

# Combating Islamic Extremist Terrorism

1

OVERALL  
GRADE **D+**

Al-Qaeda headquarters	C+
Al-Qaeda affiliated groups	C-
Al-Qaeda seeded groups	D+
Al-Qaeda inspired groups	D
Sympathizers	D-

Five years after the September 11 attacks, is the United States winning or losing the global “war on terror”? Depending on the prism through which one views the conflict or the metrics used to gauge success, the answers to the question are starkly different.

The fact that the American homeland has not suffered another attack since 9/11 certainly amounts to a major achievement. U.S. military and security forces have dealt al-Qaeda a severe blow, capturing or killing roughly three-quarters of its pre-9/11 leadership and denying the terrorist group uncontested sanctuary in Afghanistan. The United States and its allies have also thwarted numerous terrorist plots around the world—most recently a plan by British Muslims to simultaneously blow up as many as ten jetliners bound for major American cities.

Now adjust the prism. To date, al-Qaeda’s top leaders have survived the superpower’s most punishing blows, adding to the near-mythical status they enjoy among Islamic extremists. The terrorism they inspire has continued apace in a deadly cadence of attacks, from Bali and Istanbul to Madrid, London, and Mumbai. Even discounting the violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the tempo of terrorist attacks—the coin of the realm in the jihadi enterprise—is actually greater today than before 9/11.

Meanwhile, U.S. military forces continue to strain under the burden of a bloody and unpopular war in Iraq. Scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay have handed extremist Islamic ideologues a propaganda bonanza, and there is every sign that radicalization in the Muslim world is spreading rather than shrinking.

“The United States has always looked at this conflict with Islamic extremists from a Western perspective and assumed we were winning the war on terror, but if you look at it through the enemy’s eyes you may get a different answer,” said Bruce Hoffman, professor at Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and a member of the Council on Global Terrorism. Al-Qaeda’s metric of success, he contends, is not determined by the lifespan of a presidential administration or by a midterm election cycle. “Rather,

they are fighting a long war of attrition in hopes of draining our resolve and lulling us into a pre-9/11 sense of complacency. Already they see our military becoming bogged down and bled dry in Iraq and Afghanistan; our economy is straining under the weight of multiple wars and rising energy costs; and the American public's confidence in the Bush administration's conduct of the war in Iraq has steadily eroded and could eventually impact public support for the war on terrorism. Most importantly, al-Qaeda has survived our strongest blows, which has given an enormous boost to their belief in the historical inevitability and righteousness of their cause."

So, is the United States really winning or losing the global war on terrorism? In many ways the question itself reflects the great complexities and challenges of this conflict. In actuality, the United States is not engaged in a war on terrorism. Terrorism is a tactic of the weak against the strong. The enemy we confront has a specific nature, and to cast it as global "terror" risks missing its multifaceted dimensions and true character.

"The mere fact that five years after 9/11 we are still struggling to define the enemy and understand why it hates us is indicative of the vast challenge we face, because if you can't define your enemy with precision, it's very hard to develop an effective counterterrorism strategy," said Lee Hamilton, president of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a member of the Council on Global Terrorism. Casting this as a "global war on terror," he added, has also led to an emphasis on military action in a way that unhelpfully overshadows other aspects of the struggle.

"The military undoubtedly has an important role to play, but an effective counterterrorism strategy will have to do a much better job of integrating all tools of American power, including public and international diplomacy, law enforcement, money tracking, intelligence, homeland security, and foreign aid," said Hamilton, former vice chair of the 9/11 commission. "Military action and the attendant violence and killing garners all the headlines, but we really have to better coordinate all of those functions into a synergistic counterterrorism policy."

Describing the conflict as a global “war on terror” has the added disadvantage of suggesting that it is easily bound in time, with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. That plays to American impatience and fosters a military strategy of decapitation and attrition of the enemy. In truth, the conflict more closely resembles a global insurgency, and successful counterinsurgency campaigns are protracted, always emphasizing the ideological battle for minds at least as much as military action.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, there was an understandable focus on Osama bin Laden and his top lieutenants, as well as the substantial infrastructure that al-Qaeda had established in Afghanistan. Yet in the interceding years, it became clear that al-Qaeda was at the core of an interlinked “network of networks,” and never quite as hierarchical or monolithic an organization as was routinely depicted in and by the media.

Since 9/11, Islamic extremist terrorism has morphed into a multi-dimensional network with five primary nodes:

- al-Qaeda headquarters and its global infrastructure of cells and individual operatives;
- al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups with loose linkages to al-Qaeda, such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in Kashmir, all of which have received spiritual or operational guidance and assistance from bin Laden;
- al-Qaeda-seeded groups, like those responsible for the London and Madrid transit system bombings, comprising one or two members with some al-Qaeda-headquarters contact, whether it be training, participating in a prior jihadi campaign, or operational planning;
- homegrown “self-starter” cells of Islamic extremists with no clear connection to al-Qaeda but incited by bin Laden’s radical ideology; and
- the pool of Muslims who are sympathetic to the goals and ideas of radical Islam, even if sometimes disapproving of bin Laden’s terrorist methods.

The linkages between these organisms and the relative vitality and health of each is constantly shifting and evolving depending on the environment. Over time, counterterrorism antidotes that threaten one organism can cause the others to mutate and evolve; one tentacle may be made weaker, only strengthening another.

“Because we are so mechanically oriented in the West, we tend to think of organizations as shaped hierarchically like a pyramid, with the leaders at the top and the workers at the bottom, and everyone a cog in the machine,” said Xavier Raufer, director of studies and research in the Research Department on the Contemporary Criminal Menace at the Paris Institute of Criminology, University of Paris II, and a member of the Council on Global Terrorism. “Al-Qaeda was always based more on a biological model, which is messier and more ill-defined, but also very resilient. Think of the global Islamic jihadist movement like water that ebbs and flows and occasionally coagulates and freezes into ice in places such as Sudan and Afghanistan, only to melt again under pressure. In that ecosystem of radical Islam, Osama bin Laden’s preachings pour forth like rain, and mushrooms sprout in Jakarta, Madrid, and London.”

## Al-Qaeda Headquarters

There is no doubt that the U.S. campaign targeting al-Qaeda’s headquarters and its Taliban benefactors has significantly damaged the group’s operations. Top leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri are in hiding, the group’s pre-9/11 leadership is largely destroyed, and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed has been captured. Al-Qaeda has also lost the infrastructure and sanctuary in Afghanistan that allowed it to methodically plan operations. Though it continues to function, its ability to scout and train thousands of Islamic extremists over a period of years is greatly weakened.

Brian Jenkins, a longtime counterterrorism expert, senior advisor to the president of the RAND Corporation, and a member of the Council on Global Terrorism, pointed out: “Denying ‘al-Qaeda Central’ its former sanctuary in Afghanistan was critical to degrading its

operational capabilities. Al-Qaeda used those training camps in Afghanistan almost like an NBA combine. They attracted potential recruits from all over the globe, and through a training regimen identified the most talented or capable people in terms of their skills or dedication. The loss of that sanctuary has thus made life considerably tougher for al-Qaeda.”

Yet, al-Qaeda has long demonstrated unusual resiliency. The organization used the decade of the 1990s to establish deep roots, allowing it to weather the United States’ counterterrorism campaign. The rapid replacement of leaders captured or killed in that effort also suggests that al-Qaeda had a deeper “bench” of relatively experienced operatives than many experts initially anticipated. Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and other top operatives, intelligence services now believe, have found sanctuary, if not altogether safe haven, in the tribal regions on the Pakistan side of the border with Afghanistan, an area that lies outside the effective control of the central government in Islamabad.

“In terms of terrorist sanctuaries and potential sanctuaries, there’s a natural tendency to avert our eyes and shift our concerns away from these ungoverned spaces because they are often too difficult or horrible to contemplate, but we will quickly pay the price for such neglect,” said Walter Reich, Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Professor of International Affairs, Ethics and Human Behavior at George Washington University and a member of the Council of Global Terrorism. “The lesson of Afghanistan was that any ungoverned area that is within the reach of Islamic extremists is a danger and matter of great concern.”

In terms of al-Qaeda cells and key international operatives, however, the lack of a successful attack on the U.S. homeland since 9/11 at least strongly suggests that the group had little infrastructure established inside the United States prior to or after the attacks. In contrast, European counterterrorism experts noted evidence of strong linkages between al-Qaeda headquarters and terrorist cells that conducted both the Madrid and London transit bombings in 2004 and 2005, respectively. In the case of the Madrid bombings, the

attackers were essentially remnants of an al-Qaeda cell in Spain broken up in the winter of 2001; in the case of the London bombings, ringleader Mohammed Siddique Khan is believed to have trained in an al-Qaeda camp, returning to Pakistan before the bombing. Al-Qaeda's media arm later released Khan's martyrdom video. On the first anniversary of the London bombings, one of Khan's accomplices, Shahzad Tanweer, was also memorialized on tape. Both videos contained commentary from al-Zawahiri, adding evidence of ties between these attacks and al-Qaeda. More recently, the group of Islamic extremists in Britain who plotted to blow up jetliners flying to the United States also had ties to Pakistan and suspected al-Qaeda operatives.

"There is no doubt that al-Qaeda has been much weakened in terms of its ability to communicate and coordinate operations as a result of losing sanctuary in Afghanistan, but in Europe we have seen a lot of evidence that al-Qaeda operatives are still actively planning multiple major attacks and hoping to perpetrate another 9/11-type spectacular," said Fernando Reinares, director of the Programme on Global Terrorism at Spain's Elcano Royal Institute for International and Strategic Studies, professor of political science and security studies at Rey Juan Carlos University, and a member of the Council on Global Terrorism. "As it adapts to an increasingly hostile environment, al-Qaeda is becoming far more decentralized and reliant on affiliated groups and individuals, and bin Laden has focused on articulating jihadi ideology. I reject the idea, however, that it has now evolved completely into a movement or ideology. Al-Qaeda is still an organization with operatives planning attacks, and I fear the next successful al-Qaeda spectacular will most likely occur in Europe."

## Al-Qaeda Affiliates

From an early stage, one attribute that made Osama bin Laden particularly dangerous was his skill in coalescing several groups under his pan-Islamic banner. A mosaic of Islamic extremist groups have been drawn to bin Laden's messianic message of war between Western and

Islamic civilizations, and his calls for jihad or “holy war” against America and its allies. Al-Qaeda became so lethal in such a short period of time in part because it established itself as the leading part of a coalition of as many as twenty Islamist terrorist organizations stretching around the world. Indeed, it was the watershed merger with the Egyptian Islamic Jihad in 1998 that brought al-Qaeda the considerable organizational skills of Ayman al-Zawahiri and elevated the jihadi struggle from a more myopic battle—against first the Russians and then Saudi Arabia—to the larger struggle against the “near enemy” in the Middle East and the “far enemy” in the West.

Since 9/11, these al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, or Islamic extremist groups that embrace al-Qaeda’s agenda, have been responsible for much of the terrorist carnage around the world. Most recently, the Kashmiri separatist group Lashkar-e-Taiba allegedly had a hand in the train bombings in Mumbai, India, this past July that killed 197 passengers. That group is inspired by the same Saudi-style Wahhabism as bin Laden, and hopes to bring the Indian subcontinent under Muslim rule; the pace of its attacks continues to ratchet upward. In similar fashion, Salafia Jihadia, a group with close ties to al-Qaeda, carried out the Casablanca bombings of May 2003. A series of attacks on Western interests and oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia in 2004 were conducted by al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, and much of the ongoing sectarian violence in Iraq was provoked by al-Qaeda in Iraq. Four bombings in Bali and Jakarta, Indonesia; Taba, Egypt; and General Santos City, the Philippines, were the work of Jemaah Islamiyah, yet another Islamist terrorist group with close ties to al-Qaeda. The list goes on.

The United States and its allies continue to wage pitched battles with these terrorist groups, often with mixed results. U.S. forces in Iraq scored a major victory earlier this year when they killed the terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the extremely violent leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Yet the sectarian violence that al-Zarqawi dreamed of stoking into an all-out civil war continues unabated. Significantly, al-Zarqawi’s chosen successor is a former member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad with close ties to Ayman al-Zawahiri—an



indicator that al-Qaeda is bringing the Iraq conflict further under its direct control.

“Despite a concerted effort by the terrorists to give al-Qaeda in Iraq an Iraqi face, the fact that an Egyptian and former protégé of Zawahiri was chosen to lead the group shows that al-Qaeda continues to exert significant influence on these affiliated groups,” said Bruce Hoffman.

Much like al-Qaeda itself, a number of affiliated Islamic extremist groups have also shown an ability to continue terrorist attacks and planning even after the death or capture of key leaders. Despite the arrest or incapacitation of many of Jemaah Islamiyah’s top operatives, for instance, the group still remains a deadly threat, continuing to plot and terrorize, all the while training new members, expanding its reach, and bringing other groups like those in the Philippines into its fold.

That ability to decentralize operations and replenish ranks despite top personnel losses helps explain the resiliency of the terrorism network of networks. In one such example, Indonesian authorities recently raided a Jemaah Islamiyah safe house, killing two top lieutenants and nearly capturing leader Noordin Mohammed Top. Inside the house, police officials found bombs already assembled and plans for additional attacks. Yet the documents seized by authorities revealed just how meticulous the JI leaders were in passing along their bomb-making and other terrorism skills to the next cadre of operatives.

## Homegrown Terrorism

Last November, Australian authorities also raided two so-called self-starter cells of Islamic extremists in Sydney and Melbourne composed almost entirely of second-generation immigrants and Australian citizens with no apparent connection to al-Qaeda, other than an embrace of bin Laden’s radical ideology. This is part of a phenomenon of homegrown terrorism: In some cases, like in Madrid and London, adherents are directed by more established al-Qaeda operatives; in

others, the phenomenon is represented by purely independent acts of violence, like the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands. The recent roll up of cells of Islamic extremists in Britain, Canada, and the United States represents one of the most worrisome trends in Islamic extremist terrorism. Authorities need to better understand what forces in the broader community of Muslims are conspiring to persuade people with only a normal interest in religion to suddenly become radicalized.

Paul Pillar, visiting professor at Georgetown University's Center for Peace and Security Studies, former national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia, and a member of the Council on Global Terrorism, said: "The U.S.-led offensive against al-Qaeda has scored significant successes against the group's upper and mid-level tiers, but the organization has mutated, and the radical jihadist threat has become more decentralized and diffuse. That evolution worries me because we now have more potential threats, which are difficult to track from an intelligence point of view, coming at us from lots of different directions. And of all those threats, the home-grown cells really keep me awake at night. Often we don't even know they exist. Yet if just a handful of these guys had hijacked one airplane and flown it into one of the World Trade Center towers on 9/11, they still would have killed 1,500 people."

The idea that terrorist groups can come together virtually spontaneously and wreak major havoc with minimal funding or training shows how pernicious this evolving threat will become with little or no way to tell who will become radicalized. Its growing occurrence, and an increase in potential recruits and sympathizers, creates a new level of threat. This phenomenon is crucial to how great a danger we face, for how long, and in which regions of the world. This fifth node of al-Qaeda—the groundswell of sympathizers—is key to the future of this battle; its unique characteristics are addressed in fuller detail in chapter 7.

Next, the Council on Global Terrorism will examine steps the United States and its allies have taken to hone their counterterrorism capabilities. ■