Chapter 2

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

Introduction

The annual *Country Reports on Terrorism* is designed to meet a Congressional requirement for a full and complete annual report on terrorism for countries and groups that meet the criteria of Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656(f).

But at a time when our nation is engaged in a global war on terror, the *Country Reports* also serve a broader purpose -- to summarize key developments in the international campaign against terrorism. This chapter of the *Country Reports* provides such a summary, and complements the detailed observations contained in other parts of the document.

General Trends in Terrorism

This chapter focuses primarily on al-Qaida (AQ) and associated networks. This is appropriate, given that these networks represent the most prominent current terrorist threat to the United States and our international partners. However, some general trends -- beyond solely al-Qaida and its affiliates -- are relevant in considering the broader phenomenon of terrorism. These include:

- **Micro-actors**. Increasingly, small autonomous cells and individuals drew on advanced technologies and the tools of globalization such as the Internet, satellite communications, and international commerce. When combined with the motivation to commit a terrorist act, these technologically empowered small groups represented "micro-actors" who were extremely difficult to detect or counter.

- **Sophistication**. Many terrorists worldwide moved to improve their sophistication in exploiting the global interchange of information, finance, and ideas. They also improved their technological sophistication across many areas of operational planning, communications, targeting, and propaganda.

- **Overlap with transnational crime**. In some cases, terrorists used the same networks used by transnational criminal groups, exploiting the overlap between these networks to improve mobility, build support for their terrorist agenda, and avoid detection.

Key Judgments

During 2005, evidence began to emerge that, in the face of counterterrorism successes, central al-Qaida (AQ) leaders were seeking new ways to interact with associated networks. By year's end, it appeared that AQ senior leadership often inspired terrorist activity but could not direct it as fully as in the past.

Although the international community's actions have degraded the ability of the core AQ leadership group -- Usama bin Ladin and his immediate lieutenants -- to mount global acts of

terrorism, AQ and its affiliates' political will has not been undermined. Terrorists continued to attempt to adapt to improved countermeasures and evolve new approaches in response to a less permissive operating environment. In 2005, we saw indications of:

- An increasing AQ emphasis on ideological and propaganda activity to help advance its cause. This led to cooperation with al-Qaida in Iraq, the organization led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and with AQ affiliates around the globe, as well as with a new generation of Sunni extremists;

- The proliferation of smaller, looser terrorist networks that are less capable but also less predictable;

- An increased capacity for acts of terror by local terrorists with foreign ties (demonstrated in the July 7 London bombings);

- An increase in suicide bombings. The July 7 London bombing was the first such attack in Europe (three of the four terrorists were second-generation British citizens of South Asian descent); we also noted a marked increase in suicide bombings in Afghanistan;

- The growth of strategically significant networks that support the flow of foreign terrorists to Iraq.

AQ Core Leadership: Transition and Regeneration

Before 9/11, core AQ leaders tended to guide and direct the struggle, as well as provide funds, training, and technical expertise to allied networks. In particular, the core leadership played a key role in transnational "spectacular" attacks like those of September 11, 2001, that required international planning and coordination.

The arrest or death of two key operational planners in the span of half a year during 2005 forced AQ to adapt to broken command-and-control lines and to increased pressure in a region they had previously considered a safe haven. AQ's leaders are scattered and on the run; its Afghan safe haven is gone; its relationship with the Taliban has diminished; its finances and logistics have been disrupted; and its organizational networks previously centered on Afghanistan are now more decentralized.

AQ's core leadership continues to influence and provide ideological guidance to followers worldwide. By remaining at large, and intermittently vocal, bin Ladin and Zawahiri symbolize resistance to the international community, demonstrate they retain the capability to influence events, and inspire actual and potential terrorists.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that core leaders including bin Ladin and Zawahiri are somewhat frustrated by their lack of direct control, as demonstrated by the Zawahiri-Zarqawi correspondence of October, in which AQ's principal ideologue, Ayman al-Zawahiri, chided Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for his choice of tactics, sought to influence his strategy, and asked for financial support.

Looser, Local Networks

Parallel to the changing role of AQ's core leaders, there is evidence that AQ's global networks were beginning to disaggregate. What was once a relatively structured network appeared to be a more diffuse worldwide movement of like-minded individuals and small groups, sharing grievances and objectives, but not necessarily organized formally. While AQ-linked trainers or facilitators often acted as catalysts for terrorist activity, this was no longer strictly necessary in functional terms, and self-sufficient cells have begun to emerge.

This new generation of extremists, some of whom are self-selected and self-radicalized, is not easy to categorize. Some cells are composed of individuals from the same ethnic group, often an insular "band of brothers" that is difficult to identify or penetrate.

Others became radicalized "virtually," meeting in cyberspace and gaining their training and expertise in part from what they glean from the Internet. Just as some groups in the flattened global terrorist movement are ethnically defined, other cells are mixtures, such as the July 7 London bombers, who included a convert along with second-generation British citizens of South Asian descent.

This trend means there could be a larger number of smaller attacks, less meticulously planned, and local rather than transnational in scope. An increasing number of these attacks could fail through lack of skill or equipment, in the same way that the July 21 London attack did.

The Connection between Iraq and the Broader War on Terrorism

President George W. Bush shakes hands with troops after making remarks on the War on Terror before some 25,000 service members in April at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas. (AFP Photo/Tim Sloan)

Iraq remains a key front in the global war on terror. US, Coalition, and Iraqi forces are engaging international terrorists as part of the security mission mandated by UNSCR 1546 and 1637 in support of the democractically-elected Iraqi government.

Terrorist attacks are frequent and are conducted by Islamic extremists, former regime elements, and foreign terrorists. The terrorists share a common opposition to the legitimate Iraqi government and the presence of Coalition forces. Al-Qaida's senior leaders have fully supported the Iraq terrorist movements and see it both as a means to influence and radicalize Muslim public opinion worldwide and as a magnet to draw in as many recruits as possible.

The two most prominent terrorist groups in Iraq are al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and Ansar al-Sunna (AS). Both have strong ties to al-Qaida's central leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan and are committed to establishing a theocratic state in Iraq ruled under Sharia law. Moreover, they dream of turning Iraq into what Afghanistan was under the Taliban – a safe haven from which to plot and plan new attacks against the United States and its allies.

The enemies of Iraq are determined to prevent the development of a democratic society, to ignite a civil war, and to pit the Iraqi people against one another. As Zarqawi wrote in his 2004 letter to bin Ladin, "If we succeed in dragging the Shia into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger … the only solution for us is to strike the religious, military, and other cadres among the Shia blow after blow."

The December election in Iraq exposed divisions among the rejectionists and the terrorists over participation in the political process. There were numerous reports in western and north-central Iraq of local Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups engaged in armed disputes (in some cases, deliberate operations) against al-Qaida of Iraq (AQI) over its targeting of Iraqis and opposition to the election.

Threats, plots, and cells linked to the Iraq conflict have been uncovered in several regions of the world. A system of clandestine support networks funneled foreign terrorists to Iraq from the Middle East, Europe, North Africa, South and Central Asia, and the Caucasus. The networks were strategically significant in their own right, because they pose an enduring threat to their parent societies after the immediate conflict in Iraq has diminished.

In 2005 AQI increased its external operations, claiming credit for three attacks. Most significant was the November 9 suicide attack against hotels in Amman, Jordan, carried out by AQI. In August, AQI claimed responsibility for a rocket attack against U.S. Navy ships in the port of Aqaba, which resulted in limited damage in Jordan and Eilat, Israel. In late December, AQI also claimed credit for firing several rockets into Israel from Lebanon. In addition, in August Turkish authorities arrested Luay Sakka, a Syrian national linked to al-Qaida and the Zarqawi network. Sakka is an important international terrorist, connected to the funding of the November 2003 Istanbul bombings and the deaths of U.S. and Coalition forces in Iraq. Sakka was in Turkey allegedly plotting a terrorist attack on Israeli cruise ships in Turkish ports.

As articulated in the 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America,* there will be a continuing need for concerted action to ensure that Iraq does not become a safe haven for terrorist groups, and to build enduring partnerships with capable institutions in Iraq and the broader region.

Conclusion

Although events of 2005 depict a rapidly changing situation, some conclusions emerge:

- Al-Qaida is not the organization it was four years ago. International efforts have largely succeeded in denying the group its Afghan safe haven, have disrupted its operations, and have killed or captured many of the men in leadership positions.

- The group was adaptive and resilient, however, and important members of its core cadre remained alive and were adjusting to our operational tempo.

- Overall, we are still in the first phase of a potentially long war. The enemy's proven ability to adapt means we will probably go through several more cycles of action/reaction before the war's outcome is no longer in doubt. It is likely that we will face a resilient enemy for years to come.