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The Return of al-Qaida

Current Developments in International Terrorism and Their Consequences for Europe

Guido Steinberg

The al-Qaida leadership around Usama Bin Laden and his deputy Aiman al-Zawahiri used the year 2007 for an unprecedented public relations campaign. Never before had leading representatives of the organization been seen and heard so frequently in video and audio messages. The campaign's climax was a videotape from early September 2007 in which Bin Laden himself appeared on film for the first time since 2004 sharply criticizing the war in Iraq and the US presence in Afghanistan. This media resurgence raises the question whether al-Qaida's intensified activities represent desperate attempts to gain attention in the mass media and thus constitute signs of decline, or whether they should be interpreted as signs of a renewed strength that is being further reinforced through the organization's increased utilization of the media.

Al-Qaida's intensified "public relations" campaign is an indication of its regained strength. The aforementioned activities clearly reveal that the al-Qaida leadership in its refuge in Pakistan is feeling more and more secure and believes that it can afford to risk discovery by sending these files. The stress of being under pursuit that had pushed al-Qaida to the verge of total collapse in 2003 has now decreased significantly. For this reason, the original al-Qaida leadership around Bin Laden and Zawahiri has been able to reestablish itself as a terrorist command center. The group's increased public presence, however, is due to the fact that particularly in Europe, an increasing number of young Muslims are hungrily devouring the ideological and strategic edicts issued from the mountains

of Pakistan, and are frequently putting them into practice in terrorist activities of their own. At the same time, organizations that had once operated separately—al-Qaida, al-Qaida in Iraq, and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb—are growing closer, both ideologically and strategically. The focal points of their activities lie in Pakistan and Afghanistan, in Iraq and the Arab East, in North Africa as well as in Europe.

The al-Qaida Headquarters

The changed priorities of the United States in its war on terrorism have played a decisive role in strengthening al-Qaida. Since 2002/2003, the US administration has been compelled to divert the intelligence and military resources previously concentrated

on Afghanistan and Pakistan to the war in Iraq and counterinsurgency there. Since the al-Qaida leadership is currently staying in Pakistan's border region with Afghanistan, the consequences of this shift have been serious: while in 2002 and 2003 the US worked very successfully with Pakistani authorities to apprehend important al-Qaida operatives, thus significantly weakening the organization, American efforts at fighting terrorism since then have become much less effective.

Al-Qaida also profits from the weakness of the Pakistani government in the tribal regions along the Afghan border. Clear evidence of this weakness is the September 2006 Treaty of Miranshah between the Pakistani government and tribal leaders in North Waziristan, in which the government pledged to withdraw its troops from the region and discontinue military operations against the militant groups there, while the tribal leaders agreed to prevent fighters from entering Afghanistan. The agreement contributed to the emergence of "ungoverned spaces on both sides of the Durand Line that militant groups will use as a safe haven for the foreseeable future" (Citha D. Maaß and Christian Wagner, *Frieden in Waziristan*, SWP-Aktuell 46/06), and allowed the "Talibanization" of the region to continue virtually unchecked. The now failed agreement took pressure off al-Qaida and its allies in the tribal regions and granted it increased freedom of movement. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, al-Qaida has also intensified its contacts in Iraq and profited from the experiences of the al-Qaida organization there. According to the article, even some Iraq war veterans are training combatants in al-Qaida's training camps in Pakistan.

Al-Qaida's financial situation has also improved since 2007. While the organization was in dire financial straits between 2003 and 2006, it now seems to have overcome these problems. The most important source of financing still comes from the Gulf region: successes in the war against the US in Iraq and Afghanistan appear to

be motivating private donors from the Arab Gulf states to make increased donations to al-Qaida. But whether al-Qaida in Iraq has a part in financing the al-Qaida headquarters in Pakistan as US government sources have indicated is questionable at the very least.

New leaders

The organization's resurgence is rooted in its capacity to replace slain or incarcerated functionaries with new leaders. Al-Qaida has thus succeeded again and again since 2001 in recovering from its most severe losses, particularly at the middle leadership level comprising the "heads of operations" and "field commanders" in charge of planning and coordinating terrorist attacks. To take the place of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, for example, the principal architect of the 9/11 attacks who was arrested in March 2003, new leaders have appeared. In May 2007, the Egyptian Mustafa Abu al-Yazid was named commander of al-Qaida operations in Afghanistan and liaison to the Taliban. Possibly the most important al-Qaida leader at present is the Libyan Abu Laith al-Libi, who is also currently residing in the Pakistani-Afghan border region. Finally, there is the Egyptian Abu Ubaida al-Masri, who is believed to have been behind the 2005 London underground bombings and the 2006 transatlantic aircraft plot.

The new middle level of the al-Qaida leadership has often criticized the organization's practices. Abu al-Yazid, for example, spoke out against the September 11 terrorist attacks because he feared a US attack on the Taliban and the resulting loss of al-Qaida's base in Afghanistan. Libi too was long considered a critic of the Egyptians who in his opinion occupied too many of the leadership positions within al-Qaida. At least for some periods, he was closer to the Taliban than to al-Qaida. Both leaders are thus highly qualified to revive the old alliance with the Taliban—despite the differences that still exist between the two organizations, which revolve mainly

around al-Qaida's responsibility for the fall of the Taliban in 2001. The prominent position of these two leaders also reveals that the conflict in Afghanistan has top priority for al-Qaida. Its members are engaged in insurgent activity and terrorist attacks in Afghanistan. A striking example was the February 2007 suicide attack on the US base in Bagram coinciding with Vice President Cheney's visit there. The US government holds Abu Laith al-Libi responsible for the planning.

The ideological support system for Al-Qaida's terrorist activities is being provided much more effectively today than in the past. While between 2001 and 2005 the al-Qaida ideology was proclaimed in audio and video messages mainly by Bin Laden and Zawahiri, today the organization has Abu Yahia al-Libi, a Libyan theoretician who in contrast to his two superiors possesses a religious education and thus particular authority. Libi, one of the main intellectual leaders behind the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, in a spectacular coup in July 2005 escaped from US detainment in Bagram, Afghanistan. Since then, al-Qaida's public relations officials have released a series of video messages over the Internet in which he propagandizes for the organization and propagates ideological and strategic objectives. In them, Abu Yahia al-Libi presents arguments that are significantly more radical than those of Bin Laden or Zawahiri, for example supporting al-Qaida's anti-Shiite strategy in Iraq.

Recruitment and Terrorist Activities

While expanding its activities in Afghanistan, since 2006, al-Qaida has simultaneously succeeded in recruiting increasing numbers of fighters from the Arab world and Europe. Between 2003 and 2005, almost all al-Qaida volunteers went to Iraq to join the fight against US troops. At present, travel patterns are shifting to Pakistan due to the increased difficulty of entering Iraq since 2005 and the fact that Iraqi organizations most urgently require

fighters with basic military training. In Pakistan, however, al-Qaida—presumably together with Uzbek, Afghan, and Pakistani organizations—offers training for volunteers without any prior knowledge. Since 2006, the number of training camps in Pakistan's border region with Afghanistan has increased. There is also evidence of increasing numbers of European Muslims traveling to Pakistan and receiving basic terrorist training there.

The most important consequence of al-Qaida's resurgence is an increasing number of terrorist attacks in which the organization's leadership plays an active part in the planning and organization. This is true above all in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in Europe. British Pakistanis have become their most important recruitment pool. The London underground bombings of July 7, 2005, have now been linked to al-Qaida. Several of the operatives responsible had been residing in Pakistan just before the bombings. Al-Qaida has also been implicated in the thwarted terrorist plot to detonate liquid explosives on board several airliners traveling from the UK to the US in August 2006.

Al-Qaida is pursuing its old strategy of calling for the withdrawal of Western powers from the Arab and Islamic world and underscoring this demand with spectacular terrorist attacks in the US and Europe. If it continues to consolidate itself as an organization, an increasing number of terrorist attacks like those in London can be expected in the future—particularly in Europe. Attacks within the US remain one of al-Qaida's primary goals, but since they are more difficult to carry out, they probably exceed the organization's current capabilities.

Al-Qaida in Iraq

The relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and the al-Qaida headquarters of Usama Bin Laden remains ambivalent. While the Iraq organization proclaimed its allegiance to al-Qaida and adopted its current name in

October 2004, it has at the same time resisted attempts at control by the organization's headquarters in Pakistan and pursued its own strategy. It aims at strengthening its own position by fueling confessional conflicts in Iraq through attacks on Shiites. The al-Qaida leadership has repeatedly criticized the Iraq group harshly, but without succeeding in bringing about a change in its strategy. For this reason, al-Qaida in Iraq can be seen as an independent organization, but one whose violent activity contributes decisively to the broad perception of al-Qaida's leadership as the central command of a global terrorist network. At present, Bin Laden and Zawahiri are having little influence on the events in Iraq. To the contrary, in the years 2006 and 2007, it appeared that al-Qaida in Iraq was increasingly determining the direction of the parent organization.

For the al-Qaida leadership in Pakistan, Iraq is the main battleground between Islam and—as Bin Laden himself put it—a “golden opportunity” to fight the US in the heart of the Arab world. This may explain why the al-Qaida leadership wants to avoid conflicts with the insubordinate Iraqi group. At the same time, al-Qaida in Iraq has been having major problems since 2006 asserting itself in the struggle against the US troops and Iraqi security forces. In fact, since fall 2007, some US military officers and independent observers have even begun speaking about the defeat of al-Qaida in Iraq.

Reasons for the decline of al-Qaida in Iraq

The difficulties currently facing al-Qaida in Iraq are first of all in its leadership. The death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in July 2006 dealt the group a severe blow. Since then, the most important leaders have been the Iraqi Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and the Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Masri, both of whom were largely or wholly unknown before and thus unable to develop the charismatic influence their predecessor possessed.

Furthermore, al-Qaida in Iraq also lacks religious and political thinkers of the caliber of Abu Yahia al-Libi, who could sharpen the ideological profile of al-Qaida in Iraq. This lack seems to have diminished some of the group's attractiveness to foreign volunteers.

Furthermore, al-Qaida in Iraq has damaged itself. Through its radicalism in fighting all groups that do not endorse it unconditionally, its base of support has declined. At the beginning of the Iraqi insurgency, the group worked side by side with Islamo-Nationalist organizations like the Islamic Army in Iraq and the 1920 Revolution Brigades. These groups primarily target US occupying forces and have no goals extending beyond Iraq. However, since 2004, conflicts have intensified between al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamo-Nationalist groups. Even the Kurdish Iraqi organization Ansar al-Sunna distanced itself from al-Qaida despite the two organizations' close ideological affinities. Al-Qaida in Iraq is particularly critical of the Islamo-Nationalists' willingness to negotiate, a difference of opinion that led to violent confrontations already in 2005. Al-Qaida attacks on Sunnis—alleged collaborators in particular but also all those who refuse to recognize its exclusive authority—have deepened these rifts. Today, the majority of Islamo-Nationalists are engaged in armed struggle against al-Qaida in Iraq.

Finally, the US government is fighting the insurgents in general and al-Qaida in particular much more effectively now than between 2003 and 2005. Since 2005, it has been working to further widen existing differences between the militant groups. To this end, the US together with the Iraqi government opened up negotiations with Islamo-Nationalist organizations. This led to an escalation of the conflicts between al-Qaida and the Islamo-Nationalists, which has weakened the insurgency significantly. The US even succeeded in mobilizing organizations like the 1920 Revolution Brigades against al-Qaida. At least some branches of the Islamic Army have also

discontinued their campaign against the Americans.

Furthermore, the US government has endeavored to integrate Iraqi tribes more actively in the fight against al-Qaida. It has profited from the growing alienation between al-Qaida and the Iraqi population, especially in the province of Anbar and its capital Ramadi. Here, al-Qaida had undermined the authority of the Sunni tribal leaders who were in close contact and sometimes identical with the Islamo-Nationalist insurgents. This ultimately led tribal elites to offer themselves as allies to US troops in 2006. In September, tribal leader Abdassattar Abu Risha (killed in September 2007) reached an agreement with the US troops. The tribes pledged to stop their attacks on US and Iraqi troops and instead fight al-Qaida, and, to the extent they were able, to integrate their new tribal militias into the Iraqi security forces, the police in particular. In exchange, the US troops would supply their new allies with money and weapons. The newly founded tribal militias called themselves the "Anbar Salvation Council" (Majlis Inqadh al-Anbar) or the "Anbar Awakening" (Sahwat al-Anbar). Many of their members were indeed assimilated into the police, and by the spring of 2007, the security situation in Ramadi had improved noticeably. By summer, they had largely succeeded in bringing security to the province that had formerly been the site of intense fighting.

The new US military strategy also had an impact. From January 2007 on, the US increased the number of troops in the country by about 30,000 to a total of more than 160,000. A large majority of the new contingents were stationed in Baghdad and Anbar. The US forces also took a more aggressive approach to dealing with insurgents and created smaller off-base "combat outposts" to demonstrate their presence and increase the pressure on their opponents. This pushed the insurgents out of many of their areas of operations. Many members of al-Qaida moved to the North

and Northeast, particularly to the provinces of Diyala and Kirkuk. In the fall of 2007, the US army intensified the struggle against al-Qaida in Diyala and its capital Baquba. Here too, al-Qaida is only able to hold its ground with some effort.

A sustained weakening?

Despite the successes of the Americans, it is questionable to what extent al-Qaida in Iraq has really been weakened. The answer depends above all on whether al-Qaida forces in Baghdad and Anbar have indeed been defeated or whether they have simply retreated temporarily to wait out the end of the US offensive. Insurgent groups in Iraq have behaved similarly on many occasions in the past, and such an approach would only be logical in the present situation since the US troop numbers will be reduced in 2008. The extent to which al-Qaida is still present in Anbar will become apparent at the latest when Iraqi units take over US positions. Furthermore, a defeat of al-Qaida in Iraq would by no means spell an end to the insurgency. There are other organizations like Ansar al-Sunna that will remain active. Since a political solution in Iraq does not appear to be in the making, insurgent groups are likely to play a role in the years to come. It is particularly doubtful whether the US policy of arming tribal security forces will be successful in the long term. While such an approach no doubt promotes short-term stabilization, in the long term, it also fosters the emergence of militias that will continue to undermine the Iraqi state's monopoly on violence—which in any case is still purely theoretical.

The "Iraq Returnees"

Since 2001, Islamist terrorism has proven to be a nomadic phenomenon. When individual groups come under pressure in one country, they simply move into others where they can operate with less interference. The Iraqis, who now form the vast

majority of members of al-Qaida in Iraq, will most likely remain in the country.

Foreign fighters, on the other hand, will return to neighboring countries to escape increased pressure in Iraq—especially to Syria and Lebanon, where many of them originally come from. For years there have been isolated reports from Syria about activities of a strong militant underground there. In Lebanon, the Fath al-Islam has already shown the potential danger of Iraq returnees: between May and September 2007, this group established itself within the refugee camp Nahr al-Barid until government troops finally overcame it. The group consisted mainly of Lebanese and Syrian Palestinians, but also had contacts to al-Qaida. Some of its members had already fought in Iraq.

Together with the Syrians, the Saudis form the most important contingent of foreign fighters in Iraq. Should they return in large numbers to their homeland, we will have to reckon with a rekindling of the clashes between security forces and the Saudi Arabian wing of al-Qaida that rocked the country between 2003 and 2005. The majority of Bin Laden's sympathizers and supporters are in his own homeland.

Since 2005, the number of North African fighters in Iraq has been increasing rapidly as well. Algerians and Libyans seem to be represented in particularly large numbers. If even a small percentage of these combatants return to North Africa, the danger of an escalation of terrorist violence in the Maghreb will rise dramatically.

Al-Qaida in North Africa

The most important militant group in North Africa is al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. Founded in January 2007, it is the successor organization to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC), which had previously operated entirely independently of al-Qaida with the sole aim of overthrowing the Algerian government. As early as 2003, a long process of gradual

convergence began that led to its alliance with the al-Qaida of Usama Bin Laden. In the course of this convergence, the GSPC evolved from a purely nationalist organization into a close ally of al-Qaida with a more internationalist orientation. Since 2006, the organization has carried out an increased number of terrorist attacks on foreign targets in Algeria and has recently shifted to suicide car bomb attacks. The most spectacular of these bombings struck the Algerian prime minister's office and a police station on April 11, 2007, leaving 23 people dead. Despite the organization's trend toward internationalization, the goal of this attack made it clear that the main target of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb is the Algerian government. Like al-Qaida in Iraq, it remains—for the moment—an independent organization.

The GSPC's proclamation of its alliance with al-Qaida can be attributed to its waning strength since 2001 and its desire to tap into al-Qaida's financial and recruiting resources. The most important reason for the organization's decline is the weakening support among the Algerian population, which has grown tired of the violence. This has made it easier for Algerian security forces to push the GSPC's operations back into isolated areas in the mountains to the East and Southeast of Algiers and to force it to withdraw into Southern Algeria and the neighboring countries of Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania. In these efforts, the Algerian government has benefited from extensive US and European support.

The GSPC has also lost influence due to internal power struggles and conflicts over its general direction. Its merger with al-Qaida triggered a heated debate as well, leading numerous prominent members to withdraw because they rejected the alliance with Bin Laden. They criticized the fact that the organization's current emir, Abu Musab Abdalwudud, made the decision single-handedly. The lack of a religious leader within the organization who could foster

internal unity has also proven detrimental for al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb will nevertheless remain a major source of terrorist violence. With its connection to the broader al-Qaida terrorist network, it has evolved in keeping with the trend towards internationalization of conflicts that attracts so many young North African men. The increasing numbers of North Africans who have attempted to enter Iraq since 2005 to join the fight against the Americans shows just how attractive the international ambitions of al-Qaida really are. Terrorist cells have repeatedly been disrupted in the Maghreb countries (and in Europe) in their attempt to smuggle North African volunteers into Iraq.

In the future, the attractiveness of internationalist goals and strategies may lead to an increase in the organization's terrorist activities outside of Algeria. Warnings issued against France are one indication of this. As recently as July 2007, Emir Abdalwudud threatened terrorist attacks against France after a visit by French President Sarkozy to Algiers. Given that al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb possesses highly developed logistical networks in France and Spain, this warning should be taken seriously.

However, the internationalization of Algerian terrorism poses an immediate danger above all for the Maghreb countries themselves. The terrorist threat there today is even more serious than in the year 2005. Algeria itself has been the target of a series of suicide bombings since the April 2007 attacks in Algiers including a failed attempt to assassinate President Bouteflika in Batna in September 2007. In December, two devastating truck bombings in Algiers followed. In Morocco, numerous incidents took place in March and April 2007 in which suicide bombers actually succeeded in detonating their explosives. In both Tunisia and Libya, the security situation is equally precarious. All of the neighboring states fear an increase in terrorist violence.

Consequences for Europe

The signs that the al-Qaida leadership and the groups in Iraq and the Maghreb are growing closer—despite existing differences—are impossible to disregard. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb will not be able to ignore its young recruits' desire to engage in a conflict of expanded international dimensions. Even today, many European sympathizers of Islamist terrorists do not appear to consider the differences between the three al-Qaidas to be very important. Support for al-Qaida in Iraq is thought of as support for the cause of Usama Bin Laden and vice versa. Thus al-Qaida is currently working to develop into the global network that it had not yet become in the year 2001. At that time, the Saudis and Egyptians were too dominant in the organization and in determining its strategic orientation.

In this context, the renewed strength of the al-Qaida headquarters is the most important development of 2006 and 2007. If this trend continues, we can count on new large-scale terrorist attacks worldwide. In Europe as well, some terrorist cells have more important connections to external organizations than is frequently assumed. In all the major terrorist plots since 2001, there have at least been indications that the perpetrators had contact with larger organizations or backers with terrorist experience. The same is true for the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004, which is frequently cited as a classic example of terrorism carried out independently of any terrorist organization. Its mastermind was the Syrian Radwan al-Issar (or al-Isa), who had close contacts to terrorist circles. There are no cells in Europe that plan, organize, and carry out attacks altogether autonomously. The impression that they exist is probably due mainly to the individual groups' increasing professionalism in concealing their external contacts, making it more difficult for European security services to uncover these links. In security circles, the notion of "homegrown terrorism" has

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gained currency: its proponents believe that there are increasing numbers of Muslims of Arab, Turkish and South Asian origin planning attacks in their European countries of residence, and that only rarely do they have connections to terrorist organizations abroad. However, the lack of clear evidence of these relationships does not mean that they do not exist. Al-Qaida's organizational influence on European Muslims has been increasing, not decreasing, since 2005.

Al-Qaida is ever more successful in propagating its ideology by Internet. Its multimedia materials are consumed enthusiastically by young Muslims throughout Europe. Since 2003, al-Qaida has proven its ability to attract new adherents in this way. It has even expanded its recruitment base: while in 2001 it was an almost purely Arab organization, since 2003 it has been successfully attracting ever more Pakistani and Kurdish Muslims, and since 2006 Muslims of Turkish origin as well.

As the al-Qaida infrastructure becomes more and more consolidated, the danger is growing that new recruits will be trained more effectively and thus acquire the ability to work even more professionally in the future. If the North African networks expand the international focus of their activities further and if cooperation between al-Qaida, al-Qaida in Iraq, and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb intensifies, this danger could increase. After all, the groups active in the Middle East and North Africa are working in direct proximity to Europe.

If a revitalized al-Qaida does indeed plan increased terrorist attacks in Europe, the effectiveness of conventional methods of fighting terrorism such as the surveillance of communication lines and travel will be put to the test. Since al-Qaida wants to influence its adherents, it must and will attempt to communicate with them across national borders. Expanding international cooperation is therefore the right path. But this will only allow us to prevent some of the attacks. The sophistication of al-Qaida's

plans and their "success rate" will undoubtedly increase with the renewed strength of al-Qaida's command center.