

**DENYING SAFE HAVENS: HOMELAND SECURITY'S EFFORTS TO COUNTER THREATS FROM  
PAKISTAN, YEMEN, AND SOMALIA**

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History has shown that al Qaeda is nothing without a physical sanctuary or safe haven. Indeed, this is why al Qaeda has invested so much of its energy in recent years to strengthening the capabilities of its affiliated and associated movements in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Al Qaeda has thus created a networked transnational movement in order to ensure its survival. Accordingly, rather than the single, monolithic, entity of a decade ago, today there are several al Qaedas, not just one: each of which has different capabilities and presents different, often unique, challenges. This effectively negates a "one size fits all" strategy. Instead, countermeasures have to be tailored to the specific conditions and realities in each of these places where al Qaeda and its franchises have taken root and indeed have flourished.

#### **THE ROLE OF SAFE HAVENS AND SANCTUARIES IN AL QAEDA'S STRATEGY**

Al Qaeda's strategy of survival in recent years has been predicated on the expansion and consolidation of its safe havens and sanctuaries in both South Asia and beyond. It's greatest success has of course been in Pakistan but significant strides have been made in Yemen and Somalia as well. Indeed, since 2004 every major terrorist attack or plot against the U.S. or our European allies has emanated from al Qaeda or its affiliates and associates based in Pakistan, Yemen, or Somalia.

The majority of these attacks and plots have originated from Pakistan. Arabs, Turks, Chinese, Uzbeks, and Chechens comprise an international jihadi contingent based in Pakistan that, along with their indigenous allies and hosts have planned local, regional and international terrorists operations on an ambitious scale. As Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, then-Director General of the British Security Service (MI5), explained in a November 2006 speech, upwards of 30 terrorist plots and attacks in the UK alone had been "linked back to al Qaeda in Pakistan . . . through those links al Qaeda gives guidance and training to its largely British foot soldiers here on an extensive and growing scale."<sup>1</sup> Among the thirty incidents she referred were:

- The planned bombing of a London nightclub and a shopping center in April 2004;
- The 7 July 2005 suicide attacks on London transport that killed 52 persons and wounded nearly a thousand others;
- The abortive follow-on plot against the same target set in London two weeks later; and
- The attempt in August 2006 to bomb seven U.S. and Canadian aircraft departing from London's Heathrow Airport;

More recently, the following additional plots and attacks emanating from Pakistan, including several planned to occur in the U.S. have been detected. They include:

- The January 2008 plan to attack transportation targets in Barcelona, Spain that in turn was linked to another plot by a sister terrorist cell in Germany;

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<sup>1</sup> 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/h1/news/6135000.stm>.

- The abortive plan to bomb New York City's Pennsylvania Station on Thanksgiving Day 2008;
- The plots uncovered to stage attacks in Manchester, England in April 2009 and in New York City against its subway system in September 2009;
- The attempt to detonate an explosive-packed SUV in New York City's Times Square; and,
- The plan to attack transportation targets in Berlin, Germany that as uncovered just days before bin Laden's killing on 2 May 2010.

Although fewer in number, the plots that have originated from Yemen by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), have been no less serious and, if anything, even more ambitious. Among them were:

- The September 2009 attempted assassination of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in Saudi Arabia, the Deputy Interior Minister responsible for counterterrorism in that country;
- The Christmas Day 2009 plot to explode a bomb aboard a North West Airlines flight en route From Amsterdam to Detroit; and,
- The attempt to blow up American cargo planes uncovered in September 2010 involving bombs disguised as photocopier printer cartridges.

Not surprisingly, a succession of U.S. intelligence officials have expressed concern at the rapidity with which AQAP has emerged as a potent force in international terrorism posing perhaps an even greater threat to U.S. security than its parent body.

And, from Somalia a January 2010 plot by members of the al Qaeda affiliate in that country, al Shabaab ("The Youth") to kill the Danish cartoonist responsible for drawings of the Prophet Muhammad that enraged the Muslim world. In al Shabaab's case as well, American and European intelligence officials have been alarmed by the global ambitions, and international radicalization and recruitment capabilities of this relatively new Somali militant organization.

#### **AL QAEDA'S STRATEGY OF SURVIVAL**

All these incidents represent the fruition of al Qaeda's strategy to fight its enemies on multiple fronts and from multiple bases. Accordingly, it conducts local campaigns of subversion and destabilization in critical operational theatres where failed or failing states provide new opportunities for al Qaeda to extend its reach and consolidate its presence. Countries such as Pakistan, Somalia, and especially, Yemen prominently fall within this category.

Al Qaeda accordingly provides guidance, assistance, and other help to its local affiliates and associated terrorist movements. This support often appreciably enhances attack capabilities and strengthens the resilience of these groups thus presenting more formidable challenges to national and local police, military forces and intelligence agencies. Al Qaeda actively works behind the scenes to "plus up" the capabilities of indigenous terrorist both in terms of kinetic as well as essential non-kinetic operations—including information operations, propaganda, and psychological warfare.

Al Qaeda's role in each of these theaters is thus critical. It serves as a "force multiplier": providing training and advice and otherwise building existing capacity among indigenous insurgent groups. The standard basic insurgent training package of riflery and field craft, for instance, is augmented by al Qaeda instruction in advanced ambush techniques and the use and emplacement of increasingly

sophisticated improvised explosive devices. Al Qaeda additionally provides overall strategic guidance and assists in the coordination of operations between a variety of terrorist and insurgent groups. It imparts useful non-combat skills as well: teaching local jihadis how to plan and execute psychological and information operations, make use of the Internet for radicalization and recruitment purposes, and generally improve and strengthen operational expertise and organizational resiliency.

Al Qaeda also deliberately seeks out citizens and residents of enemy countries, who can then be brought to these sanctuaries and safe havens for training. Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia have figured prominently in this strategy.

For example, members of each of the British terrorist cells involved in the aforementioned plots and attacks in the UK between 2004 and 2006 were trained at the same al Qaeda camp in Pakistan's Malakand Agency.

Like these British plotters, Najibullah Zazi, the Afghan-born, Green Card holder who lived in Queens, New York, and ring-leader of the 2009 plot to stage suicide attacks against the New York City subway, was also instructed in the fabrication of powerful homemade explosives using ordinary commercial ingredients like hair bleach (hydrogen peroxide) and acetone at an al Qaeda facility in Pakistan.

Zazi and his two fellow conspirators told FBI agents, that they had been trained in bomb making at an al Qaeda camp in Pakistan. Senior al Qaeda commanders had overseen and directed the operation, which was linked to another set of attacks planned from Pakistan to occur in Manchester, England in April 2009. The superseding indictment of Zazi and the two other men filed by the U.S. Department of Justice on 7 July 2010 unambiguously describes how this "American-based al-Qaeda cell" was commanded by "leaders of al-Qaeda's external operations program [based in Pakistan who were] dedicated to terrorist attacks in the United States and other Western countries."<sup>2</sup>

Umer Farouk Abdulmuttalab, the would-be Christmas Day 2009 airline bomber, for example, was trained and prepared for his operation in Yemen by AQAP. It is believed that the group may have been responsible for recruiting, training, and deploying at least seven other bombers—and, according to some reports, as many as twenty—from Europe and the U.S.

According to Western intelligence sources, as of 2010, al Qaeda was able to train and deploy back to their home or adopted countries some 100 and 150 persons from Europe and the U.S., among other locales.

Finally, lest there be any remaining doubts about the importance of physical safe haven and training facilities to terrorist organizations in general and those within al Qaeda's orbit in particular, the case of the nearly thirty young Somali-Americans who left the U.S. between 2007 and 2008 to train in terrorism and guerrilla warfare in Somalia provides a salutary remainder.

The youths were radicalized and recruited in the U.S. and trained in Somalia by al Shabaab, the local al Qaeda ally that deliberately

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<sup>2</sup>United States District Court Eastern District of New York, United States of America v. Adis Medunjanin, Abid Nasser, Adnan El Shukrijumah, Tariq Ur Rehman, and FNU LNU, 7 July 2010.

emulates its mentor organization—down to its reliance on training camps and use of the Internet for propaganda purposes.

Indeed, it is believed that their trainer in Somalia was Saleh Ali Nabhan, the longtime al Qaeda commander implicated in both the 1998 bombing of the American embassy in Nairobi and the 2002 attack on Israeli tourists at a hotel in Mombassa, who was reportedly killed in September 2009 by U.S. special operations forces in Somalia. Two of these youths have become the first known Americans to have carried out suicide terrorist attacks.<sup>3</sup>

The *Annual Report 2008*<sup>4</sup> of the Netherlands' General Intelligence and Security Service (*Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst*, or AIVD), had specifically called attention to the growing threat then posed by al Qaeda and its allies because of the sanctuary they had established in Pakistan and elsewhere. The AIVD, it should be noted, is among the most professional and prescient of the world's intelligence and security agencies. Though far smaller than many of its Western counterparts,<sup>5</sup> the AIVD is an elite and perspicacious service that is impressive for its early identification and incisive analysis of emerging trends.

"Al Qaeda's ability to commit and direct terrorist attacks has increased in recent years," the report, which was released in April 2009, unequivocally states. "The AIVD received a growing number of indications that individuals from Europe are receiving military training at camps in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region."<sup>6</sup> Further elucidating this key point, the report goes on to explain how

An analysis conducted in 2008 by the AIVD and verified by fellow services indicates that core Al Qaeda's ability to carry out terrorist attacks has increased in recent years. To a great extent, this is explained by the many alliances Al Qaeda has forged with other networks and groups, both in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region itself and elsewhere in the Islamic world. . . .

One development of particular concern is the growing evidence that people from Europe are undergoing military training at camps in the border region.<sup>7</sup>

The report's conclusion was as disquieting as it was sobering: "This could increase the ability of (core) Al Qaeda and its allies to commit or direct attacks in Europe."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Spencer S. Hsu, "Concern Grows Over Recruitment of Somali Americans by Islamists," *Washington Post*, 4 October 2009.

<sup>4</sup> General Intelligence and Security Service, *Annual Report 2008* (The Hague: Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2009). The report can be accessed at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/netherlands/aivd-2008.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> The AIVD reportedly employs some 1,100 people. See DutchNews LG accessed at: <http://www.dutchnews.nl/dictionary/2006/11/aivd.php>.

<sup>6</sup> General Intelligence and Security Service, *Annual Report 2008*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Earlier in 2008, Spanish authorities had uncovered a terrorist cell in Barcelona, that was planning terrorist attacks against transportation targets in that city. It was directed by the late Pakistani Taliban leader Beituallah Meshud (who was killed in a predator airstrike in 2009). In addition, terrorist cells of other Pakistanis in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, among other places that were subsequently uncovered had similar plans and were also directed by Meshud's Taliban faction from Pakistan. Further, the German terrorists who in September 2008 were arrested and charged with plotting to bomb U.S. military targets in that country had also been trained in Pakistan at a camp run by the IJU (Union of Islamic Jihad), an Uzbek jihadi group closely allied to al Qaeda.

#### **SANCTUARIES AND SAFE HAVENS MATTER TO AL QAEDA**

Despite the evidence to the contrary, the centrality of sanctuaries and safe havens to al Qaeda and its allies and affiliates is often dismissed or discounted. This willful ignoring of recent history may be found in arguments claiming that al Qaeda "requires apartments and not acres"<sup>9</sup> and therefore that the risk of al Qaeda sanctuaries in failed or failing states is distorted and over-blown. It has been most cogently articulated by Paul R. Pillar, a former senior CIA officer, who maintains that planning for the 9/11 attacks did not take place in Afghanistan but in "apartments in Germany, hotel rooms in Spain and flight schools in the United States."<sup>10</sup> Harvard University professor Stephen M. Walt made the same point on his *Foreign Policy.com* blog in 2008 arguing that, "The 9/11 plot was organized out of Hamburg, not Kabul or Kandahar, but nobody is proposing that we send troops to Germany to make sure there aren't 'safe havens' operating there."<sup>11</sup>

However, while it is true that follow-on, *tactical* planning did indeed occur in those places; according to the authoritative *9/11 Commission Report*,<sup>12</sup> among other sources, the location and strategic genesis of the 9/11 attacks, however, indisputably came from al Qaeda's physical sanctuary in Afghanistan. In late 1998/early 1999, for instance, the operation's mastermind, Khaled Sheik Mohammed (KSM), moved to Afghanistan at bin Laden's invitation precisely for this purpose.<sup>13</sup> KSM had admittedly been mulling over such an operation ever since his nephew, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, had returned to Pakistan following the 1993 Trade Center bombing--but the concrete steps towards the plot's execution did not take shape until KSM accepted bin Laden's invitation.<sup>14</sup> Bin Laden subsequently took the idea forward in discussions with his military chief, Mohammed Atef, and KSM at al

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Austin Long of Columbia University coined this phrase in an exchange on the foreign policy list-serve managed by Professor Robert Art, 8 September 2009

<sup>10</sup> Paul R. Pillar, "Who's Afraid of A Terrorist Haven?" *Washington Post*, 16 September 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "The 'safe have' myth," *Foreign Policy.com*, 18 August 2009 accessed at: [http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/08/18/the\\_safe\\_haven\\_myth](http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/08/18/the_safe_haven_myth).

<sup>12</sup> Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Authorized Edition* (New York & London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Qaeda's al Matar complex near Kandahar in the spring of 1999.<sup>15</sup> An "elite" training course was then organized for the four operatives originally selected to pilot the hijacked aircraft at al Qaeda's Mes Aynak camp--also in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

It was only later, towards the end of 1999, that Mohammed Atta and the three other Hamburg operatives entered the picture when they came to Afghanistan to undergo training at al Qaeda camps pursuant to fulfilling their desire to fight (and die) in Chechnya. It was at these al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan that they were then recruited for the 9/11 operation.<sup>17</sup> KSM confirmed all this when he was interviewed by Pakistani journalist Yosri Fouda in 2002.<sup>18</sup> And bin Ladin himself, in the famous "Kandahar Tape," captured by U.S. forces in that city in November 2001 that was broadcast the following month, detailed his own intimate involvement in the planning of the 9/11 attacks—from exactly where he was sitting in Khandahar.

Additional al Qaeda operations also were planned in Afghanistan. The 1999 "Millennium Bomber," Ahmad Ressaam, was trained by KSM at al Qaeda's al Farouk facility in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> And, the 2003 Istanbul suicide bombings were originally conceived at al Qaeda's camp outside of Kandahar immediately following the 9/11 attacks.<sup>20</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

To sum up, al Qaeda's sanctuaries in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia largely account for the movement's survival. These three safe havens figure prominently in the threat that al Qaeda continues to present to the U.S. and the West but also to stability and security of each of those countries today. Failing to deprive al Qaeda and its affiliates and associates of these safe havens and sanctuaries will almost certainly give al Qaeda new momentum and the greater freedom of action that an expanded geographical ambit facilitates. Accordingly sanctuary—and in the form of something larger than an apartment's confines and in the kind of permissive environment that the border straddling Afghanistan and Pakistan and parts of Yemen and Somalia afford—appears to be extremely important to, and highly valued by, al Qaeda and its allies.

Al Qaeda has been compared to the archetypal shark in the water that must keep moving forward—no matter how slowly or incrementally—or die. Whether al Qaeda can in fact do so—and thereby prove that it can survive following its founder and leader's killing last month—is surely the most pressing question of the moment.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-159.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 160-166.

<sup>18</sup> Yosri Fouda and Nick Fielding, *Masterminds of Terror: The Truth Behind the Most Devastating Terrorist Attack Ever Seen* (NY: Arcade, 2003), pp. 123-128

<sup>19</sup> Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 177, 261 & fn. 5, p. 500.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Vick, "Al Qaeda's Hand In Istanbul Plot: Turks Met With Bin Laden," *Washington Post*, 13 February 2007, accessed at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021201715\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021201715_pf.html))

In these circumstances, the U.S. must remain vigilant and avoid complacency and the temptation to lower our guard. Al Qaeda has always regarded this as a generational struggle that goes beyond the purview or interests of any one individual. The loss of Usama bin Laden will not affect that calculus.

Accordingly, the U.S. should continue to kill and capture al Qaeda leaders and operatives as it has so effectively done, especially during the past three years of stepped up aerial drone attacks. At the same time, the U.S. must also continue to deprive al Qaeda and its leaders of the sanctuaries and safe havens that it depends on.

Thus, the highest priority for the U.S. must be to concentrate our attention on al Qaeda as a networked global phenomenon—not as in the past as one enemy, in one place, at one time. Today, there are several al Qaedas in a variety of places, each with different capabilities. This will require both continued U.S. military and intelligence operations in South Asia alongside a continual scanning of the horizon to counter al Qaeda's presence in, and prevent its expansion to, failing and failed states.

At the foundation of the type of dynamic and adaptive strategy needed to defeat terrorists and insurgents alike in these variegated locales is the ineluctable axiom that successfully countering these threats is not exclusively a military endeavor but also involves fundamental parallel political, social, economic, and ideological activities.

The predominantly tactical "kill or capture" approach and metric encapsulated by the targeted assassination focused drone program is too narrow and does not sufficiently address the complexities of these unique operational environments. The adversaries and the threats that the U.S. faces today in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere are much more elusive and complicated to be vanquished by mere decapitation. What is required to ensure success is a more integrated approach to a threat that is at once operationally durable, evolutionary and elusive in character.

An effective strategy will thus combine the tactical elements of systematically destroying and weakening enemy capabilities alongside the equally critical, broader strategic imperative of breaking the cycle of terrorist and insurgent recruitment and replenishment that have respectively sustained al Qaeda and fueled and its allies in Yemen and Somalia as well.<sup>21</sup> Enhanced, improved and better coordinated

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<sup>21</sup> Secretary Gates made exactly this point in his September 2008 speech at the National Defense University. "In the long-term effort against terrorist networks and other extremists, we know that direct military force will continue to have a role. But we also understand that over the long term, we cannot kill or capture our way to victory. Where possible, kinetic operations should be subordinate to measures to promote better governance, economic programs to spur development, and efforts to address the grievances among the discontented from which the terrorists recruit." See U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), Speech: National Defense University (Washington, D.C.), As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Washington, D.C., Monday, September 29, 2008 accessed at:



information operations will be a critical element of this approach.<sup>22</sup> These also will entail the building of host-nation capabilities to a greater and more sustained extent than currently exists.

In conclusion, it would be dangerously precipitous at this time to declare total victory. Al Qaeda's hopes of renewal and re-generation in the aftermath of bin Laden's killing rest on its continued access to the geographical sanctuaries and safe havens that the movement has always depended on and historically have used as bases from which to plot and plan and launch international terrorist strikes. Only by depriving al Qaeda of those sanctuaries, destroying the organization's leadership, and disrupting the continued resonance of its message will al Qaeda finally be defeated.

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<http://www.defenselink.mil/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1279>.

<sup>22</sup> Secretary Gates was explicit on this point as well. "Retired Marine Colonel T. X. Hammes has noted that where past insurgencies consisted of military campaigns supported by information operations, they now often consist of strategic communications campaigns supported by military operations. In Iraq and Afghanistan, extremists have made deft use of the internet and propaganda to misinform and intimidate local populations. See Ibid.