

Sunni Islamist Militancy in the Region and Beyond

Yoram Schweitzer and Jonathan Schachter

In 2009, efforts by al-Qaeda and the various global jihad splinter groups affiliated with it to carry out terrorist activities with familiar operational characteristics – showcase multi-casualty attacks and suicide bombings – continued unabated in locales around the world. This year most of the activity shifted away from the Iraqi arena, which in recent years was the focus for global jihadists, to the Afghanistan and Pakistan combat arena. In the Afghan-Pakistani arena, al-Qaeda and other jihadists operate alongside local Taliban operatives. At the same time, ties have grown closer between al-Qaeda Central and regional organizations on the various front lines, in particular in the Arabian Peninsula, the Maghreb, and East Africa. These ties help upgrade the activities of the local activists and place new emphasis on senior local government and foreign targets. Also this past year a number of terrorist cells and operatives were discovered in the United States; these elements demonstrated that al-Qaeda intends to persevere in its attempts to carry out terrorist acts on American sovereign territory through the use of American as well as foreign nationals.

The results of the concerted effort by the United States and its allies in the campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan will influence the ability of al-Qaeda and the global jihadists to act in that local arena and beyond. The organizations continue to prepare for large operations by training operatives from various countries, including those in the West, to be sent on terrorist missions. The degree of success of counterterrorism activity, as well as the capability of local security services

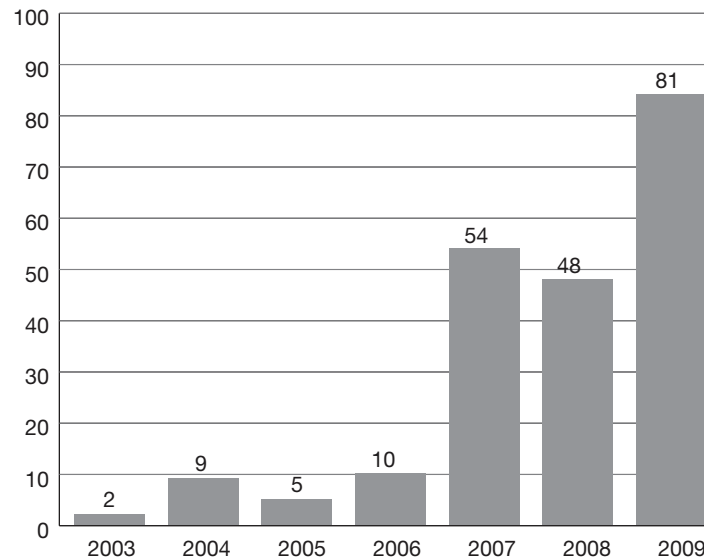
in Middle Eastern countries to foil attempted attacks, will to a large extent dictate the nature and extent of global jihadist anti-Israel activities, as from their perspective Israel remains a desirable target for attack.

The Afghan-Pakistani Arena

In the past year, the Afghan and Pakistani arenas became more firmly established as the focus of the principal international struggle against terrorism, led by the United States and NATO members in cooperation with the relevant states, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In light of the bleak picture prevalent in Afghanistan following the Afghan Taliban's takeover of most of the country, the United States, under the direction of President Barack Obama, reassessed its performance in the region and adopted a new fighting strategy. As a part of the new policy, US forces in Afghanistan would be supplemented by some 30,000 soldiers for a period of about eighteen months, after which these forces would be withdrawn. Later, it was decided that the withdrawal would take place after a new situational assessment.¹ The American forces were deployed in Afghanistan gradually, and at first they concentrated their activities in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, the primary strongholds of the Afghan Taliban and its affiliates.

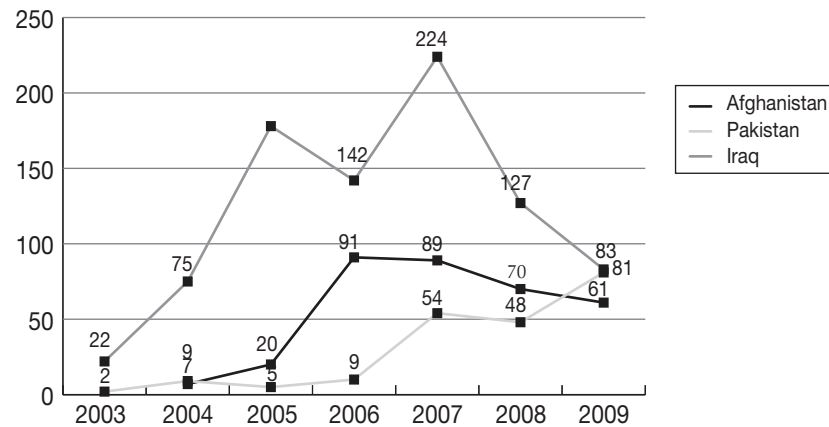
The confrontation arena expanded, with the Pakistani Taliban and their Afghan affiliates taking refuge in the northwestern provinces of Pakistan. Pakistan, which is largely responsible for the growth of the Taliban, has for years straddled the fence with regard to tackling the group. However, several developments compelled the Pakistani regime to assist in the fighting: an attack by the Pakistani Taliban – the TTP – in the Swat Valley, which began in late 2008 and continued until mid-2009 and threatened to spread towards the capital of Islamabad; escalation in guerilla and terrorist activities, including suicide bombings in numerous Pakistani cities (figures 1 and 2); and substantial American pressure on the government. In addition, Pakistan allowed American forces and armed RPVs – albeit unofficially – to carry out limited attacks on al-Qaeda and Taliban elements in Pakistani territory. In 2009, these strikes were an especially prominent part of the effort: the Americans carried out 59 drone attacks against senior al-Qaeda and Taliban personnel (a 47 percent increase compared to 2008).² The first quarter of 2010 already saw 22 such attacks.³

Figure 1. Suicide Attacks in Pakistan



Source: INSS Program on Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict database

Figure 2. Suicide Attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan



Source: INSS Program on Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict database

Note: The increase in the number of suicide attacks in Pakistan is especially noteworthy in comparison with the parallel arenas of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda Central, which in recent years strengthened its infrastructure, particularly in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of the Afghan-Pakistani border region, has cooperated with the Taliban and established even closer ties with it while maintaining an autonomous organizational hierarchy. In order to fight common enemies, however, al-Qaeda subordinated its military units and regional commands – including its operational battalion, Leshkar al-Zil – to the Afghan Taliban’s military force and made a special contribution in the form of special operations. A prominent example of this cooperation was the infiltration by a Jordanian double agent, Dr. Khalil Balawi, of the CIA’s Camp Chapman, where he carried out a suicide attack on December 30, 2009. Eight people were killed, including seven senior CIA agents and Balawi’s Jordanian handler. Those killed led the covert intelligence campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the region. Their elimination was a severe blow to the Americans and an al-Qaeda-Taliban intelligence and operational success.⁴

Similarly, al-Qaeda continued to maintain close ties with the Islamist terrorist groups that share al-Qaeda’s philosophy and also cooperate with the Taliban, including the Kashmiri Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Harakat al-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI) and the Uzbeki Islamic Jihad (IJU). Al-Qaeda continues to enlist and train reserves of Muslim activists and Western converts to Islam for future terrorist activity in the West.⁵ The division responsible for al-Qaeda activity throughout the world continues to operate, despite the severe blows rendered to it by American-led activity, which damaged the leadership and in recent years caused the death or imprisonment of prominent operational personnel.

Unification Trends

Guided by its philosophy and strategy, al-Qaeda is working hard at encouraging unification and cooperation between the organizations supporting militant jihad across the globe. Al-Qaeda’s philosophy maintains that uniting the ranks and forming inter-organizational fronts to operate in specific geographical areas is crucial to the success of global jihad. Therefore, al-Qaeda promotes this trend and even accedes, albeit

selectively, to requests by local front organizations to unite and carry its name along with their own. Al-Qaeda is careful to respond to unification and cooperation requests made by organizations that demonstrate real ability to act and that are ready to attack international targets, whether in their local arenas or beyond. As part of such cooperation, these organizations swear allegiance (*ba'iaa*) to Bin Laden and declare their acceptance of his leadership as the emir of al-Qaeda. This was the basis for the cooperation between al-Qaeda and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who led the activities of al-Qaeda in Iraq (al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers) until his death in 2006; this was the case with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (which announced its merger with al-Qaeda at the end of 2006); and this is what happened in 2009 when al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (al-Qaeda in the Hijaz) swore allegiance to Bin Laden and merged the Saudi al-Qaeda with the Yemeni al-Qaeda.⁶ In January 2010, the Somali group al-Shabab also announced that it was formally joining al-Qaeda after several of its leaders declared their support for global jihad in 2009 and swore allegiance to Bin Laden.⁷ Al-Qaeda has yet to formally accept this organization under its umbrella, but in 2009 Zawahiri expressed support for al-Shabab activities.⁸

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

As a result of vigorous activity by Saudi security services against al-Qaeda operatives in Saudi Arabia, including systematic arrests and elimination of suspects appearing on wanted lists, those who managed to elude capture were forced to flee to Yemen across the long and largely unguarded common border. With the encouragement of al-Qaeda Central, the Saudi and Yemeni organizations merged under the leadership of Nasser Wakhayshi, a former secretary of Bin Laden who escaped from a Yemeni jail in 2006. In 2009, the united organization committed a number of daring attacks, including an attempt in August to murder the Saudi deputy minister of the interior. The agent, who hid an explosive charge in his underwear, managed to secure a personal meeting with Prince Mohammad bin Naif bin Abd al-Aziz al-Saud on the pretext of seeking a personal pardon from him in honor of his decision to retire from terrorist activity.⁹ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was likewise behind the attempted attack on a Northwest Airlines flight to Detroit on Christmas Day by Umar Farouk Abd al-Mutallab, also with

explosives hidden in his underwear. In an audiotape released by Bin Laden (January 24, 2010), he praised the act and its perpetrator, and threatened additional attacks in the future.¹⁰

In part to fulfill al-Qaeda Central doctrine and expand the range of targets, and in part to target Israel, Sa'id al-Shaharai, the deputy commander in the Arabian peninsula, called for using the closer ties forged between the organizations to attack the interests of Israel and its supporters around the world, in particular focusing on blocking Israel's access to the Red Sea.¹¹

The Somali al-Shabab

The Somali organization al-Shabab is an important example of inter-organizational cooperation with al-Qaeda. The organization is the youth movement and the militant faction of the Islamic Courts Union, which controlled Somalia until its ouster in 2006 following the incursion of Ethiopian forces into the country. This organization gradually adopted al-Qaeda's ideology and enlisted senior al-Qaeda operatives into its ranks, who then assumed prominent leadership positions. Sallah Nabahan, for example, a senior member of an al-Qaeda Central cell that carried out the attack against the Arkia Airlines plane and the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa in November 2002, became the head of the military wing. After the attack, Nabahan fled to Somalia and was absorbed into the organization's leadership. He was killed by the Americans in September 2009; his senior rank in the Somali organization was fully revealed in the eulogies published by the organization in his memory.¹² After his death, he was succeeded in the organization's leadership by Fasoul Haroun, who was also involved in the attack in Mombasa and who in August 1998 participated in the double attack against the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.¹³

This organization has adopted the operating patterns of al-Qaeda, upgraded its activity to include attacks on decision makers in Somalia, and adopted suicide attacks – al-Qaeda's trademark – in its repertoire of activities. In 2009, al-Shabab committed a number of major attacks, including the suicide bombing at the Medinah Hotel (June 18, 2009) in which 35 people were killed, including the Somali defense minister and members of the diplomatic corps,¹⁴ and a suicide bombing during a medical school graduation ceremony (December 4, 2009), in which three Somali

government ministers, in addition to graduating students, were killed.¹⁵ The organization had already carried out suicide attacks in 2008 and 2009 with American volunteers of Somali extraction.¹⁶

On November 1, 2009, the leader of al-Shabab declared that his organization had established a special unit called the al-Quds Brigade that would focus on harming Israeli interests in Africa and would even send operatives to Israel and the Gaza Strip to help “free the Islamic holy places.”¹⁷ There is a risk that the flow of African infiltrators into Israel in recent years might facilitate the organization’s efforts to insert its own operatives into Israel for the purpose of carrying out terrorist attacks.

Terrorism in the United States

The attempted attack on the Northwest flight in December 2009 by a Nigerian would-be suicide bomber sent by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula¹⁸ served as a reminder that al-Qaeda and its affiliates have not abandoned their intention to carry out terrorist attacks on American soil. This attack joins a list of actions planned in 2009-10, for the most part foiled with arrests in the United States and elsewhere of American citizens and immigrants, most of whom were of Muslim descent. The people involved in these incidents had adopted the philosophy of global jihad and at a certain point some of them volunteered for training, usually in the Afghan-Pakistani region, with terrorists belonging to or identified with al-Qaeda. Some of the operatives intended to carry out attacks in the US, and some left the US to carry out attacks elsewhere in the world. Daoud Gilani (age 49, also known as David Coleman Headley), is a native-born American with a Pakistani father and American mother who moved to the United States as a teen. He was arrested in Chicago in December 2009 for his involvement in intelligence gathering that served the Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba in its major attack in November 2008 in Mumbai, in which over 160 people were killed, including eight Israelis and Jews. Gilani and his Pakistani-American partner were also instructed to carry out an attack against a Danish newspaper’s editorial staff to avenge the paper’s publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad that were deemed offensive to Islam.¹⁹

In another incident, Najibullah Zazi (age 24), a native of Afghanistan who immigrated with his family to the United States and lived in New York,

was arrested in September 2009. After marrying his cousin in Pakistan, he joined up with radicals and enlisted in the ranks of global jihad. He volunteered for training at an al-Qaeda camp in the Peshawar region of Pakistan. In 2009 he returned to the United States and was directed by his handler to gather intelligence about transportation and sports arena targets; he even amassed materials for preparing explosive charges to carry out a suicide bombing at a Manhattan subway station.²⁰ On February 22, 2010, Zazi pled guilty to the charges against him.²¹ His partner in the planned attack, Zarian Ahmadzei, pled guilty on April 23, 2010, and claimed that in 2008 two senior al-Qaeda members in Pakistan instructed them to carry out the attack.²²

In October 2008, Bryant Neal Vinas was arrested. Vinas, a Christian American convert to Islam who trained in explosives at an al-Qaeda camp in Waziristan, took part in al-Qaeda attacks against American bases in Afghanistan and even volunteered for a suicide bombing on behalf of the organization in Afghanistan. His request, however, was denied because of the assessment that as an American citizen he would be able to serve the organization in future activities on American soil. The indictment against him included information about additional attacks planned for Belgium, which were to have been carried out by members of another terrorist cell with which he was in contact. To date the details of that affair remain undisclosed.²³

The Fort Hood, Texas active shooter attack in November 2009, carried out by Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a psychiatrist in the US Army who is a Muslim American of Palestinian extraction, resulted in the deaths of twelve soldiers and a civilian and the wounding of some thirty soldiers and bystanders. The attack served as a fresh reminder of terrorist activity in the United States inspired by global jihad incitement. Under interrogation, Hasan, who survived, though he was paralyzed by police fire, revealed his close ties to Anwar al-Awlaki, an extremist Muslim cleric of Yemeni extraction who was born in the United States and lived there for some years before returning to Yemen. There he acts as one of the most virulent preachers in favor of terrorism against the United States, and his name has been mentioned as one of the people who influenced the would-be Christmas airplane bomber.²⁴

Additional attacks in the United States, including some planned by American citizens, and carried out or foiled in 2009, include the following: In May, four Muslim Americans (including three who had converted to Islam in prison) were arrested immediately after placing fake bombs in cars near a synagogue and Jewish community center in New York. Operatives collaborating with the FBI supplied the bombs.²⁵ On June 1, Abd al-Hakim Mujahad Muhammad, an American convert to Islam, opened fire at a US Army recruitment center in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing one soldier and wounding another. There are contradictory reports regarding Muhammad's motives and his links to terrorists in the Middle East, but it was reported that he had been arrested in Yemen where he was jailed for some months in 2007-8, then expelled to the United States. Similarly, it was reported that before the shooting attack he had gathered intelligence on Jewish targets throughout the United States.²⁶ In September, there were two unconnected attempts to blow up buildings in the United States. In Springfield, Illinois, Michael Finton, an American convert to Islam, attempted to activate a fake car bomb supplied by the FBI next to a federal government building in the city and was arrested. On the same day, Maher Hussein Smadi, a Jordanian citizen, was arrested after also trying to set off a fake car bomb, again supplied by the FBI, next to a skyscraper in Dallas.²⁷ Other developments include the involvement of American citizens of Somali extraction who were American-educated from birth (in Minneapolis, which has the highest concentration of Somali immigrants in the US) and who volunteered to fight in Somalia. At least two Somalis from the United States carried out suicide bombings in Somalia in the name of the local al-Shabab. Should this organization choose to send Somali American citizens to carry out suicide bombings on American soil, under the direction of al-Qaeda or with its blessing, it will likely not lack for volunteers.²⁸

The success of the American intelligence and enforcement services in foiling attempts to carry out terrorist acts in the United States is impressive. Nonetheless, the renewed vigor in recent years to bring terrorism to America using local operatives, Muslims, and converts to Islam, and even to export terrorism by American citizens to other countries highlights the risk to the United States from within, and is liable at some point to prevail over the opposing efforts of the security services.

The participation of American citizens in jihad activities, especially those who do not hail from the Middle East, represents a danger to Israel because it is relatively easy for American citizens to enter Israel. Israel may encounter an attempt to repeat the pattern of the terrorists who attacked Mike's Place in Tel Aviv (2003), who arrived in Israel on British passports and operated on behalf of Hamas.

Global Jihad in the Middle East

In the last year, sporadic attempts by global jihadists to carry out attacks throughout the Middle East persisted. Members of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb continued to act in Algeria and abroad. Most of their activity in Algeria consisted of ambushing military forces, but it also included kidnapping Westerners for ransom, which catered to al-Qaeda Central's demand to pursue terrorist activities with an international flavor. In early January 2009, British journalist Edwin Dwyer was kidnapped in Niger, along with other four Europeans. In June, the organization announced that the British subject had been executed as a warning to British and American citizens concerning their continuing involvement in the Muslim world and cooperation with the Jews. Also in January, the Canadian UN representative, Robert Fowler, and his deputy were kidnapped on the border between Niger and Mali. In August, the organization carried out a suicide bombing at the French embassy in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. Two security guards were lightly injured in the attack, the first of its kind in the country.²⁹ A shooting attack against the Israeli embassy there took place in February 2008, about a year after Zawahiri called on his followers to attack the embassy.³⁰

In Jordan security services continued their effective efforts to prevent attacks by local supporters of global jihad, but in early 2010 an attack was carried out against a convoy of Israeli diplomatic vehicles en route to Israel. The attack was carried out by setting off an explosive charge in an ambush and was the product of extensive intelligence gathering. Local global jihadists were suspected in the attack, which was fairly amateurish in its execution and caused no fatalities.

On February 22 a terrorist attack was carried out in the Khan al-Halili marketplace in Egypt by means of two explosive charges hidden near a café

full of foreign tourists. One of the charges exploded while the other was rendered safe.³¹ The attack killed a French tourist and injured 24 people, mostly tourists from France. Another large attack targeting tourists and vacation spots was foiled in 2008 and led to a string of arrests during 2009. The planned attack was attributed to jihadists with links to Hizbollah.³²

In recent years, there were at least four incidents of rocket fire (in January, February, September, and October³³) from Lebanon towards northern Israel, none of which caused any damage or casualties. Elements identified with global jihad, apparently belonging to Fatah al-Islam, assumed responsibility for the attacks. In the Gaza Strip, global jihadists have rejected Hamas's willingness to participate in the Palestinian political system, opposed the organization's agreement to a de facto ceasefire with Israel, and continued their efforts to drag Hamas into a confrontation with Israel. Thus since the end of the fighting in January 2009 Hamas has taken care to avoid shooting rockets at Israel and made efforts to prevent others from doing so in order to avoid a fierce response from Israel. Terrorist elements in Gaza, mostly those belonging to global jihadist groups, have continued sporadic rocket and mortar fire at Israel. From the end of Operation Cast Lead until March 2010, these groups fired 220 volleys.³⁴

Similarly, members of the Jaljalat (elements identified with global jihad in Gaza) continued to try to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel. In June 2009 members of Jund Ansar Allah (Soldiers of the Companions of God) attempted a massive attack using suicide bombers riding booby-trapped horses in order to abduct Israeli soldiers. The attack was foiled without Israeli casualties.³⁵ On August 14, 2009, against the background of ongoing tension between Hamas and Jaljalat members and following sermons of incitement by the Jund Ansar Allah leader, the imam of the mosque in Rafah, Hamas's security services acted forcefully against organization members who had barricaded themselves in the mosque.³⁶ Twenty-four people were killed and more than 130 were wounded.

Conclusion

Recent trends in the struggle against international terrorism are likely to continue in the coming years, especially the direct confrontation in the Afghan-Pakistani arena. There has been a significant decrease in the

number of terrorist attacks in the Iraqi arena, formerly an important locus of the fighting, and the power of al-Qaeda in Iraq has been curtailed. At the same time, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of attacks in the Afghan-Pakistani arena, which has become the center for al-Qaeda activity and remains the home base of the central leadership.

The decision to deploy 30,000 more American troops in the region indicates that President Obama and his advisors understand very well the importance of this arena in the struggle against global jihad in general and al-Qaeda in particular. Similarly, it seems that the bitter experience in Pakistan in recent years has pushed the regime to act against terrorists with greater vigor than before and to cooperate more closely with the United States, if only by means of turning a blind eye to American activity on Pakistani soil or at least in Pakistani airspace. The results of the intensifying confrontation between al-Qaeda and American and NATO forces in this arena are likely to determine the fate of al-Qaeda Central in the next several years and may also bring about changes in the group's organizational structure and its patterns of activity.

The American struggle against Islamist terrorism continues and is expanding to include activity in the United States proper. Despite ongoing efforts to secure America's sovereign territory against external enemies, 2009 saw a significant number of attempted attacks by American citizens on American soil. Although Muslim immigrants have generally integrated successfully into American society, certainly better than in host nations in Europe, it has become clear that there is still a real danger that a small number of immigrants and converts to Islam will adopt global jihad ideology and translate their beliefs into terrorist activities.

Adopting aggressive, resolute policies, security services of Middle East states continued relatively successfully to foil attempted attacks by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. In most instances, terrorist networks and operatives were arrested in time. In the Arabian Peninsula, activity in Yemen was especially prominent over the past year because of the difficulties of the local regime in tackling the challenge of terrorism. As a result, the United States increased its efforts to help Yemen act effectively against al-Qaeda, and the level of success will be examined over the next few years.

Israel continues to figure as a declared target for al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Alongside its own routine preventive efforts with regard to terrorism, Israel benefits from the preventive efforts of its neighboring states, especially Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. In addition, the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip continues to work at consolidating its exclusive rule in the Strip and its monopoly on the use of force, and therefore is acting to curb local global jihadists – the Jaljalat – which seek to continue attacking Israel and thus set off another round of fighting between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza arena.

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