

BULLETIN

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Al Qaeda under New Leadership

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The elimination of Osama bin Laden is a success in the decade old America-led “global war on terror.” However, this does not mean that Al Qaeda will cease to function. Its new leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, will attempt to rebuild the weakened organizational structures and Al Qaeda’s jihadist allies, its Middle Eastern branches and individual would-be jihadists inspired by the organization might aspire to avenge bin Laden’s death.

Al Qaeda’s Leadership. Osama bin Laden died during a U.S. Special Forces raid in the Pakistani town of Abbottabad on 2 May. It is most probable that two weeks later the senior leaders of Al Qaeda decided to appoint Saif al Adel as the new interim leader (Emir) of the organization. Al Adel is the former chief of Al Qaeda’s military committee and spent the majority of the last decade in house arrest in Iran. However, his tenure as the interim leader was cut short by the 16 June announcement that another Egyptian—Ayman al Zawahiri, bin Laden’s former deputy and one of the most prominent spokespersons of the organization—was confirmed as Al Qaeda’s new Emir. He will attempt to rebuild the shattered organization and its morale with the preparation of spectacular terrorist attacks while simultaneously trying to ensure its survival during intensified U.S. counterterrorist operations in South Asia.

Al Qaeda Central after bin Laden’s Death. Now led by al Zawahiri, the so-called “Al Qaeda central,” suffered further serious losses after bin Laden’s death: Ilyas Kashmiri, the Pakistani connection between Kashmiri fundamentalists and Al Qaeda was killed on 3 June, and Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Al Qaeda’s representative for East Africa and the man behind one of the 1998 suicide bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya or Tanzania, was shot dead by Somali soldiers five days later.

Those spectacular eliminations of Al Qaeda central’s leaders and its representatives seriously weaken the organization and limit its capacity to conduct successful terrorist attacks around the globe. Its strength, however, lies with its allied organizations from the Afghan-Pakistani border region and also Somalia, Chechnya and Indonesia, its Saudi Arabian-Yemeni, Iraqi and Northern African branches and independent terrorist cells functioning within the Muslim communities in Europe and the United States. It is hard to expect such organizations and structures to cease terrorist activity in the aftermath of bin Laden’s death. Some of them actually possess the potential to intensify their activities and may attempt avenging bin Laden, the icon and the leader of the global jihad.

Al Qaeda Central’s Allies. Al Qaeda’s allies from the Afghan-Pakistani border region, and especially the Pakistani Taliban who officially announced their desire to avenge bin Laden, constitute the biggest terrorist threat to international security. In the last month, they conducted a series of spectacular attacks on Pakistani security forces, including a double suicide bombing of the headquarters of the Frontier Constabulary in Shabqadar that killed 80 people and the commando style assault on the Mehran naval base in the vicinity of Karachi, Pakistan’s largest city. The assault team managed to wreak havoc within the perimeter of the base for about 16 hours, and the Pakistani army had 18 killed and 16 wounded trying to flush out the terrorists. Such attacks further destabilized Pakistan, a state which is now in the process of upgrading its nuclear arsenal and locked in a frozen conflict with India. Its cooperation, however, is vital if American efforts in the “global war on terror” are to succeed. In addition to this, the Pakistani Taliban, which operate from the Afghan-Pakistani border region, have a documented history of targeting the West and utilizing their paramilitary infrastructure to train Europe and U.S.-based members of Al Qaeda central-affiliated cells.

The jihadist organizations allied with Al Qaeda central from the North Caucasus, Indonesia and Somalia constitute a much diminished threat to international security. Most of them suffered serious losses when Supyan Abdullayew and Abu Anas, prominent field commanders of the Caucasus Emirate, were both eliminated by Russia, and Umar Patek, one of the organizers of the 2002 Bali bombings, was arrested in Pakistan. However, the death of Fazul Abdullah Mohammed in Somalia failed to stop the Al Qaeda-aligned Somali Al Shabaab from executing a successful suicide attack against Abdishakur Sheikh Hassan, the Somali minister of interior, on 10 June.

Al Qaeda in the Middle East. Out of the three Al Qaeda branches, the Yemen structure (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) appears to be in the best condition and will attempt to use the country's difficult domestic situation to its advantage and create not only a logistical base for its terrorist activities in the Middle East but also in Europe and the U.S.¹

Al Qaeda in Iraq finds itself in a much worse condition, but it could stage a spectacular comeback if the political process in this country continues to stall. According to Leon Panetta, director of the CIA, the organization still numbers more than a thousand members and might grow stronger as U.S. troops continue to withdraw from Iraq, which is expected to be completed in December.

The least dangerous of the Al Qaeda branch operates in Northern Africa (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). Five years after its merger with Al Qaeda central, the organization that earlier functioned as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat failed to conduct one successful terrorist attack in Europe, though targeting this continent was allegedly its main priority.² The organization is riven with internal conflicts but it could use the Libyan civil war to its advantage and relocate to ungoverned spaces in this country.

Individual Terrorism. One of Al Qaeda central's strongpoints is its ability to inspire and radicalize individual potential jihadists who could conduct terrorist attacks targeting the West. An example of such a plot is the case of Nidal Hassan from 2009 who shot 13 American soldiers dead on their base at Fort Hood, Texas. Al Qaeda central calls for more such attacks in the statements and videos it released after bin Laden's death. Their task is to simultaneously incite and authorize acts of individual terrorism carried out in the name of the global jihad.

Despite the seriousness of the threat from terrorist lone wolves, these calls from Al Qaeda central also can be interpreted as a sign of weakness. It seems clear that the organization now almost solely relies on its allies, branches and individual jihadists to conduct any spectacular terrorist attacks. Due to security precautions and intensified U.S. counterterrorist activities, it may not be in a position to recruit new members and, because of this, is forced to call for acts of individual jihad.

Conclusions. Al Qaeda central remains the biggest terrorist threat to international security. Most of its terrorist acts, however, actually will be perpetrated by allied organizations, its branches or Al Qaeda-inspired individual jihadists. This might reduce the number of spectacular terrorist attacks and plots that would target the West. Unfortunately, this might signal an increase in the number of plots and attacks prepared by lone-wolf jihadists who often would be acting without Al Qaeda central's knowledge or direct authorization. In such conditions, countries without a history of a terrorist problem, such as Poland, the co-host of the EURO 2012 football tournament, could find themselves among the targets.

¹ P. Sasnal, *Al-Ka'ida w Jemenie*, "Biuletyn" PISM, nr 6 (614), 15 January 2010

² K. Rękawek, *Al Qaeda and the Revolutions in the Arab World*, "Bulletin" PISM, no 25 (774) of 10 March 2011