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Al Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment

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Summary

Most U.S. and international intelligence institutions, as well as outside experts, agree that Al Qaeda retains the intention to conduct major attacks in the United States and against U.S. interests abroad. These institutions also appear to agree that U.S. counter efforts in the past few years have weakened Al Qaeda's central leadership structure and capabilities, and that Al Qaeda's sympathizers now represent the pre-eminent threat from this organization. However, there is little agreement among experts over the degree to which these changes have materially reduced the overall Al Qaeda threat. This report will be updated as warranted by developments. See also, CRS Report RL32759, *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology*.

Al Qaeda's Origins

Al Qaeda was founded by Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1988. Osama bin Laden was born in July 1957, the seventeenth of twenty sons of a Saudi construction magnate of Yemeni origin. Many Saudis are conservative Sunni Muslims, and bin Laden appears to have adopted militant Islamist views while studying at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. There, he studied Islam under Muhammad Qutb, brother of Sayyid Qutb, the key ideologue of a major Sunni Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood.¹ Another of bin Laden's instructors was a major figure in the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Dr. Abdullah Azzam. Azzam is identified by some experts as the intellectual architect of the *jihād* against the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and ultimately of Al Qaeda itself;² he cast the Soviet invasion as an attempted conquest by a non-Muslim power of sacred Muslim territory and people.

¹ The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 in Egypt, and it has spawned numerous Islamist movements throughout the region since, some as branches of the Brotherhood, others with new names. For example, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas traces its roots to the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

² Gunaratna, Rohan. *Inside Al Qaeda*. Columbia University Press, 2002.

Bin Laden went to Afghanistan shortly after the December 1979 Soviet invasion, joining Azzam there. He reportedly used some of his personal funds³ to establish himself as a donor to the Afghan *mujahedin* and a recruiter of Arab and other Islamic volunteers for the war. In 1984, Azzam and bin Laden structured this assistance by establishing a network of recruiting and fundraising offices in the Arab world, Europe, and the United States. That network was called the *Maktab al-Khidamat* (Services Office), also known as *Al Khifah*; many experts consider the *Maktab* to be the organizational forerunner of Al Qaeda. Another major figure who utilized the *Maktab* network to recruit for the anti-Soviet *jihad* was Umar Abd al-Rahman (also known as “the blind shaykh”), the spiritual leader of radical Egyptian Islamist group Al Jihad. Bin Laden apparently also fought in the anti-Soviet war, participating in a 1986 battle in Jalalabad and, more notably, a 1987 frontal assault by foreign volunteers against Soviet armor. Bin Laden has said he was exposed to a Soviet chemical attack and slightly injured in that battle.⁴

During this period, most U.S. officials perceived the volunteers as positive contributors to the effort to expel Soviet forces from Afghanistan, and U.S. officials made no apparent effort to stop the recruitment of the non-Afghan volunteers for the war. U.S. officials have repeatedly denied that the United States directly supported the volunteers,⁵ although the United States did covertly finance (about \$3 billion during 1981-1991) and arm (via Pakistan) the Afghan *mujahedin* factions, particularly the Islamic fundamentalist Afghan factions, fighting Soviet forces. During this period, neither bin Laden, Azzam, nor Abd al-Rahman was known to have openly advocated, undertaken, or planned any direct attacks against the United States, although they all were critical of U.S. support for Israel in the Middle East.

In 1988, toward the end of the Soviet occupation, bin Laden and Azzam began contemplating how, and to what end, to utilize the Islamist volunteer network they had organized. U.S. intelligence estimates of the size of that network was about 10,000 - 20,000, although not all of these necessarily supported or joined Al Qaeda terrorist activities.⁶ Azzam reportedly wanted this “Al Qaeda” (Arabic for “the base”) organization to become an Islamic “rapid reaction force,” available to intervene wherever Muslims were perceived as threatened. Bin Laden differed with Azzam, hoping instead to dispatch the Al Qaeda activists to their home countries to try to topple secular, pro-Western Arab leaders, such as President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Saudi Arabia’s royal family. Some attribute their differences to the growing influence on bin Laden of the Egyptians in his inner circle, such as Abd al-Rahman, who wanted to use Al Qaeda’s resources to install an Islamic state in Egypt. Another close Egyptian confidant was Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, operational leader of Al Jihad in Egypt. Like Abd al-Rahman,

³ The September 11 Commission report says that U.S. officials obtained information in 2000 indicating that bin Laden received \$1 million per year from his family from 1970 (two years after his father’s death) until 1994, when his citizenship was revoked by the Saudi government. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. July 22, 2004. p. 170.

⁴ Gunaratna, p. 21.

⁵ Author conversations with officials in the public affairs office of the Central Intelligence Agency. 1993.

⁶ Report of the 9/11 Commission. p. 67.

Zawahiri had been imprisoned but ultimately acquitted for the October 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and he permanently left Egypt for Afghanistan in 1985. There, he used his medical training to tend to wounded fighters in the anti-Soviet war. In November 1989, Azzam was assassinated, and some allege that bin Laden might have been responsible for the killing to resolve this power struggle. Following Azzam's death, bin Laden gained control of the *Maktab*'s funds and organizational mechanisms. (Abd al-Rahman later came to the United States and was convicted in October 1995 for terrorist plots related to the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. Zawahiri stayed with bin Laden and remains bin Laden's main strategist today.)

The Threat Unfolds

The August 2, 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait apparently turned bin Laden from a de-facto U.S. ally against the Soviet Union into one of its most active adversaries. Bin Laden had returned home to Saudi Arabia in 1989, after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan that February. While back home, he lobbied Saudi officials not to host the 500,000 U.S. combat troops that defended Saudi Arabia from the Iraqi invasion and ultimately expelled Iraq from Kuwait in "Operation Desert Storm" (January 16 - February 28, 1991). He argued instead for the raising of a "*mujahedin*" army to oust Iraq from Kuwait, but his idea was rebuffed as impractical, causing his falling out with Saudi leaders. He relocated to Sudan in 1991, buying property there which he used to host and train Al Qaeda militants — this time, for use against the United States and its interests, as well as for *jihād* operations in the Balkans, Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Philippines. He remained there until the Sudanese government, under U.S. and Egyptian pressure, expelled him in May 1996; he then returned to Afghanistan and helped the Taliban gain and maintain control of Afghanistan. (The Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996.)

Bin Laden and Zawahiri apparently believed that the only way to bring Islamic regimes to power was to oust from the region the perceived backer of secular regional regimes, the United States. During the 1990s, bin Laden and Zawahiri transformed Al Qaeda into a global threat to U.S. national security, culminating in the September 11, 2001 attacks. By this time, Al Qaeda had become a coalition of factions of radical Islamic groups operating throughout the Muslim world, mostly groups opposing their governments. Cells and associates have been located in over 70 countries, according to U.S. officials. Among the groups in the Al Qaeda coalition, virtually all of which are still active today, are : the Islamic Group and Al Jihad (Egypt), the Armed Islamic Group and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (Algeria), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Jemaah Islamiyah (Indonesia), the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (Libyan opposition) and Harakat ul-Mujahedin (Pakistan, Kashmiri).

Al Qaeda's pre-September 11 roster of attacks against the United States included the following: (1) In 1992, Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for bombing a hotel in Yemen where 100 U.S. military personnel were awaiting deployment to Somalia for Operation Restore Hope. No one was killed; (2) A growing body of information about central figures in the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, particularly the reputed key bomb maker Ramzi Ahmad Yusuf, suggests possible Al Qaeda involvement. As noted above, Abd al-Rahman was convicted for plots related to this attack; (3) Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for arming Somali factions who battled U.S. forces there in October 1993, and who killed 18 U.S. special operations forces in

Mogadishu in October 1993; (4) In June 1995, in Ethiopia, members of Al Qaeda allegedly aided the Egyptian militant Islamic Group in a nearly successful assassination attempt against the visiting Mubarak; (5) The four Saudi nationals who confessed to a November 1995 bombing of a U.S. military advisory facility in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia claimed on Saudi television to have been inspired by bin Laden. Five Americans were killed in that attack; (6) The 9/11 Commission report indicates that Al Qaeda might have had a hand in the June 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers complex near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, although FBI officials have attributed that attack primarily to Shiite Saudi dissidents working with Iranian agents. Nineteen U.S. airmen were killed; (7) Al Qaeda allegedly was responsible for the August 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed about 300. On August 20, 1998, the United States launched a cruise missile strike against bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan, reportedly missing him by a few hours; (8) In December 1999, U.S. and Jordanian authorities separately thwarted related Al Qaeda plots against religious sites in Jordan and apparently against Los Angeles international airport; and (9) In October 2000, Al Qaeda activists attacked the U.S.S. Cole in a ship-borne suicide bombing while the Cole was docked the harbor of Aden, Yemen. The ship was damaged and 17 sailors were killed.

The U.S. Response and Its Effects

After the 1998 embassy bombings, the Clinton Administration began to pressure Al Qaeda's host, the Taliban regime of Afghanistan. On August 20, 1998, two weeks after those attacks, the United States launched cruise missile strikes against an Al Qaeda camp hoping to hit bin Laden, but the strike apparently missed him by a few hours.⁷ In July 1999, President Clinton imposed a ban on U.S. trade with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and froze Taliban assets in the United States. On December 19, 2000, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1333 banned any arms shipments or provision of military advice to the Taliban. The Clinton Administration also pursued a number of covert operations against bin Laden during 1999-2000, and the Bush Administration considered some new options prior to September 11th, including arming anti-Taliban opposition groups.⁸

The September 11th attacks instilled greater urgency in the U.S. effort against Al Qaeda. U.S. officials say that the post-September 11th struggle against Al Qaeda is worldwide and multifaceted, involving diplomatic and financial, as well as military and covert actions. A cornerstone of the post-September 11th U.S. effort has been in Afghanistan, where the U.S.-led war succeeded in ousting the Taliban regime there (December 2001) and replacing it with a pro-U.S., moderate government. Approximately 18,000 U.S. troops remain in and around Afghanistan, searching for remaining Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders and fighters. Bin Laden and Zawahiri escaped the war and, according to most assessments, fled into Pakistan, where they have continued to elude capture by Pakistani forces and agents. There are Central Intelligence Agency paramilitary officers and other U.S. personnel (some as contractors) in Pakistan dedicated to this search.⁹ After

⁷ September 11 Commission Report. p. 117.

⁸ September 11 Commission Report, p. 139, pp. 203-214.

⁹ CRS conversations with journalists and experts in Washington, D.C. December 2004-January 2005; Risen, James and David Rohde. A Hostile Land Foils the Quest for Bin Laden. *New York* (continued...)

a March 2004 Pakistani offensive against suspected Al Qaeda hiding places in the South Waziristan region that failed to find the two (or other major figures), Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said in December 2004 that the "trail has gone cold," an characterization generally backed by U.S. observers.

Although bin Laden and Zawahiri remain at large, U.S. officials say that much progress has been made against Al Qaeda, but that more remains to be done. In his annual testimony to Congress on national security environment, then Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet said on February 24, 2004, that "the Al Qaeda leadership structure we charted after September 11 is seriously damaged, but the group remains as committed as ever to attacking the U.S. homeland ... But do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting Al Qaeda is defeated. It is not."¹⁰

The Administration points to the capture or killing of senior Al Qaeda leaders as evidence of progress against Al Qaeda. Of the top 37 top Al Qaeda operatives identified by U.S. agencies after September 11, 2001, 15 have been killed or captured. The most notable among them include: number three leader Mohammad Atef (killed in Afghanistan by U.S. Predator); September 11th planner Khalid Shaikh Mohammed (arrested by Pakistan); key recruiter and planner Abu Zubaydah (arrested by Pakistan); Southeast Asian affiliate operational leader Hanbali (Riduan Isammudin), a key operative of Jemaah Islamiyah (arrested in Thailand); September 11th plotter Ramzi bin al-Shibh (arrested by Pakistan); and Abdul Ali al-Harithi, key plotter in Yemen (killed by U.S. Predator in Yemen). In the aggregate, since the September 11th attacks, about 3,000 suspected Al Qaeda members have been detained or arrested by about 90 countries, of which 650 are under U.S. control. The Administration also claims success in tracking and freezing Al Qaeda finances; a White House fact sheet of September 11, 2004, says that about \$77 million in suspected Al Qaeda assets have been frozen worldwide, with about \$4.5 million of that in the United States.¹¹ On the other hand, several press reports say Al Qaeda activists have found methods, such as trading in precious commodities, such as diamonds and gold, to continue to generate funds.

Some senior figures, aside from bin Laden and Zawahiri, are still at large and could be continuing to plan operations. Three senior figures — Al Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Ghaith, operations planner Sayf al-Adl, and bin Laden's son Saad — are believed to be in Iran. The three are believed responsible for planning the May 2003 suicide attacks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Iran says it has some senior Al Qaeda figures "in custody," although many doubt the degree of constraint, if any, that Iran has placed on them, and Iran has refused to transfer them to their countries of origin for interrogation and trial.¹²

⁹ (...continued)

Times, December 13, 2004.

¹⁰ Testimony of Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. February 24, 2004.

¹¹ [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/09/print/20040911.html>].

¹² *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2003*, p. 88.

The nature of the threat might also be changing. Numerous outside experts¹³ have assessed the organization, as former DCI Tenet did in February 2004 congressional testimony: “Successive blows to Al Qaeda’s central leadership have transformed the organization into a loose collection of regional networks that operate more autonomously.” This could suggest the ideology of Al Qaeda is reverting to its former roots as a vehicle for destabilizing secular governments in the Islamic world. Many believe that the weakening of central direction renders Al Qaeda less able to conduct catastrophic attacks inside the United States, but others believe that more autonomous affiliates might be better able to adapt attacks to local conditions and goals, making them a major collective threat. Younger Al Qaeda figures, some of whom fled the Afghanistan battlefield, are said to be emerging as major planners, and these activists apparently see Al Qaeda as inspiration rather than as a structured organization. On the other hand, from their hiding places, Bin Laden and Zawahiri continue to issue audio and video statements referencing current events, demonstrating their ability to communicate with the outside world. The increased frequency of these statements in 2004 could suggest the two are rebuilding at least some support infrastructure, and that they might be trying to restore some central direction for Al Qaeda.

The Administration asserts that the absence of attacks inside the United States since September 11th, demonstrates that the main thrust of Administration policy is succeeding. However, some are skeptical that the overall threat from Al Qaeda or pro-Al Qaeda movements has been reduced, and they point to major attacks since mid-2002, most notably: the Jemaah Islamiya (Indonesian affiliate) attack on a Bali nightclub, killing 180 (October 2002); the bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel and the related firing (and near miss) of shoulder-fired missiles at an Israeli passenger aircraft, both in Mombasa, Kenya (November 2002); suicide car bomb attacks against three housing compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, killing 20 people including eight Americans (May 2003); a suicide bomb attack against five sites in Casablanca killing about 40 people (May 2003); and the bombing of a commuter train in Madrid, killing about 300 (March 2004). Numerous smaller attacks have been conducted against U.S. and other sites in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, East Asia, and other areas where Al Qaeda affiliates operate. On February 4, 2005, the acting Coordinator for Counter-terrorism at the State Department warned that more attacks like the Madrid bombing are likely.

The Bush Administration has asserted that the U.S.-led war in Iraq is part of the war on terrorism. U.S. forces there are fighting foreign volunteers for the insurgency, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a 38-year-old Jordanian Arab who reportedly fought in Afghanistan. In 2004, he formally was affiliated with Al Qaeda.¹⁴ Others maintain that the U.S. involvement in Iraq has harmed rather than benefitted the war on terrorism by inspiring new recruits to Al Qaeda, motivated by a perceived U.S. occupation of Iraq. A recent surge of suspected Al Qaeda attacks in Kuwait, where U.S. troops congregate before deploying into Iraq, might support concerns that militant Islamists have become energized by the Iraq war. Others believe that reported heightened Al Qaeda activity in Europe might represent recruitment of volunteers for the Iraq insurgency.

¹³ See, for example, Hoffman, Bruce. “The Changing Face of Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 27:549-560, 2004.

¹⁴ Murphy, Dan. In Iraq, A Clear Cut Bin Laden-Zarqawi Alliance. *Christian Science Monitor*, December 30, 2004.