Al-Qaeda in the Asia Pacific: Origin, Capability, and Threat

By Rohan Gunaratna

Between pre-modern and post-modern continental United States via Europe and Asia, al-Qaeda has built a state-of-the-art terrorist network for moving funds, goods, and personnel recruited from around the world to reach its targets. It is the painstaking and steadfast construction of this network over many years that enabled al-Qaeda to mount 9/11. Al-Qaeda’s targeting reflects its sophistication as a professional terrorist group. After the East Africa bombing – a land suicide attack on a US diplomatic target – the US strengthened security at all US missions overseas. However, instead of another land suicide operation, al-Qaeda mounted a sea-borne suicide operation. After al-Qaeda attacked the USS Cole in October 2000, the US invested in perimeter security. However, al-Qaeda evaded these measures and struck America’s most outstanding landmarks from the sky. Al-Qaeda planned to strike the US once more with a radiological dispersal device using Jose Perdilla, an American Muslim, an operation that was disrupted at the reconnaissance stage. As it is al-Qaeda’s doctrine to learn from its experiences and failures, it is most likely to use the lessons learned for a future attempt at destroying its third target, the US Congress. And as terrorist groups employ cost-effective tactics, al-Qaeda is likely to use civilian infrastructure once again to attack Western targets.

In keeping with its founding charter authored by Sheikh Dr Abdullah Azam in March 1988, al-Qaeda is the ‘spearhead of Islam’, the vanguarding of the Islamic movement. Because of the inspirational value, al-Qaeda’s gives preference to suicide attacks. Attacking highly prestigious and symbolic targets is difficult, requiring extensive planning and preparation over a long period of time across several countries. To strengthen Islamic movements worldwide al-Qaeda – together the Islamic Movement of Taliban and the Maktab al Khidmatul Jillah al-AspectRatio – has trained several tens of thousands of Western, Middle Eastern, African, Caucasian, Balkan, and Asian Muslims.

Decentralization

Al-Qaeda’s training infrastructure has gravely suffered as a result of US intervention in Afghanistan since October 2001. However, al-Qaeda began decentralizing, opening new training facilities for recruits from Mindanao in the Philippines to Pankishi Valley in Georgia, long before 9/11. In forming the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders in 1998, al-Qaeda networked with and in some cases co-opted groups – from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Far East to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Central Asia and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat in North Africa. Telephone intercepts indicated that in early 1999 at the request of al-Qaeda’s head of external operations Abu Zubaida, the MILF opened special camps for training foreign recruits. These camps were all situated in what is called the Abu Bakar complex, which was later overrun by the Philippine military. At that point, another al-Qaeda associate – Maulana Judulullah – established a facility in Poso,
Lectures on the Past: al-Qa`ida as the New Pan-Islam

By Michael Laffan

Martin van Bruinessen has recently found himself chairing two forums on the al-Qa`ida-Sti nexus. The first was the IIAI annual lecture, given in Amsterdam on 14 June 2002 by a specialist on terrorism, Rohan Gunaratna of St Andrew’s University, Edinburgh. The second was given on 26 June 2002 by the established commentator on Islamists discourse and director of Georgetown University’s Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Yvonne Haddad (IiAS Newsletter | #29 | November 2002

In the case of Gunaratna, conclusions of clear and present danger left policy- experts and diplomats nodding and some academic specialists of Islam, and particularly those working on Indone- sia, shaking their heads and consider- ing the merits of interdiction. Certainly, reliable evidence for an al-Qa`ida con- nection with the spate of bombings in Jakarta in December 2000 is yet to be made publicly available. And even when the recent events on Bali are thrown into the confused mix of information and lies, Gunaratna’s simplistic black and white narrative is all the more attractive to those who make the news. Nonethe- less, a grey area for some present at his lecture in June was the lack of discus- sion of the underlying ideology of al- Qa`ida, for it is in this area that Osama bin Laden and his followers differ on many levels with apparently like mind- ed Islamists – be they Jihadist Hafid or the Muslim Brothers. On the whole, the debate on law and order in the post-9/11 regional, including its operatives in Europe (according to CIA estimates). Although the planning and preparing for attacks by its operational cells have been disrupted in Western Europe, al-Qa`ida’s support cells are still very much in place – engaged in propaganda and propaganda activities, raising funds, recruiting, procuring supplies, and mounting surveillance on intended targets. Its collabora- tors, supporters, and sympathizers are filling the leader- ship vacuums created by the arrests or deaths of key al-Qa`ida leaders in Europe immediately after 9/11. The post-9/11 cells are more clandestine, compact, and self-contained, thus hard to detect and disrupt.

Current threat

After 9/11 al-Qa`ida attempted but failed to destroy US, UK, Australian, and Israeli diplomatic missions, attack both a US warship off Singapore and US and British warships in the Straits of Gibraltar, and poison the water supply to the US embassy in Rome. In addition to the shoe-bomber, Richard Reid, trying to destroy an aircraft over the Atlantic, al-Qa`ida also attempted to bomb the USS Abraham Lincoln and American tourists, and sent a martyr in a Clayton mine to seed U.S. troops in Kuwait in October 2002. To instigate Islamists to strike worldwide Jewish targets, Nizar Seif Eddin al-Tunisi, an al-Qaeda associate group, killed 11 Frenchmen and 12 Pakistanis on 18 May 2002. The well-planned attack was conducted after anti-militant surveillance on the Sheraton hotel and the bus route used by French naval engineers and tech- nicians working on the submarine project in Karachi. The attempt was thwarted by a NATO air strike against the US Consulate in Karachi on 14 June 2002 injuring a US marine and killing 11 Pakistanis. Using the same vehi- cle, they also targeted President Musharraf on 26 April, but the remote control failed to detonate the explosives.

Primary target

The US remains the principal target of al-Qa`ida as reflect- ed when Osama stated: ‘The battle has moved to inside Ameri- ca. We will continue this battle, God permitting’, until victo- ry. In an interview given on 6 August 2002 by the Singaporean government disrupted cells of Jamahiyah Islamiyah (al-Qa`ida’s arm in Sin- gapore), the leadership relocated to Indonesia and vowed to crash a plane on to the Changi international airport in Sin- gapore. After the 9/11 attacks, for the US, several Islamists groups in Pakistan are attacking soft tar- gets nationwide.

With unprecedented security, intelligence, and law enforce- ment cooperation as well as with heightened public alertness, al-Qa`ida is unable to engage in extensive and long- term planning and international preparation, a pre-requisite for conducting coordinated simultaneous attacks. None- theless, its super cells are likely to plan, prepare, and execute another mass casualty attack. For the time being due to the limitations of mounting another large-scale operation to attack a population-center, economic infrastructure, and sym- bolic/prestigious targets inside the US, a range of other...
features remain options open—from ‘going to sleep’ or debilitating, taking opportunity targets, to tasking other groups. Of the dozen medium- and small-scale attacks conducted by al-Qaeda and its associates only a few have been successful. They have failed due to targeting international, specifically U.S., security countermeasures and hurred-al-Qaeda planning. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda ideology ensures that, like a vengeful and retaliatory wounded animal, the group is determined to strike back. As a result of a range of countermeasures, the spectrum of threat is expanding to include a wider range of targets as well as a change in the modus operandi. Al-Qaeda is operating through other Islamist groups, providing them trainers and funds, influencing their strategic and tactical direction, and is also likely to operate through associated groups.

Importance of Afghanistan-Pakistan borders

The developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan are central to our understanding of al-Qaeda. These two countries are groups adapting to the security environment and can be seen to have undergone three internal strategic changes. First, Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban and former head of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, has assumed the principal responsibility of fighting the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. In the fight, Osama bin Laden himself has pledged loyalty and allegiance to his leadership. Since Osama went into hiding, as the ‘leader of the Faithful’, Mullah Omar has spearheaded the regrouping and re-organizing of the Taliban after 9/11. After re-establishing communication with the scattered units of the Taliban, he regrouped them along secure areas and created an ace, a term used to describe an expert or better than average performer in any field. A new approach was required, and following a three-day visit of the Taloa and al-Qaeda, the Dutch went about taking the political and governmental resources, and weakening security countermeasures. ‘the infidels’, and the ‘unbelievers’ both by word of mouth and underground networks extending from southern Thailand to Australia. Among the groups it has infiltrated and influenced are Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia; Jashkar Jundullah, Indonesia’s fault. The rhetoric of the evil of Islamism. In some cases turned back to their faith as a result. The first step towards reducing the immediate threat to Southeast Asia is to develop and implement a multi-pronged, multi-dimensional, multi-agency approach by ASEAN countries together to target al-Qaeda’s support and operational infrastructure at home and in the immediate neighbourhood.

Southeast Asian network

Most academics find it difficult to understand al-Qaeda because the group functions both operationally and ideologically. In addition to dispatching its operatives to target countries, it provides the experts, training, and resources to other groups and individuals to advance a common goal. In the same way that it has penetrated existing Islamist networks worldwide, al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia penetrated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a regional organization with overground and underground networks extending from southern Thailand to Australia. Among the groups it has infiltrated and influenced are Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia; Jashkar Jundullah, Indonesia’s fault. The rhetoric of the evil of Islamism. In some cases turned back to their faith as a result. The first step towards reducing the immediate threat to Southeast Asia is to develop and implement a multi-pronged, multi-dimensional, multi-agency approach by ASEAN countries together to target al-Qaeda’s support and operational infrastructure at home and in the immediate neighbourhood.

The future

In many ways, al-Qaeda decentralized before 9/11. With focused targeting on the Afghan-Pakistan border where both al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Mullah Omar Faction) are concentrated, the group will depend on its regional networks, such as its Southeast Asian network, to continue the fight. Al-Qaeda’s disrupted Singapore operation clearly demonstrates the group’s intentions as well as its capabilities and opportunities for attacking target-rich Southeast Asia.

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