiracy theories abounding. They will then move on to what the extremists claim is religious justification for violent jihad in the Quran and the Hadith . . . and — if suicide attacks are the intention — the importance of martyrdom in demonstrating commitment to Islam and the rewards in Paradise for martyrs; before directly inviting an individual to engage in terrorism. *There is little evidence of overt compulsion. The extremists appear rather to rely on the development of individual commitment and group bonding and solidarity* [emphasis mine].²⁰

These new recruits are the anonymous cogs in the worldwide al-Qaeda enterprise and include both longstanding residents and new immigrants found across Europe, but

specifically in countries with large expatriate Muslim populations such as Britain, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium.

Indeed, ongoing investigations increasingly suggest that recent terrorist threats and attacks — the August 2006 plot to blow up 10 planes in flight from Britain and crash them into American cities, the July 2005 suicide bus and subway bombings in London, and the two separate operations foiled in Britain during 2004 involving, on the one hand, bombings of a shopping center or nightclub and, on the other, simultaneous suicide attacks on economic targets in lower Manhattan, Newark, New Jersey and Washington, D.C. — were all in fact coordinated in some way by al-Qaeda, and not (as commonly assumed) cooked up by homegrown terror groups.

Thus, al-Qaeda's goal remains as it has always been: to inspire radicalized Muslims across the globe to join the movement's holy fight. Not only does al-Qaeda retain its core operational and command-and-control capabilities, it has shown remarkable resiliency and a stubborn capacity for renewal and regeneration. Even though its personnel may be dispersed, al-Qaeda remains a hierarchical organization: capable of ordering, planning and implementing bold terrorist strikes. Issues of classification and sensitive collection, as well as the British government's gathering of evidence for a number of criminal cases that remain *sub judice*, have prevented further, full, public disclosure of al-Qaeda's active involvement in the London attacks — and virtually every other major terrorist plot unmasked in the UK since 2003.²¹ However, suffice it to say that what is publicly known and has been reported in unclassified sources clearly points to such involvement.

The widely perceived current threat from less discernible and more unpredictable entities drawn from the vast Muslim diaspora in Europe, moreover, actually represents the fruition of strategic decisions made by al-Qaeda a decade ago. As far back as 1999, British authorities knew of al-Qaeda's years-long subversive activities among that country's Muslim community: believing that some 3,000 British Muslims had already left and returned to the country after receiving terrorist training at al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere.²² Three years later, the Netherlands' intelligence and security service called attention to increased terrorist recruitment efforts among assimilated Dutch Muslim youths. And, a senior official in Spain's Interior Ministry recently told me that authorities in that country now suspect that upwards of a thousand Muslims living there also received training in overseas al-Qaeda camps before 9/11. In this way, new recruits from these countries have been drawn into the movement. The threat thus is not only one of jihadi radicalization, but of deliberate, longstanding al-Qaeda subversion.

Consider what we have learned since the 2005 London bombings and how new evidence about the attack's genesis completely dispels the prevailing assumption that entirely organic, "homegrown" threats posed by indigenous radicals acting on their own have superseded that of al-Qaeda. Initially, British authorities concluded that the attacks were the work of disaffected British Muslims, self-radicalized and self-selected and operating purely within the country. We have subsequently learned, however, that the London cell's ringleader, Mohammed Siddique Khan, and a fellow bomber, Shahzad Tanweer, both visited Pakistani terrorist camps between November 2004 and February

2005, where it is now believed they were trained by al-Qaeda operatives. For instance, the aforementioned report by the Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee noted, among its other conclusions, that

- Investigations since July [2005] have shown that the group [the four London bombers] was in contact with others involved in extremism in the UK.
- Siddique Khan [the group's ringleader] is now known to have visited Pakistan in 2003 and to have spent several months there with Shazad Tanweer [another bomber] between November 2004 and February 2005. It has not yet been established who they met in Pakistan, but it is assessed as likely that they had some contact with Al Qaeda figures.
- The extent to which the July 7 attacks were externally planned, directed or controlled by contacts in Pakistan or elsewhere remains unclear. The [British intelligence and security] Agencies believe that some form of operational training is likely to have taken place while Khan and Tanweer were in Pakistan. Contacts in the run-up to the attacks suggest they may have had advice or direction from individuals there.²³

Both men also recorded "martyrdom" videos while in Pakistan that were subsequently released in September 2005 and then on the first anniversary of the bombings by al-Qaeda's perennially active communications department, "Al Sahab [the Clouds] for Media Production." On those tapes, Ayman al-Zawahiri also claims credit for the London attack in the name of al-Qaeda — an admission that at the time was mostly dismissed given that it challenged the conventional wisdom that al-Qaeda was no longer capable of such operations.

In addition, following the bombings, when Khan's photograph was a staple of nightly British newscasts and on the front page of daily newspapers, a reliable source working for Britain's security service claimed to have seen Khan at an al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan in either 1999 or 2000.²⁴ Finally, as previously noted, a BBC documentary broadcast last July reported that during the summer of 2001, Khan was seen attempting to attract recruits from Britain's Muslim community to al-Qaeda. He was accompanied, moreover, by two other British Muslims who would later stage a suicide bombing in Israel in April 2003. And, only a month before that attack, Khan himself visited Israel — taking the same route via Jordan that the bombers would soon follow — in what may have been a practice or dry-run for the operation.²⁵

The London bombing's pedigree, moreover, is familiar. Exactly a year earlier, British and American authorities had thwarted the aforementioned plot by a London-based al-Qaeda cell led by Dhiren Barot (a.k.a. "Issa al-Hindi" and "Issa al-Britani") to simultaneously carry out suicide attacks on the New York Stock Exchange and the Citigroup Building in midtown Manhattan, the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey, and the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank headquarters in Washington, D.C. The trail in this operation similarly led back to Pakistan. It emerged that a protégé of the 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed operating in Lahore was the essential nexus between the London cell and al-Qaeda commanders operating out of Waziristan.

And, a parallel plot disrupted only months before, in April 2004, likewise involved a group of British Muslims of Pakistani ancestry. Their plan was to bomb a shopping mall or London nightclub using 1,300 pounds of ammonium nitrate fertilizer they had stockpiled with which to fabricate their explosives. Members of this cell had also traveled to Pakistan for terrorist training in jihadi camps along the Afghan border. Their leader, Omar Khyam, admitted that, while in Pakistan, he had met with al-Qaeda commanders and that his al-Qaeda controller for the operation was Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, the reputed new “number three” figure in the movement and a key liaison officer with the al-Qaeda organization in Iraq. Khyam’s claims were corroborated by another cell member, Mohammed Junaid Babar, who became a witness for the prosecution. Babar, a naturalized U.S. citizen who had emigrated from Pakistan as a young child, himself confessed to having attended an al-Qaeda “summit” meeting held in Pakistan in March 2004 that was devoted to planning international terrorist operations.

Finally, this past summer’s plot to simultaneously bomb 10 U.S. airliners and crash them into targets over American cities was foiled after arrests in Pakistan once more led UK and U.S. officials to yet another terrorist cell of British Muslims of Pakistani heritage.

According to terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna, that operation’s controller was none other than Abu Ubaydah al-Masri, the commander for al-Qaeda in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.

Just as disturbing is the fact that these attacks were not directed against the softer, more accessible targets like subway and commuter trains, hotels and tourist destinations that the conventional wisdom held a degraded al-Qaeda only capable of, but against arguably the most internationally-hardened target set since 9/11 — commercial aviation. This alarming development calls into question some of our most fundamental assumptions about al-Qaeda’s capabilities and intentions, given that the movement seems undeterred from the same grand homicidal ambitions it demonstrated on 9/11.

And so it is with another case. Spanish authorities now intimate that evidence is accumulating that al-Qaeda was behind the March 2004 Madrid bombings. Though reluctant to share the details of an investigation that remains *sub judice*, the links between the Madrid bombers and al-Qaeda that have since publicly come to light are compelling. One key figure in the 3/14 attacks, for instance, a terrorist using the nom de guerre “Serhane the Tunisian” has been linked to Amer Azizi, an al-Qaeda operative who is believed to have helped organized the July 2001 meeting held in Tarragona, Spain, between 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta and his controller, Ramzi Binalshib. Another member of the Madrid cell, Mohamed Afalah, was able to flee to Belgium following the attack allegedly with the help of Omar Nakhcha, a European-based al-Qaeda recruiter of foreign fighters for jihad in Iraq. And, the enigmatic “Abu Duhana al-Afghani,” often cited in internal communications by the Madrid bombers, is believed to be Yussuf Belhadj, the self-described “military spokesman for al-Qaeda in Europe.”

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Thus, the portions of the National Intelligence Estimate released publicly last September are right. We're just as vulnerable as ever — not only because of Iraq, but also because of a revitalized and resurgent al-Qaeda that continues to plot and plan terrorist attacks. Senior British intelligence and security officials publicly stated that they had reached this same conclusion the following month. And, in a speech delivered in November 2006, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, the director-general of the Security Service (MI-5), was unequivocal in her assessment of the threat posed by a resplendent al-Qaeda. "We are aware of numerous plots to kill people and to damage our economy," Dame Eliza stated. "What do I mean by numerous? Five? Ten? No, nearer 30 that we currently know of," she continued. "These plots often have linked back to al-Qaeda in Pakistan and through those links al-Qaeda gives guidance and training to its largely British foot soldiers here on an extensive and growing scale."²⁶

Rather than al-Qaeda R.I.P. then, we face an al-Qaeda that has risen from the grave. Its dispersion following Operation Enduring Freedom has not meant that al-Qaeda has become decentralized. The movement, in fact, is just as hierarchical as before. Its chain of command, however, admittedly is less effective and more cumbersome. But this is a reflection of how al-Qaeda has been able to adapt and adjust to the changes imposed on its operations by the U.S.-led war on terrorism and how the movement has coped with this new reality. Although it may not be the most effective way to run a terrorist organization, al-Qaeda's core leadership has accepted that in order to survive and ensure the movement's continued longevity — and, indeed, its attack capacity — it has had to surrender the direct command-and-control, if not the micromanaging, capacity it exercised before the September 11, 2001, attacks.

In retrospect, it thus appears that Iraq has further blinded us to the possibility of an al-Qaeda renaissance. America and Britain's entanglement in that country the past four years and our overwhelming preoccupation first with an escalating insurgency and now with an incipient civil war consumed the attention and resources of our respective countries' military and intelligence communities — at precisely the time that Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and other senior al-Qaeda commanders were in their most desperate straits and stood to benefit most from this distraction. Iraq has thus had a pernicious effect on both our counterterrorism policies and perceptions of national security. As the situation in that country deteriorated, one could take solace in the president's argument that we were "fighting terrorists over there, so that we don't have to fight them here." The plots and attack plans against the United States previously described along with the Madrid and London attacks effectively challenge that once comforting, but now patently discredited, argument.

PLAYING RIGHT INTO AL-QAEDA'S HANDS: THE SURGE STRATEGY

Our preoccupation with Iraq, moreover, has introduced yet another significant impediment to the war on terrorism. Withdrawing from that country, the Bush administration has claimed in support of its new strategy to "surge" 21,000 American troops into Iraq, is exactly what al-Qaeda wants. That would "validate the al-Qaeda view of the world," Vice President Cheney argued in an interview broadcast on Fox News Sunday in Janu-

ary.²⁷ He amplified that same point the following week in an interview with Wolf Blitzer on the CNN show, *Situation Room*. “The pressure is from some quarters to get out of Iraq,” he stated. “If we were to do that,” the Vice President continued, “we would simply validate the terrorists’ strategy that says the Americans will not stay to complete the task, that we don’t have the stomach for the fight.”²⁸ Yet, ironically, by “staying the course,” America is doing exactly what al-Qaeda wants — and, indeed, has long expected.

The clearest explication of al-Qaeda’s strategy in Iraq was provided by the group’s second-in-command, Ayman al Zawahiri, on the occasion of the second and third anniversaries of the 9/11 attacks. “We thank God,” he declared in September 2003, “for appeasing us with the dilemmas in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Americans are facing a delicate situation in both countries. If they withdraw they will lose everything and if they stay, they will continue to bleed to death.”²⁹ Indeed, what U.S. military commanders had once optimistically described more than three years ago as the jihadi “magnet” or terrorist “flytrap” orchestrated by the U.S. invasion of Iraq has thus always been viewed very differently by al-Qaeda. “Two years after Tora Bora,” Zawahiri observed in December 2003, “the American bloodshed [has] started to increase in Iraq and the Americans are unable to defend themselves.”³⁰

In other words, with America trapped in Iraq, al-Qaeda has had us exactly where they want us. Iraq, for them, has been an effective means to preoccupy American military forces and distract U.S. attention while al-Qaeda has regrouped and reorganized since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Indeed, this was essentially the analysis offered last month in Congressional testimony by outgoing National Intelligence Director John D. Negroponte. In contrast to both longstanding White House claims and the prevailing conventional wisdom, the Annual Threat Assessment presented by Negroponte to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence painted a disquieting picture of a terrorist movement on the march rather than on the run.

Iraq has also figured prominently in al-Qaeda plans and propaganda as a means to reinvigorate the jihadi cause and recapture its momentum. By enmeshing U.S. forces in battle and thereby portraying America’s efforts in Iraq as an oppressive occupation, al-Qaeda has been able to propagate an image of Islam cast perpetually on the defensive with no alternative but to take up arms against American aggression. Finally, the ongoing violence in Iraq — coupled with the continued painful memories of the Abu Ghraib revelations — have all contributed to America’s indisputable decline and increasingly poor standing in the Muslim world.

In sum, America’s stubborn refusal to change its policy for Iraq has arguably played right into al-Qaeda’s hands. And Zawahiri’s prophecy about “bleeding us to death” has proven depressingly prescient. Iraq not only daily consumes American lives and treasure but has arguably enervated our military: preoccupying U.S. attention and sapping America’s strength precisely at a time when the 2007 Annual Threat Assessment warns, the threat posed by al-Qaeda is increasing — and other even more portentous security challenges, like Iran and North Korea, grow more worrisome.

But, even if one dimension of Zawahiri’s analysis has already been validated, it is still within America’s power to prevent the other — even more consequential — dimension of

Zawahiri's prediction from being realized: our "losing everything." But this requires nothing less than a dramatic reversal of the administration's current strategy for Iraq — and accepting that even if it is beyond our capacity to solve the Iraq problem, we should be moving without further delay to contain it from spreading and destabilizing the entire region.

Redeploying the American military from Iraq to strengthen and build capacity among our key allies throughout the region could serve to affirm, not undermine, U.S. commitments there. It would also enable us to refocus our efforts more productively on countering the greater systemic threat to the region posed by al-Qaeda's clarion call to radicalization and violence rather than to remain in Iraq as America's power is expended and confidence in U.S. leadership continues to erode worldwide.

Finally, ending our military and intelligence preoccupation with Iraq would permit the United States to devote its full attention to thwarting al-Qaeda's current resurgence. Al-Qaeda's efforts to regain its foothold in Afghanistan and its growing strength across the border in Pakistan could be decisively negated. More critical, our efforts to kill or capture Bin Laden, Zawahiri and the movement's other leading figures could be revitalized and redoubled. The benefits of making good on President Bush's now five-plus-year-old pledge to bring these murderers in "dead or alive" would potentially deliver a more crushing blow to al-Qaeda's morale than continuing to pursue our quixotic ambitions in Iraq — which, after all, is precisely what al-Qaeda wants.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: A WAY AHEAD?

Al-Qaeda may be compared to the archetypal shark in the water that must keep moving forward — no matter how slowly or incrementally — or die. In al-Qaeda's context, this means adapting and adjusting to even our most consequential countermeasures while simultaneously searching to identify new targets and vulnerabilities. However, al-Qaeda's capacity to continue to prosecute this struggle is also a direct reflection of both the movement's resiliency and the continued resonance of its ideology.

Defeating al-Qaeda suggests first and foremost that our assessments and analyses must be anchored firmly to sound empirical judgment and not blinded by conjecture, mirror-imaging, politically partisan prisms and wishful thinking. Second is the need to refocus our attention and efforts back to South Asia — to Pakistan and Afghanistan, specifically — where it was following 9/11 and when al-Qaeda was indeed on the run. Third is the recognition that al-Qaeda cannot be defeated with military means alone. As one U.S. intelligence officer with vast experience in this realm told me over two years ago: "We just don't have enough bullets to kill them all." Accordingly, a new strategy and new approach is needed given a resuscitated al-Qaeda organization that relies as much upon clandestine subversion of targeted communities as it does upon propaganda and radicalization. Its success will depend on effectively combining the tactical elements of systematically destroying and weakening enemy capabilities alongside the equally critical, broader strategic imperatives of countering the continued resonance of the radical's message and breaking the cycle of terrorist recruitment and replenishment that has both sustained and replenished al-Qaeda.

The war on terrorism has now lasted longer than America's involvement in World War II. Yet, even today we cannot claim with any credibility, much less acuity, to have fulfilled Sun Tzu's timeless admonition.³¹ Indeed, what remains missing five-and-a-half years since this war began is a thorough, systematic understanding of our enemy: encompassing motivation as well as mindset, decision-making processes as well as command-and-control relationships; and ideological constructs as well as organizational dynamics.

Forty years ago, the United States understood the importance of building this foundation in order to effectively counter an enigmatic, unseen enemy motivated by a powerful ideology who also used terrorism and insurgency to advance his cause and rally popular support. Although America, of course, encountered many frustrations during the Vietnam conflict, a lack of understanding of our adversary was not among them. Indeed, as early as 1965, the Pentagon had begun a program to analyze Vietcong morale and motivation based on detailed interviews conducted among thousands of guerrilla detainees. These voluminously detailed studies provided a roadmap of the ideological and psychological mindset of that enemy, clearly illuminating the critical need to win what was then often termed the "other war" — the ideological struggle for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.³² Even if the fundamental changes required in U.S. military strategy to overcome the Vietcong's appeal went ignored, tremendous effort and resources were devoted to understanding the enemy.

Today, Washington has no such program in the war on terrorism. America's counterterrorism strategy continues to assume that America's contemporary enemies — be they al-Qaeda or the insurgents in Iraq — have a traditional center of gravity. It also assumes that these enemies simply need to be killed or imprisoned so that global terrorism or the Iraqi insurgency will both end. Accordingly, the attention of the U.S. military and intelligence community is directed almost uniformly towards hunting down militant leaders or protecting U.S. forces — not toward understanding the enemy we now face. This is a monumental failing not only because decapitation strategies have rarely worked in countering mass mobilization terrorist or insurgent campaigns, but also because al-Qaeda's ability to continue this struggle is ineluctably predicated on its capacity to attract new recruits and replenish its resources.

The success of U.S. strategy will therefore ultimately depend on Washington's ability to counter al-Qaeda's ideological appeal and thus effectively address the three key elements of al-Qaeda's strategy:

- the continued resonance of their message
- their continued ability to attract recruits to replenish their ranks
- their capacity for continual regeneration and renewal

To do so, we first need to better understand the mindset and minutiae of the al-Qaeda movement, the animosity and arguments that underpin it and indeed the regions of the world from which its struggle emanated and upon which its hungry gaze still rests. Without knowing our enemy we cannot successfully penetrate their cells; we cannot knowledgeably sow discord and dissension in their ranks and thus weaken them from within

and, we cannot fulfill the most basic requirements of an effective counterterrorist strategy: preempting and preventing terrorist operations and deterring their attacks. Until we recognize the importance of this vital prerequisite, America will remain perennially on the defensive: inherently reactive rather than proactive, and deprived of the capacity to recognize, much less anticipate, important changes in our enemy's modus operandi, recruitment and targeting.

¹ Quoted in Peter Baker, "Bush Is Reassuring on Iraq But Says He's 'Not Satisfied'," *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2006.

² The most stunning and consequential of these was achieved during "Operation Enduring Freedom," which toppled the Taliban regime ruling Afghanistan and destroyed al-Qaeda's infrastructure in that country.

³ Dana Priest and Susan Schmidt, "Al-Qaeda's Top Primed to Collapse, U.S. Says," *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2003.

⁴ See, for example, CNN, "Alleged Bin Laden Tape a Call to Arms," at <http://cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/02/11/sprj.iqr.wrap> and Bin Laden's statement, "We want to let you know and confirm to you that this war of the infidels that the U.S. is leading with its allies . . . we are with you and we will fight in the name of God."

⁵ David R. Sands, "Al-Qaeda's Credibility 'on the Line' as War in Iraq Winds Down," *Washington Times*, April 24, 2003. See also, Dennis Pluchinsky, "Al-Qaeda Identity Crisis," *Washington Times*, April 28, 2003.

⁶ "U.S.: Al-Qaeda is 70 Percent Gone, Their 'Days Are Numbered'," *World Tribune.Com*, January 23, 2004.

⁷ Sarah el Deeb, "Al-Qaeda Reportedly Plans Big New Attack," *Associated Press*, May 8, 2003.

⁸ Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), p. 29.

⁹ As Jason Burke notes, "'Al-Qaeda'" is a messy and rough designation The word itself is critical. 'al-Qaeda' comes from the Arabic root qaf-ayn-dal. It can mean a base, as in a camp or a home, or a foundation, such as what is under a house. It can mean a pedestal that supports a column. It can also mean a precept, rule, principle, maxim, formula, method, model or pattern." Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 7. See also idem., "Think Again: Al-Qaeda," *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2004, accessed at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>.

¹⁰ A search on google.com for "Al-Qaeda Number 3's" illuminates how this movement has a deeper bench than is often thought and something akin to an institutionalized process of leadership succession.

¹¹ See 1734HA01, United States District Court, Southern District of New York, United States of America v. Mokhtar Haouri, S4 00 Cr. 15 (JFK), June 3, 2001, pp. 538, 548, 589, 622, 658, & 697.

¹² A confidential informant of the British Security Service (MI-5) claims to have traveled to Afghanistan in the late 1990s/early 2000s with another man named "Imran," whom he later identified as the ringleader of the 7/7 London attacks, Mohammed Siddique Khan. That "Imran" was in fact Khan has not been confirmed. See *Intelligence and Security Committee, Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, p. 16.

¹³ See Honourable House of Commons, *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005* (London: The Stationary Office, HC 1087), May 11, 2006, titled "Were They Directed from Abroad?" pp. 24-27, accessed at <http://www.official-documents.co.uk/document/hc0506/hc10/1087/1087.asp>.

¹⁴ See "Lebanon Holds Train Bomb Suspect," *BBC News (International Version)*, August 24, 2006, accessed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5281208.stm>.

¹⁵ See General Intelligence and Security Service, *Recruitment for the Jihad in the Netherlands: From Incident to Trend* (The Hague: Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, December 2002).

¹⁶ A UK Muslim community leader interviewed in the documentary said that he was approached by Mohammed Khan, who was accompanied by two British Muslims named Asif Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif, who in 2003 would stage a suicide attack on a seaside pub in Tel Aviv, Israel. See BBC News Media Exchange, "Britain's First Suicide Bombers," broadcast on BBC2 on July 11, 2006, 2000 GMT.

¹⁷ Quoted in Intelligence and Security Committee, *Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸ The report concluded that “The July attacks emphasized that there was no clear profile of a British Islamist terrorist.” See *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁹ For instance, in the criminal category are Richard Reid (the so-called “shoe bomber,” who attempted to blow up an American Airlines flight en route from Paris to Miami in December 2001) and Jermaine Lindsay (one of the 7/7 London bombers), while Omar Saed Sheikh (who orchestrated the kidnapping and murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in 2002) is a graduate of the LSE and Omar Sharif Khan (one of the two British Muslims who carried out a suicide bombing attack against a seaside pub in Tel Aviv, Israel in April 2003) attended the University of London.

²⁰ Honourable House of Commons, *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005*, pp. 31-32.

²¹ These include the so-called “ricin plot” in January 2003 involving an Algerian al-Qaeda operative named Kamal Bourgass and what British authorities refer to as “Operation Crevice” and “Operation Rhyme,” as well as this past summer’s abortive plot to crash ten U.S. airliners into American cities. See Elaine Sciolino and Don Van Natta, Jr., “2004 British Raid Sounded Alert on Pakistani Militants,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2005; and *idem.*, “Europe Confronts Changing Face of Terrorism,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 2005; Sebastian Rotella, “British Terrorism Case Parallels Others; Trial in a suspected plot to bomb a nightclub or mall in 2004 involves alleged home-grown Islamic radicals with ties to militants in Pakistan,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 2006; and BBC News, “Man Admits UK-US Terror Bomb Plot,” October 12, 2006 accessed at http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6044.

²² Robert Winnett and David Leppard, “Leaked No 10 Dossier Reveals Al-Qaeda’s British Recruits,” *Sunday Times* (London), July 10, 2005.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 12. See also the section of the Honourable House of Commons, *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005*, pp. 20-21.

²⁴ See Intelligence and Security Committee, *Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, p. 16.

²⁵ See BBC News Media Exchange, “Britain’s First Suicide Bombers,” broadcast on BBC2 on 11 July 2006, 2000 GMT.

²⁶ Quoted in BBC News, “Extracts from MI5 Chief’s Speech,” November 10, 2006 accessed at <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/news/6135000.stm>.

²⁷ Quoted in Michael A. Fletcher, “Bush ‘We’re Going Forward’,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2007.

²⁸ Quoted in Peter Baker, “Defending Iraq War, Defiant Cheney Cites ‘Enormous Successes’,” *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2007.

²⁹ Quoted in Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington, D.C. Brassey’s, 2004), p. xxi.

³⁰ Quoted in Walter Pincus, “Al-Qaeda Releases Tape Predicting U.S. Defeat,” *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2004.

³¹ This same argument was made almost exactly a year ago in my testimony before this subcommittee. See Bruce Hoffman, *Combating Al-Qaeda and the Militant Islamic Threat* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, CT-255, 2006) available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT255>.

³² The RAND Corporation actively contributed to these analyses in a series of detailed reports, based on voluminous interviews of captured Vietcong. See, for example: Leon Gouré, Anthony Russo, and D. Scott, *Some Findings of the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Study: June-December 1965* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, RM-4911-12-ISA/ARPA, February 1966); Leon Gouré, J. M. Carrier, and D. Scott, *Some Findings of the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Study: January-June 1966* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, RM-5137-ISA/ARPA, February 1966); J. M. and Charles Thomson, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale: The Special Case of Chieu Hoi* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, RM-4830-2-ISA/ARPA, May 1966); J. C. Connell, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale: A Preliminary Report* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, RM-4507/2-ISA, July 1968).