



Memorandum

March 31, 2004

TO: House Government Reform Committee
Attention: [REDACTED]

FROM: Audrey Kurth Cronin
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Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

SUBJECT: Terrorist Attacks by Al Qaeda

This memorandum is in response to your request for information about attacks by Al Qaeda both before and after the September 11, 2001 attack on the United States. If you have further questions, please contact Audrey Kurth Cronin at [REDACTED].

Introduction

The request asks for the number of attacks attributed to Al Qaeda in the two-and-a-half years before September 11, 2001, and in the two and a half years afterwards, as well as the total number of attacks by Al Qaeda before September 11, 2001. While an analysis of the number of attacks worldwide committed by Al Qaeda might seem a simple, straightforward exercise, it is not, for the reasons mentioned below. We have endeavored to provide an assessment of the evidence available and will describe our findings in the body of the memorandum.

A number of issues arise relating to the reliability of this information, which is collected from openly available chronologies of terrorist incidents. First, the most authoritative unclassified U.S. government document that assesses terrorist attacks, *Patterns of Global Terrorism* (published by the Department of State), comes out in the Spring of the subsequent year and thus has a lag of at least several months. There is currently no official government information available after 2002. Second, private organizations that collect information about terrorist attacks often define terrorism in different ways. Thus, it is often difficult to directly compare data that are collected on the basis of different assumptions.

Third, and most important with respect to tracking Al Qaeda's attacks, the attribution of terrorist attacks can be unknown for months or years, and sometimes (especially with respect to Al Qaeda) it is probably never definitely known. There is information of varying reliability in the press about apparent logistical, financial, or technical cooperation with Al Qaeda, and/or apparent links between operatives in local groups and Al Qaeda. Sometimes groups may claim to be associated with Al Qaeda so as to associate themselves with Al

Qaeda's goals or ideology, even if there is no direct physical link. At other times, investigators think there is a link to Al Qaeda, but have no proof. We have used our best judgment to assess the reliability of this information, but it is not possible in many cases to be sure. Especially recently, the number of attacks definitely attributable to Al Qaeda has evolved and changed, as forensic and intelligence evidence comes to light. Therefore, especially for very recent attacks by Al Qaeda, the listing that we provide below may not be entirely complete or correct.

These comments are necessary because of the complexity of data on terrorist incidents generally, and the particular problems in tracking Al Qaeda's recently evolving pattern of attacks. The remaining discussion should be considered with these caveats in mind.

Total Al Qaeda Attacks Prior to September 11, 2001

According to the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002*, the following attacks are attributed to Al Qaeda before September 11, 2001:¹

December 1992: Three bombings were reportedly targeted at U.S. troops in Aden, Yemen. There were no casualties.

1993: Al Qaeda claims to have shot down U.S. helicopters and killed U.S. servicemen in Somalia while they were performing Operation Restore Hope. Bin Laden reportedly believes that Al Qaeda was thus responsible for the withdrawal of the United States from Somalia. (Note: Some experts do not include this incident as a terrorist attack, because it was directed not against civilians but against military members in combat.)

August 1998: Al Qaeda reportedly conducted the bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. 301 persons were killed and more than 5,000 were injured.

12 October 2000: Al Qaeda reportedly directed the attack on the USS Cole in the port of Aden, Yemen. 17 U.S. Navy members were killed and 39 were injured. (Note: Some experts do not include this attack as a "terrorist incident," because it was directed against a military, not civilian, target, although the Cole was not engaged in any combat during that period.)

These four attacks are the total number listed by the State Department as attributable to Al Qaeda before September 11th. There were also numerous attempted attacks that were disrupted, including:

1994: Al Qaeda reportedly plotted to assassinate Pope John Paul II during his visit to Manila.

1995: Al Qaeda reportedly plotted to assassinate President Clinton during a visit to the Philippines, and to bomb a dozen U.S. trans-Pacific airline flights.

¹U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 2003), pp. 118-119; also accessible at [<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls>].

1999: An Al Qaeda operative reportedly attempted to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport.

1999: Simultaneous with the above, Al Qaeda reportedly plotted to carry out terrorist operations against U.S. and Israeli tourists visiting Jordan for millennial celebrations.

Terrorist Attacks Attributable to Al Qaeda Immediately *before* September 11, 2001

You have asked for the number of terrorist attacks in the period two-and-a-half years before September 11, 2001. We have interpreted this to mean the time period from March 1, 1999 to September 11, 2001 (i.e., a total of 30 months before September 2001). To answer this question, we are again relying upon the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002*:

There were no terrorist attacks that we have been able to identify as attributed to Al Qaeda during 1999.

12 October 2000: Al Qaeda reportedly directed the attack on the USS Cole in the port of Aden, Yemen. 17 U.S. Navy members were killed and 39 were injured. (Note: As mentioned above, some experts do not include this attack as a "terrorist incident," because it was directed against a military, not civilian, target, although the Cole was not engaged in any combat during that period.)

The U.S. State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism* lists no more major attacks attributed to Al Qaeda between October 2000 and September 11, 2001. Thus, it appears that there was one major attack publicly attributed to Al Qaeda in the thirty months before 9/11.

The following Al Qaeda plots were reported by the State Department as *disrupted* during this time period (March 1, 1999 to September 11, 2001):

1999: An Al Qaeda operative reportedly attempted to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport.

1999: Al Qaeda reportedly plotted to carry out terrorist operations against U.S. and Israeli tourists visiting Jordan for millennial celebrations.

Terrorist Attacks Attributable to Al Qaeda Immediately *after* September 11, 2001

You have asked for the number of terrorist attacks in the intervening two-and-a-half years after September 11, 2001 and to the present date. We have interpreted this to mean the time period from September 12, 2001 to March 31, 2004 (i.e., a total of 30 months after September 2001). To answer this question, we are relying upon the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002*, newspaper accounts, and the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Incident database:²

²RAND-MIPT Terrorism Incident Database is maintained by the RAND Corporation, in conjunction
(continued...)

11 April 2002: Al Qaeda reportedly firebombed a synagogue in Tunisia, killing 19 and injuring 22.

6 October 2002: Al Qaeda reportedly directed a suicide attack on a French oil tanker off the coast of Yemen, killing 1 and injuring 4.

8 October 2002: Al Qaeda reportedly attacked U.S. military personnel in Kuwait, killing 1 person and injuring 1 person.

12 October 2002: Al Qaeda reportedly supported an attack (primarily carried out by Jemaah Islamiya) on a nightclub in Bali, Indonesia, killing approximately 180 people.

28 November 2002: Al Qaeda reportedly bombed an Israeli-owned/patronized hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, killing 15 and injuring 40. Simultaneously, Al Qaeda operatives unsuccessfully attempted to shoot down an Israeli chartered plane using a surface-to-air missile as it departed the airport in Mombasa, Kenya.

12 May 2003: Al Qaeda reportedly supported suicide attacks on three Western housing compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia killed 34 people, including 8 Americans.

16 May 2003: Fourteen suicide bombers, member of a local group (Al-Salafiyyah al-Jihadiyah, or "Salafia Jihadia") allegedly connected to Al Qaeda, carried out nearly simultaneous attacks on five Western and Jewish targets in Casablanca, killing 45 people and injuring more than 100.

15 November 2003: A group called Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades, which reportedly has connections to Al Qaeda, carried out twin suicide truck bomb attacks on synagogues in Istanbul. 25 people were killed and more than 300 were injured.

20 November 2003: An organization called the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders' Front (or IBDA-C), which reportedly may have received logistical training and support from Al Qaeda, carried out suicide attacks against the British Consulate and the HSBC bank in Istanbul, Turkey.

11 March 2004: Simultaneous bombings of four packed commuter trains in Madrid killed 190 people and injured more than 1400. Evidence is still being gathered; however, Spanish police have in custody a number of Moroccan and other Islamist radicals who are reportedly members of organizations such as Al-Salafiyyah al-Jihadiyah, the group that carried out the Casablanca attacks and which reportedly has links with Al Qaeda. A self-described spokesman for Al Qaeda claimed the organization's responsibility for the attacks, although that has not been independently confirmed.

Please note that we are not including in this list terrorist attacks that have occurred in Iraq, many of which are suspected to have a link to Al Qaeda (or its associated groups), but whose genesis is still undetermined. There are a large number of attacks that could qualify

² (...continued)

with the Oklahoma City National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism. It is accessible at [http://db.mipt.org/mipt_rand.cfm].

for the list, but at this point the degree to which Al Qaeda is responsible is unclear and disputed.

The following Al Qaeda plot was reportedly *disrupted* during this time period (September 12, 2001 to March 31, 2004):

December 2001: Suspected Al Qaeda associate Richard Colvin Reid attempted to ignite a shoe bomb on a transatlantic flight from Paris to Miami.

There may be other attacks that were disrupted during this period; however, we do not yet have access to unclassified government sources that would give a more complete and authoritative accounting of them. Thus it is not possible to determine the total number of attacks *attempted* by Al Qaeda and disrupted by counterterrorist efforts in the 30 months after September 11th.

Summary

To summarize, the U.S. State Department lists four attacks as attributable to Al Qaeda in the total period of time before September 11th. In the thirty months immediately before September 11, 2001, the U.S. State Department lists one. In the thirty months after September 11, 2001, the picture is much more complicated, since the State Department has not yet published its assessment and we do not have completely reliable sources. Counting only those attacks that are widely attributed to Al Qaeda in open sources, and realizing that this list is likely to change as more information either confirming or disputing an Al Qaeda role becomes available, we estimate that there have been approximately ten Al Qaeda terrorist attacks since September 11, 2001 (not including any potential Al Qaeda-associated operations in Iraq). The total number of disrupted attacks since September 11, 2001 is not known at this time. This is the best judgment that we can make on the available information and within the time provided to prepare this memorandum.