

# AL QAEDA: STILL AMERICA'S GREATEST THREAT?

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## **Key Words:**

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## **Abstract**

Since the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, American intelligence and law enforcement agencies have been trying to decipher and predict what Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda are going to do next. Theories are abundant, ranging from 'nothing' to a nuclear attack. With the advantage of almost six years of hindsight, it can be argued that bin Laden's next move is 'not much'.

Why has al Qaeda been largely quiet since their spectacular attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.? Where did the organization come from? Are they still operational as a jihadist movement? Where are they going in the future? Some of these questions can be answered with historical information, while others require speculation and interpretation of current al Qaeda actions.

## **Introduction**

There is no doubt that al Qaeda burst into the average American citizen's consciousness shortly after the 11 September 2001 attacks. That fateful day, America learned that they were no an island on the world stage; that they were indeed vulnerable to terrorist actions. However, it can be argued that the most telling effects of the World Trade Center and Pentagon strikes would take years to manifest. America, and to some extent, the western world, was shaken to the core by the images of the Twin Towers collapsing upon themselves, spewing fire and smoke as they came down. That epochal moment clearly marked the beginning of a new, and uncertain, age.

That shift in perception however, did not match the outcome that bin Laden and the al Qaeda leaders had been looking for. Bin Laden hoped for no less than the complete destruction of the United States. In a somewhat naïve sense, bin Laden believed that America was so corrupt, and so soft, that these attacks would dissolve the union of states. He stated, "but all this is built upon an unstable foundation which can be targeted, with special attention to its obvious weak spots. If it is hit in a hundredth of those spots, God willing, it will stumble, wither away and relinquish world leadership." (Wright, 2006, p.308) This belief, that by attacking its foundation, the United States would crumble and dissolve was enforced by bin Laden's original choices for targets. The White House, the Capitol, and the physical seats of power were to be destroyed. These targets made their ambition seem reasonable. However, the pillars of American society did not crumble and collapse. Americans did not immediately clamor for a complete withdrawal of interests from the Middle East. In point of fact, the opposite occurred. Tactically, the 11 September attacks must be considered a success. Strategically, they were a near fatal mistake. Supported by most governments of the world, the United States attacked al Qaeda's central training and logistics center - Taliban controlled Afghanistan. American Special Forces were on the ground in Afghanistan within weeks of the 11 September attacks, working to organize and coordinate the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. American heavy

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bombers, B-52's, B-1's and B-2's began dropping tons and tons of ordinance on Taliban and al Qaeda camps and facilities. By December of 2001, American and Afghan Northern Alliance troops has driven bin Laden and al Qaeda from their camps and caves in Tora Bora and into hiding in Pakistan.

In writings recovered after Operation Anaconda, the Tora Bora action, bin Laden revealed that he believed his actions had divided the world into sides – faithful Muslims and everyone else. He was waiting in Tora Bora for the faithful fighters to stream to his banner, for his grand jihad against the west to gain momentum. It appears that he felt that once again, now fifteen years later, his camps in the Parrot's Beak region would serve as launching points in his personal war. He was sadly mistaken. No Islamic fighters rallied to his cause, only bombs and pursuing troops. He later appeared to be resigned to his fate, and even asked his sons to not join al Qaeda. His words seem to indicate that he understood the futility of his attacks, and may have regretted his course of action. (Wright, 2006)

Though the collapse of the American Republic has not come about, The United States is a markedly different place than in was on 10 September 2001. Many of bin Laden's overt goals were never reasonable to begin with, but he still succeeded in undermining many aspects of American society. Unfortunately, most of the damage done to the fabric of America has been done by Americans themselves.

In response to this new and spectacular threat, the United States has seen a continuous string of ineffective security policies, bad foreign policy, eroding civil rights, and incompetent leadership. Al Qaeda cannot be anything but pleased at how Americans have seen their rights to privacy reduced and their reputation abroad destroyed, all in the name of the Global War on Terror. The incursion into Iraq has also proved to be a boon for al Qaeda, and all of these actions were undertaken in 'response' to the 9/11 attacks. Analysis of bin Laden's plans and actions regarding the 9/11 attacks reveals a man who knew very little about his targets. With that assumption in mind, it is difficult to believe that these repercussions to American liberty and society were ever part of the terrorist's grand scheme – it's just a happy coincidence for them.

### **Historical Focus**

At what point did bin Laden and al Qaeda turn their attention westward onto the United States and its interests? The answer to this question can be found as early as the 1920's in post WWI western influenced Egypt, and more recently in 1980's Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In the post revolutionary environment of a semi-independent Egypt from under British rule, the secularist national movement challenged the traditional Islamic ethos (Musallam, 2005, p viii). By 1927 there was a renewal of Islamic sentiments, fueled in part by Muslims who were, "sad to see their heritage disappear, to be substituted by the Western system" (Heyworth-Dunne, 1950, p. 12). Without question the foundation of Hassan al-Banna's Society of Muslim Brothers of Egypt (later retooled as the Muslim Brotherhood) in 1928 was the foundation for a more Islamic focused style of politics. The societies express purpose was to oppose irreligion and libertinism, reviving the glory of Islam by restoring its religious laws and supremacy (Musallam, 2005). When contrasted with the failures of the parliamentary monarchical regime in Egypt from 1923 to 1952 the resurgence of Islamic and anti-Western sentiment is not surprising. In addition, Egyptians were becoming more aware of their fellow Arabs and Muslim counterparts suffering at the hands of western democracies such as Britain and France (Musallam, 2005, p. 21). The growth of the Arabic press and broadcasting allowed Egyptian nationalists to turn "more and more to a vision of Arab and Muslim solidarity" (Musallam, 2005, p 21).

After WWII, Egypt slipped into a period of increasing instability; overcrowding of its industrialized cities, violence, chaos, and a breakdown of law and order. These conditions led to the overthrowing of the monarchy and liberal regimes, leaving two alternatives; extreme leftist (Marxist) groups, or an Islamic alternative. By the 1950's the Society of Muslim Brothers had risen to prominence with decades of experience and discipline (Musallam, 2005, p. 99). The Society of Muslim Brothers called for an Islamism political system for Egypt, a *Shari'ah*-based Muslim society with the nationalization of financial institutions, tax reforms, redistribution of land, and labor reform measures (Musallam, 2005, p. 17). However, following the 1952 "Free Officers" overthrow of King Farouk, President Nasser established an Arab style socialist government.

The Society of Muslim Brothers continued to organize, write, and protest against Nasser's leadership. In 1964 one of its most famous members, Sayyid Qutb published the book *Milestones*, outlining the role of Islam in politics. Qutb wrote *Milestones* in prison, where he was convicted of playing a role in the assassination attempt on President Nasser. Re-arrested in 1965, and eventually sentenced to death, Qutb's writings became a rallying point for radical Muslims seeking an Islamist style of government.

One of the most important aspects of the Qutb's writing is the concept of the *Jahiliyyah*; the lack of a Muslim world and the prevalence of Islamic ignorance. The way to bring about Islamic freedom was to fight *Jahiliyyah* in a twofold approach; first to preach and second to fight, abolishing the organization and authorities through "physical power and Jihad" (Qutb, 1964).

Wright claims that without the writings of Sayyid Qutb, al-Qaeda would not have existed. (2006, p. 332). Qutb's greatest influence may have been on bin Laden's mentor al-Zawahiri, and bin Laden's close friend Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, who stated,

Islam is different from any other religion; it's a way of life. We (Khalifa and bin Laden) are trying to understand what Islam has to say about how we eat, who we marry, how we talk. We read Sayyid Qutb. He is the one who most affected our generation" (Wright, 2006, p.79).

In 1986, bin Laden moved from Saudi Arabia to Peshawar, Pakistan. Here, he began to actively recruit and support Islamists willing to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. While he had been active in recruiting for jihad in Afghanistan for some time, this move marked his first permanent period of residence in the region. He was viewed as "young, sweet-tempered, soft-mannered, and above all fabulously wealthy patron of worthy jihad causes" (Coll, 2004, p. 153) He rode horses for pleasure, participated in radical Arab circles, and visited hospitals and orphanages. The CIA station chief in Islamabad, felt that "bin Laden himself 'actually did some very good things'". (Coll, 2004, pp.152-155).

In general, the United States approved of recruiting fighters to go into Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, and they pursued ways to increase the participation of these jihadists and their effectiveness. Bin Laden announced that he would pay all the expenses of any Muslim that wished to enter Afghanistan and fight the Soviets. This type of free support of U.S. policies was looked upon favorably by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Overall, the Arab Muslims that had come to the region to fight were ineffective. Of the thousands given money, training, etc. to fight the Soviets, mere hundreds actually served. This was mainly because the goals of the Arab Muslims and the Afghan mujahedin were completely different. The Afghans were fighting for their country; the Arab Muslims were mainly seeking martyrdom at the hands of the Soviet Army. During an attack on Jalalabad, the,

"Arabs had pitched white tents on the front lines, where they were easy marks for the Soviet bombers. 'Why?' the reporter asked incredulously. 'We want them to bomb us!' the men told him. 'We want to die!' They believed that

they were answering God's call. If they were truly blessed, God would reward them with a martyr's death." (Wright, 2006, p.108)

This type of behavior created a cadre of Arab Muslims in the region that were mostly ineffective in fighting the Soviets.

Bin Laden was not schooled in the art of war, nor was he familiar with the necessities of logistics or tactics. Several accounts, even those given by the man himself, show that he was not an expert in combat (Wright, 2006, p.116), yet his skill at defining his image would later contradict these shortcomings. His biggest strength was his charisma and he leveraged that to foster his dream of a global organization to wage jihad. He began making that dream a reality while in Pakistan and Afghanistan in the late 1980's.

By the Summer of 1988, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was well underway, and bin Laden was never seen without the captured Soviet AK-74 assault rifle. This weapon was taken from a dead Soviet soldier during one of bin Laden's adventures in Afghanistan and helped bolster his image a warrior. During the chaos of the Soviet withdrawal, most of the mujahedin leaders began thinking, and talking about, what their next moves would be. With the exception of bin Laden, all of them, as well as Egyptian and Palestinians had strictly parochial aims. Bin Laden, however, was thinking globally. In the Spring of 1988, bin Laden secretly formed "a 'pioneering vanguard' along the lines called for by Qutb. 'This vanguard constitutes the solid base' – qaeda – 'for the hoped-for society,'" (Wright, 2006, p.130). Bin Laden explained the origin of the term in a videotaped interview with Al Jazeera journalist Tayseer Alouni in October 2001:

The name 'al-Qaeda' was established a long time ago by mere chance. The late Abu Ebeida El-Banashiri established the training camps for our mujahedeem against Russia's terrorism. We used to call the training camp al-Qaeda. The name stayed (CNN, 2002).

Al-Qaeda the organization had been formed. Months later, it was brought into the open among the Arab Muslims in Peshawar, Pakistan and recruitment began.

This was bin Laden's driving goal – to create an organization that transcended nationalistic views, and championed pure Islamism across the globe. Al Qaeda would not settle for concerning itself with the plight of one country or tribe, but strove to bring about a true Islamic state, free from secular influence, wherever it could. This global thinking is the key aspect that sets bin Laden apart from any other jihadist in the world. Not long after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed, bin Laden and al Qaeda began thinking about the United States as a target.

In an October 2001 interview with bin Laden, he was asked why he was targeting the US. Bin Laden reply was that the battle was between, "Muslims against the global crusaders" (CNN, 2002). In the same interview he pointed to the success al Qaeda had experienced against the Soviets, saying,

"The Soviet Union scared the whole world then...Where is that power now? We barely remember it...God, who provided us with his support and kept us steadfast until the Soviet Union was defeated, is able to provide us once more with his support to defeat America on the same land and with the same people.

We believe the defeat of America is possible, and with the help of God, and is even easier for us, God permitting, than the defeat of the Soviet Union was before (CNN, 2002)."

## **Framing the United States as a Target**

Al Qaeda didn't spring into existence with the United States as its prime target; Saddam Hussein helped that process along. In 1991, the United States sent hundreds of thousands of troops and personnel, along with divisions of armor, squadrons of aircraft, and tons of supplies to Saudi Arabia to conduct Operation Desert Shield. U.S. and Coalition troops came to the Arabian Peninsula under the invitation of the Saudi government, but their existence on the sacred peninsula was decried by many – including Osama bin Laden. He believed the presence of the Americans was sacrilegious, and asked the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to send them away. He pledged that his own troops – al Qaeda – could defend Saudi Arabia from the aggression of Saddam's Iraqis. In the end, the Coalition forces did what they came to do, but then they did something even worse in the eyes of bin Laden. They stayed.

The presence of US forces on Islamic Holy Land led bin Laden back to another philosophy of Qutb's; the idea that there were false Muslims or apostates; people who declared themselves to be Muslims but had abandoned the fundamental tenant of Islam. In Qutb's writings this included countries, such as Saudi Arabia, whose leaders were failing to enforce sharia law (Eikmeier, 2007)

In August of 1996, bin Laden issued a fatwa that, in effect, declared war on the United States for the “occupation of the land of the two Holy Places -the foundation of the house of Islam, the place of the revelation, the source of the message and the place of the noble Ka'ba, the Qiblah of all Muslims- by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies.” (PBS, n.d.) Comparing American troops to invading locusts, bin Laden clearly separated himself from the goals of other Muslim fighters.

In February of 1998, bin Laden issued a second, similar, fatwa. This reinforced his claim of a state of war between Islam and the United States. Six months later, al Qaeda bombed two U.S. Embassies in Africa. This was al Qaeda's first major operation against U.S. targets. The U.S. response to these bombings were cruise missile strikes against training camps and al Qaeda facilities in Afghanistan and Sudan. Casualty figures vary, but most sources point to six deaths in Afghanistan. Bin Laden was not at any of the targets and was not injured.

In October of 2000, the guided missile cruiser U.S.S. Cole was struck by a suicide bomb while anchored in Aden, Yemen. Seventeen sailors were killed. There was no U.S. military response, even though it became clear that bin Laden and al Qaeda were behind the attack. The Central Intelligence Agency, utilizing a Predator drone armed with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, destroyed an SUV in Yemen carrying a suspected planner of the plot. That was the only direct retaliation for the attack. It is possible that this distinct lack of response emboldened al Qaeda into thinking that they could attack the U.S. homeland with impunity.

## **Contemporary Focus of al Qaeda**

Between 1998 and 2001, al Qaeda planned and executed three major attacks on U.S. interests. Since 11 September 2001, there have been none. Why?

Prior to the U.S. led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, al Qaeda enjoyed some support and protection from the Taliban regime. This allowed bin Laden to have a secure base of operations to recruit and train his people for terrorist actions around the globe. The U.S. actions in Afghanistan ruined that haven. His camps destroyed, large numbers of his people killed, bin Laden was forced into hiding. This left him with limited resources, no base of operations, and not able to come out from wherever he was hiding in fear of someone turning him in for the \$25 million reward.

So why has al Qaeda appeared to have grown since 2002? In effect, it is ideological franchising. Militant jihadists striving for legitimacy can simply adopt the 'al-Qaeda' moniker a lot more easily than most of them could open a Subway restaurant. The internet provides an ideal avenue for bin Laden's organization to spread his ideology, offering it up to people wherever they might be. And since most internet communication is asynchronous – the receiver of the message is not required to be in the same space/location/time as the sender – it is simple to communicate from remote and private locations. Face to face meetings are not required, nor track-able, real-time phone calls. This ease of secretive communications had made the spread of 'al Qaeda' inevitable.

Recent documents have indicated that U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials, particularly Secretary Chertoff, are concerned about additional terror attacks against the United States during the summer of 2007. While this alert was widely reported in June and July of 2007, no DHS officials could cite credible, specific threats against U.S. targets. This warning however, mirrors similar alerts in Britain and Germany, with each stating that the warnings appear very similar to warnings that were received during the summer of 2001. (Ross, Schwartz & Esposito, 2007)

A worst case scenario involves a coup in Pakistan, which results in Taliban or al Qaeda sympathizers access, even briefly, to that nation's nuclear weapons. As soon as access to the weapons is permitted, they would quickly disappear into terrorist stockpiles. However, even in that scenario, it is possible that bin Laden would not permit the use of such a weapon. After the experience of 9/11 and the resulting invasion, bin Laden must surely know that the use of such a weapon against America would result in even more terrible retribution upon his organization, their host country, or anyone who benefited or profited. That consideration, however, must be weighed against the story of the white tents in Afghanistan – these people want to be killed. We must also consider that in that scenario – a Pakistani nuclear warhead in terrorist hands – it may not be bin Laden or his al Qaeda that controls the use of the device. In that case, the probability of the weapon being employed goes up significantly.

There are literally dozens of other plausible attack scenarios that al Qaeda could attempt in the U.S., or against American interests. The most likely of these would be a simple attack on a 'soft' target, such as a stadium, school, bus terminal, subway station, or shopping center. A suicide bomb on one of these targets, even a small, man-portable device, would create fear and panic across the nation, and in many ways would be more effective a terror weapon than a large scale attack like 9/11. How many people feel that they live or work in a high profile target such as the World Trade Center? And how many ride the bus to work everyday, or more terrifying, put their children on one every morning to go to school? These simple targets would be shockingly effective as terror attacks, yet something like this has not been attempted yet. Why not? It is logical to conclude that bin Laden's al Qaeda is no longer capable of mounting even a simple operation such as these.

### **Al Qaeda Countermeasures**

Without a doubt al Qaeda's actions have changed the intelligence and information sharing environment within the United States. Previously siloed functions have attempted full network integration both inter-organizationally and intra-organizationally. Specifically there is a dramatic increase in U.S. Military operations around the world, and increased intelligence and counter-terror operations by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Since the attacks of 9/11, these two agencies have seen a radical change in the way they process, analyze and share information regarding national security threats.

In particular, the FBI has greatly increased their information technology capacities by upgrading computers and communications links and improving their data search capabilities. In 2001, the FBI was using limited information technology – most of their desktop computers were over 10 years old – and could not adequately send email or other digital information to

other law enforcement or intelligence agencies. The programs to update the antiquated hardware had begun weeks before the 9/11 attacks, but started to make an impact in the months and years to come. (Kessler, 2007, pp 14-16)

The Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA Patriot) Act of 2001 also served to break down a longstanding 'wall' within the FBI that prohibited agents working on intelligence cases to share information with agents working on criminal cases. This wall had hobbled FBI intelligence investigations for years in a way that no other types of criminal investigations were hampered.

Though the USA Patriot act is criticized by civil rights watchdog groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the Act did level the playing field, allowing FBI Special Agents working intelligence similar powers to those working on organized crime cases. And it broke the wall.

FBI agents working intelligence cases against suspected terrorists could now open criminal files against those same people, and those criminal investigations could now be leveraged into more information, and better surveillance. This new ability to combine information and surveillance results allowed the FBI to change tactics in counter-terrorism. Whereas prior to the 9/11 attacks, the FBI concentrated on creating cases for presentation to a Grand Jury and eventual trial, current investigations focus on the threat and agents are encouraged to run surveillance rather than arrest, to build an intelligence file rather than a indictment. This "threat-driven" approach allows the FBI and CIA to leverage the fact that many suspected terrorists, when arrested, will exploit the U.S. system of plea bargaining and cooperate with authorities, turning over more valuable information. "...in almost every case that we've had in the United States, one or more have cooperated and given us the full picture of the cell. And that's intelligence." (Kessler, 2007, pp 223 – 223)

### **Terrorist Organization's Future Structure**

Outside of bin Laden's al Qaeda lie the 'franchised' terrorists. These include the now infamous 'al Qaeda in Iraq' and the 'organization of al Qaeda in Palestine'. These are simply organizations that have declared their allegiance to bin Laden's ideology. Osama bin Laden does not exert any command or control over these groups. He does not provide training, or material aid. He simply lends his name. Nonetheless, they are very effective in creating the impression that al Qaeda is still a viable organization. But we must come back to the simple fact that in six years, nothing has been heard from bin Laden's organization. The lack of any significant numbers of convicted al-Qaeda members, despite a large number of arrests on terrorism charges, contributes to doubt and dispute of the extent and nature of al Qaeda's actual organization (Gerges, 2005, pp i-vii).

Despite the references to martyrdom in Afghanistan, bin Laden's al Qaeda appears to be more interested in the destruction of America than in dying for a cause. Bin Laden sincerely hoped that by attacking America, he could draw them into Afghanistan and destroy the U.S. superpower the same way that Afghanistan broke the Soviet superpower. (Wright, 2006) Simply put, bin Laden believed his own myth of how the ragged, faithful jihadists brought down one of the world's superpowers, and he wanted to do it again. He was disappointed when the core al Qaeda bombing of the U.S.S. Cole elicited such a weak response from the United States. He wanted the U.S. to invade Afghanistan. If Osama bin Laden had been more schooled in warfare, and less of a politician or religious man, he may have seen the error of that thinking prior to provoking the world's last remaining superpower.

In order to counter Al-Qaeda's new generation, Western officials should concentrate on twin goals. First, they should prevent terrorist safe havens from arising in the first place—a goal that was endorsed by the 9-11 Commission. And, second, they need to prove that U.S. allies and their aid organizations are as adept at building a stable civil society as the jihadists (Gartenstein-Ross, 2007, pp 3-10).

The current whereabouts of bin Laden are unknown. Unconfirmed French reports say that bin Laden died of Typhus in August of 2006. (Anderson, 2006) While those reports are disputed and denied, one thing remains clear; the U.S. has received no intelligence of his whereabouts in almost three years. His network has been driven underground, where it remains today. They may be planning a new offensive, or they may be simply hiding, waiting for a time to emerge and grow again. Vigilance is required, despite the fact that bin Laden's al Qaeda could very well be gone for good.

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