

Chapter 3

Global Jihad: Evolving and Adapting

The global jihadist movement — including its most prominent component, al-Qa'ida — remains the preeminent terrorist threat to the United States, US interests and US allies. While the core of al-Qa'ida has suffered damage to its leadership, organization, and capabilities, the group remains intent on striking US interests in the homeland and overseas. During the past year, concerted antiterrorist coalition measures have degraded al-Qa'ida's central command infrastructure, decreasing its ability to conduct massive attacks. At the same time, however, al-Qa'ida has spread its anti-US, anti-Western ideology to other groups and geographical areas. It is therefore no longer only al-Qa'ida itself but increasingly groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida, or independent ones adhering to al-Qa'ida's ideology, that present the greatest threat of terrorist attacks against US and allied interests globally.

US and coalition successes against al-Qa'ida have forced these jihadist groups to compensate by showing a greater willingness to act on their own and exercising greater local control over their strategic and tactical decisions. As a result of this growing dispersion and local decision-making, there is an increasing commingling of groups, personnel, resources, and ad hoc operational and logistical coordination. These groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida or indoctrinated with al-Qa'ida's ideology are now carrying out most of the terrorist attacks against US and allied interests. Their decreased power projection and limited resources mean that an increasing percentage of jihadist attacks are more local, less sophisticated, but still lethal. Some groups, however, are seeking to replicate al-Qa'ida's global reach and expertise for mass casualty attacks. This trend underscores that America's partners in the global war on terror require the capabilities to identify and eliminate terrorist threats in their countries for their own security and ultimately to stop terrorists abroad before they can gain the ability to attack the US homeland.

Al-Qa'ida

Despite intensive US and partner operations that have led to the killing or capture of much of al-Qa'ida's senior leadership, Usama bin Ladin and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, remain at large. In late 2004, they made videotaped statements addressed directly to the US public that warned of more attacks. The two have also publicly threatened at least three dozen countries in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

The apparent mergers or declarations of allegiance of groups such as Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's organization with al-Qa'ida suggest that al-Qa'ida is looking to leverage the capabilities and resources of key regional networks and affiliates — a trend that al-Qa'ida could also use to try to support new attacks in the United States and abroad.

The Global Jihadist Movement

The global jihadist movement predates al-Qa'ida's founding and was reinforced and developed by successive conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and elsewhere during the 1990s. As a result, it spawned several groups and operating nodes and developed a resiliency that ensured that destruction of any one group or node did not destroy the larger movement. Since 2001, extremists, including members of al-Qa'ida and affiliated groups, have sought to exploit perceptions of the US-led global war on terrorism and, in particular, the war in Iraq to attract converts to their movement. Many of these recruits come from a large and growing pool of disaffected youth who are sympathetic to radical, anti-Western militant ideology. At the same time, these extremists have branched out to establish jihadist cells in other parts of the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe, from which they seek to prepare operations and facilitate funding and communications.

Foreign fighters appear to be working to make the insurgency in Iraq what Afghanistan was to the earlier generation of jihadists — a melting pot for jihadists from around the world, a training ground, and an indoctrination center. In the months and years ahead, a significant number of fighters who have traveled to Iraq could return to their home countries, exacerbating domestic conflicts or augmenting with new skills and experience existing extremist networks in the communities to which they return.

The Spread of Al-Qa'ida's Ideology

Al-Qa'ida's ideology resonates with other Sunni extremist circles. Some affiliated groups — including Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia — look to their own spiritual leaders, yet historically have shared close ideological and operational ties to al-Qa'ida. In recent years, however, the resonance of al-Qa'ida's message has contributed to the formation of an assortment of grassroots networks and cells among persons that previously have had no observable links to bin Ladin or al-Qa'ida aside from general ideological and religious affinity.

Examples of this trend include Salafiya Jihadia, a loosely-

The Spread of a Poisonous Worldview: Elements of Al-Qa'ida's Ideology

Many jihadist groups have now adopted the ideology and targeting strategies of bin Ladin and other senior al-Qa'ida leaders. Al-Qa'ida's public statements have sought to promulgate the following tenets of its ideology:

- This is a clash of civilizations. Militant jihad is a religious duty before God, and therefore necessary for the salvation of one's soul as well as for the defense of the Muslim nation.
- Only two camps exist. There can be no middle ground in an apocalyptic showdown between Islam and "the forces of evil," defined not merely as "the West" but also Muslims that do not share al-Qa'ida's vision of "true Islam."
- Violence by Muslims in the defense of Islam is the only solution. Peaceful existence with the West is a dangerous illusion.
- Many of the theological and legal restrictions on the use of violence by Muslims do not apply to this war. Given that the stakes are high, compunctions against violence only assist "the infidel."
- US power is based on its economy. Therefore, large-scale, mass-casualty attacks — especially focused on US and other Western economic targets — are a primary goal.
- "Apostate" regimes must go. Muslim governments that cooperate with the West and that have not imposed Sharia law are religiously unacceptable and must be violently overthrown.

organized Moroccan movement that carried out the bombings in May 2003 in Casablanca, and the terrorists who executed the March 2004 attack in Madrid. Although these cells do not appear to have been acting directly on al-Qa'ida orders, their attacks supported al-Qa'ida's ideology and reflected al-Qa'ida's targeting strategy.

Terrorist capabilities for attacks will remain uneven, given the varying degrees of expertise and increasing decentralization within the movement. Most groups will be capable only of relatively unsophisticated, but still deadly attacks. Others, however, may seek to acquire or replicate al-Qa'ida's expertise and material support for mass-casualty attacks. The explosive growth of media and the Internet, as well as the ease of travel and communication around the world have made possible the rapid movement of operatives, expertise, money, and explosives. Terrorists increasingly will use media and the Internet to advance key messages or rally support, share jihadist experiences and expertise, and spread fear.

Although the jihadist movement remains dangerous, it is not monolithic. Some groups are focused on attacking the United States or its allies, while others view governments and leaders in the Muslim world as their primary targets. The United States and its partners in the global war on terrorism will continue to use all means available to identify, target, and prevent the spread of these jihadist groups and ideology.