An Assessment Of The Threat From Al Qaeda in 2003

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Despite being the most hunted movement in history, Al Qaeda and its associated organizations will pose a significant threat in 2003. Al Qaeda will fragment, decentralize, regroup in five zones of the world, work with like-minded groups, select a wider range of targets, focus on economic targets and population centers, and conduct most attacks in the global south. Although the group will be constrained from conducting coordinated simultaneous attacks against high profile symbolic or strategic targets in the West, together with its regional counterparts Al Qaeda will conduct similar attacks in Asia, Africa, Middle East, and even in Latin America. Despite heavy losses, including the likely capture or death of its core and penultimate leaders, Al Qaeda's anti-Western universal jihad ideology inculcated among the politicized and radicalized Muslims will sustain support for Islamism, Islamist political parties and Islamist terrorist groups. With the detection, disruption, and degradation of its human and material infrastructure, Al Qaeda may evolve and survive as a state-of-mind among Islamist territorial and migrant pockets. With a skewed US Middle Eastern policy, Islamist support for political violence will grow, prompting terrorist groups to conduct mass casualty attacks, especially suicide bombings of economic targets and population centres.

Since October 7, 2001 when US-led coalition forces began to dismantle Al Qaeda's state-of-the-art operational and training infrastructure, its intention to attack has not diminished but its capability to attack has gravely suffered. With US working with several Middle Eastern and Asian governments, Al Qaeda's strength has depleted to a third of its rank and file especially the loss or capture of its key leaders and experienced operatives. For instance, in Afghanistan, its military commander Mohommad Atef was killed in a predator attack; in Pakistan, its director of external operations Abu Zubaidah was captured, as was its maritime commander Al Nishri in the United Arab Emirates. Al Qaeda as an organization has gravely suffered severe disruption to its command and control. Therefore, the group is increasingly probing targets that can be attacked with least effort and least cost. In keeping with its doctrine of repeating its successes, Al Qaeda and its associate groups are increasingly adopting the tactic of suicide terrorism against soft targets.

While Al Qaeda's priority will be to attack US targets, it only has the resources and opportunity to attack US allies and friends. With diminished Al Qaeda assets and hardened US and Israeli diplomatic targets, the group will mount and attempt to mount attacks against British, French, German, Italian, Canadian, Australian targets and possibly other European and Japanese targets. Throughout 2002, Al Qaeda or its associate groups killed German tourists in Djerba, Tunisia; French naval technicians in Karachi, Pakistan; Australians and Westerners in Bali, Indonesia; and Israelis in Mombassa, Kenya. Osama bin Laden's pronouncements in October and November 2002 will be the best guide to unfolding Al Qaeda events in 2003. As such more effort is needed to track and target Al Qaeda experts moving worldwide and disrupt them from coordinating attacks together with Al Qaeda associate groups with which it had shared ideology, finance and training during the last decade in Afghanistan and in other conflict zones.

Countermeasures, especially target hardening, by law enforcement and protective services of vulnerable government personnel and infrastructure have forced Al Qaeda to focus on economic targets and population centers. Hardening of government targets will displace the threat to softer targets making civilians prone to terrorist attack. Economic targets, especially the tourist and the hotel industry, will suffer from terrorism. Churches, synagogues, and other non-Islamic institutions as well as trade and investment will remain particularly vulnerable. Similarly, hardening of land and aviation targets will shift the threat to sea targets particularly to commercial maritime targets. Due to the difficulty of hijacking aircraft to ram them against targets difficult to acquire from surface attacks, Al Qaeda will acquire and employ hand held Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs). If appropriate and immediate countermeasures are not taken to target the Al Qaeda shipping network, SAMs under Al Qaeda control held in the Pakistan-Kashmir-Afghanistan theater, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Horn of Africa will find its way to the Far Asia and to Europe, and possibly even to North America. Other groups operationally and ideologically unconnected to Al Qaeda will learn from Al Qaeda technologies, tactics, and techniques.

With US security forces and the intelligence community targeting Al Qaeda's nerve center in Afghanistan-Pakistan, Al Qaeda will decentralize even further. While its organizers of attacks will remain in Pakistan and its immediate neighborhood, its operatives will travel back and forth coordinating with Al Qaeda nodes in the south. To make its presence felt, Al Qaeda will increasingly rely on its global terrorist network of like-minded groups in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Horn of Africa, Middle East, and the Caucuses to strike its enemies. Already attacks in Kenya, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Kuwait and Yemen seek to compensate for the loss and lack of space and opportunity to operate in Afghanistan. Its operatives will work together with Jemmah Islamiyah (JI: Southeast Asia), Al Ithihad al Islami (Horn of Africa), Chechen Mujahidin (Khattab faction: Caucuses), Tunisian Combatants Group (Middle East), Jayash-e-Mohommad (South Asia) and other groups it trained and financed in the past decade. In addition to its own members, Al Qaeda will operate through the Salafi Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) and Takfir Wal Hijra – two groups it had infiltrated in Europe and North America. With the transfer of terrorist technology and expertise from the center to the periphery, the attacks by the associated groups of Al Qaeda will pose a threat as great as Al Qaeda.

Although attacking inside North America, Europe, Australasia and Israel remains a priority, the measures and countermeasures taken by these governments will make it difficult for Al Qaeda to mount an operation in the West. Al Qaeda finds it less costly to operate in parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East where there is lack of security controls. Therefore, most attacks will be against Western targets located in the global south. While focusing on Western targets will remain a priority, Al Qaeda will continue to conduct operations against Muslim rulers and regimes supporting the US-led "war on terror." The physical security of Pakistani and Afghan leaders will remain particularly vulnerable and their regimes will come under sustained political

challenges. While a number of Pakistani groups fighting in Kashmir will come under greater control of Al Qaeda, the group working together with the surviving elements of the Taliban will develop a clandestine network inside Afghanistan to conduct guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and political assassination.

For greater impact, Al Qaeda prefers to conduct coordinated simultaneous attacks against symbolic, high prestige or strategic targets with the intention of inflicting maximum damage to human and physical infrastructure. With Al Qaeda resources under strain and its operatives coming under increasing scrutiny in the global north, Al Qaeda will be constrained from mounting multiple attacks in the global north. However, Al Qaeda and its associate groups are still able to mount multiple operations in the global south where they have greater leverage, space, and time to operate. For instance, JI attacked Sari and Kuta clubs and the US consulate in Bali, Indonesia on October 12, 2002; and Al Qaeda attacked an Israeli-owned hotel and aircraft in Mombassa, Kenya on November 29, 2002.

RESILIENCE

Al Qaeda has suffered with the arrest of nearly 3,000 organizers, operatives and supporters in 98 countries since October 2001. With the increase in pressure, Al Qaeda is increasingly depending on its associate groups to conduct attacks. Traditionally, Qaeda with better trained, more experienced and highly committed operatives wanted to attack more difficult targets, especially strategic targets, and leave the easier and tactical targets to its associated groups. Today, with Al Qaeda operatives working closely together, the lethality of the attacks conducted by the associate groups of Al Qaeda is increasing. As Bali demonstrated, the attacks conducted by the associate groups of Al Qaeda can be as lethal as the attacks conducted by Al Qaeda itself. With attacks conducted by Al Qaeda's associated groups posing a threat as great as Al Qaeda, the theater of war will widen. US assistance, presence and influence will grow in the Muslim world, generating wide-ranging reactions.

With the loss of Afghanistan as a "liberated theater of jihad," Islamists will seek to create new theaters. Dr Ayman Zawahiri, Osama's deputy, designated successor and principal strategist of Al Qaeda considers Afghanistan and Chechnya as the only two liberated theaters of jihad. Already due to the difficulty of movement of recruits and flow of support from Islamist migrant pockets in the West and in the Middle East to Afghanistan, there has been a partial diversion of support to Chechnya. Although there is a significant reserve of Afghan-trained active and sleeper terrorists in the West, terrorists entering the West to attack Western targets may be trained in a number of theaters, especially Chechnya. With Al Qaeda fragmenting ,several other groups will take over the role of waging a universal jihad. More territorial Islamist groups will

espouse universal agendas and more Muslim separatist groups will become vulnerable to penetration by Islamist groups.

Al Qaeda will be operating across the technological spectrum but is likely to use low-tech high impact attacks, especially civilian infrastructure to attack civilian society and critical infrastructure. With greater border controls, members and associate members of Al Qaeda will use what can be readily purchased off the shelf especially from pharmacies, chemist shops, and hardware stores. Al Qaeda members will live off the environment and turn commercially available material into weapons. Al Qaeda's Tunisian member conducted a suicide attack against the oldest Jewish synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, using a LPG truck; JI used a consignment of chlorate purchased from the port city of Surabaya in Indonesia against targets in Bali; and 9/11 hijackers used passenger aircraft against America's icons. The latter attack, an Al Qaeda detainee said, was "like using your own finger to prick your eye." Using multiple identities, Al Qaeda members will travel to target countries, receive instructions, plan and prepare attacks through the Internet, and attack targets. They will generate support from low level crime, organized crime, infiltrated charities, and from politicized and radicalized segments of their migrant and diaspora communities.

With the capture of the 9/11 mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohommad alias Mohommad the Pakistani alias MP, the head of the military committee of Al Qaeda, on March 1, 2003, Al Qaeda has lost tactical control of its cells. He was central in the planning and preparation of attacks. His persona highly influenced the nature of almost all Al Qaeda attacks -- first, mass casualty attacks, second, the abundant use of suicide terrorism, third, bombings, and fourth, assassination. As mass casualty attacks need a large number of operatives, greater resources, and planning over a long period of time, Al Qaeda today will be able to conduct fewer attacks. But still they are likely to become spectacular or theatrical attacks. Assassination will be used more frequently, although suicide bombings will be the most predominant form of attack. As suicide attacks are very difficult to disrupt in the execution phase, 2003 will see the tactic of suicide terrorism being used more widely. As Al Qaeda maximizes its successes and partial successes of attacks and minimizes its failures, suicide attacks will become increasingly common. Although Al Qaeda's long term and sustained interest to use chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear agents has not diminished, conventional terrorism will remain the preferred mode of attack.

CONCLUSION

US policies towards the Middle East, especially the unilateral US invasion of Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian issue, will strengthen support for Islamism, Islamist political parties and

terrorist groups. US's skewed foreign policy will continue to pose a significant terrorist threat to Western interests both at home and overseas. In many countries, Islamism will move from the periphery to the center, making it difficult for many governments to openly support the US-led "war against terrorism." With support for Islamism rising, Islamists will campaign either politically or violently or both in Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, and other emerging democracies. In addition to well-organized groups, individual terrorists will mount operations, similar to the shooting at the El Al counter at the Los Angeles Airport on America's Independence Day 2002. With more news in the media about Islam, the Muslim public will become more aware of Islam. The number of Muslims directly supporting violence will remain very small but there will be more support for a Muslim way of life, especially the implementation of Sharia laws. Furthermore, the need to wage jihad in support of their suffering brethren will rise among politicized and radicalized segments of the Muslims.

If the threat posed by Islamism is to be countered and the life span of Islamist terrorist groups is to be shortened in the long term (10 years), the current Western, especially the US, approach of 95 percent military and five percent ideological will have to be reversed. To reduce the space for the Al Qaeda to survive and grow, the international community must develop a multipronged, multidimensional, multiagency, and multijurisdictional approach against terrorism. Failure to develop a comprehensive long term strategic response will mean, Al Qaeda changing shape, surviving and continuing the fight.

As much as 2002 was, 2003 will be a year of experience and learning both for government law enforcement and intelligence agencies. With the wider acknowledgement that there is no standard textbook for fighting Al Qaeda, it will be a learning process where new structures and institutions will have to be built and shaped to fight a rapidly evolving cunning and ruthless foe, willing to kill and die. To win, governments will have to repeat their successes and build upon their successes.

In its founding charter, Al Qaeda Al Sulbah (The Solid Base) is defined as the "spearhead of Islam" and the "pioneering vanguard of the Islamic movements." The existing and emerging Islamist groups burdened with the Al Qaeda ideology will pose a continuous terrorist threat. Although Al Qaeda as a physical entity will be relegated to history, it has at least partially accomplished its primary role of "showing the way" to other groups, especially the need to go beyond a limited territorial agenda and wage a universal jihad. The momentum Al Qaeda has so successfully unleashed will spawn and sustain a dozen existing and emerging Islamist groups at least in the immediate (1-2 years) and in the mid term (5 years).