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Al-Qaeda: Vanquished or Strengthened?

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Al-Qaeda captured international headlines again last week, with reports of a direct threat to Western embassies – American embassies in particular – and civilians everywhere. The organization's propaganda victory was scored after some intelligence information was made public, with partial details leaked by both US administration spokespeople and anonymous intelligence sources. This media event renewed the debate about the threat level currently represented by al-Qaeda. While over the last year senior figures in the US administration, members of the defense establishment, and many analysts embraced optimistic assessments, namely, that the organization is close to elimination, this past week the pendulum swung the other way and pointed to a strengthened al-Qaeda, which in conjunction with its affiliates presents as a multi-tentacle octopus-like creature capable of carrying out simultaneous, multi-victim terrorist attacks throughout the world.

The US administration's decision to close several embassies and issue a travel alert to its citizens was apparently made on the basis of specific intelligence received through the interception of a communication between al-Qaeda leader Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri and some of his most senior associates, first and foremost Nasser al-Wuhayshi, Bin Laden's former secretary and the current leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. In this communication, al-Zawahiri seems to have instructed them to carry out large scale attacks against a string of strategic targets. Additional information indicated that local al-Qaeda prisoners in Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, and Yemen have made en masse daring, well-organized jailbreaks and have reconstituted themselves into a fighting reserve.

Intelligence information shared with the public and travel alerts have in recent years become more prevalent in various Western countries, a function of the 9/11 trauma which also led to serious intelligence housecleaning and unprecedented exposure of the most classified types of intelligence. Several possible explanations may account for the administration's recent decision to make public high quality intelligence, even at the cost of denying its ability to monitor conversations among al-Qaeda leaders. One, there is the

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essential need to secure the lives of citizens visiting embassies who would be exposed to harm. These civilians – unlike embassy personnel – are not protected by highly secured fortifications. Preventing embassy visits could help generate more effective preparations against an anticipated attack. Two, the administration is trying to quell the harsh criticism leveled against it regarding the invasion of citizens' privacy through mass surveillance of civilian electronic communications, both in the United States and elsewhere, by intelligence and law enforcement organizations. Three, the Obama administration was the target of much criticism that it mishandled information about events that ostensibly ended with the murder of the American ambassador and three security personnel in Benghazi in September 2012, and is now much more cautious, even risking valuable intelligence sources, so as not to be accused again of failing to read the situation correctly.

Beyond the precautions of this past week, however, the important question is whether al-Qaeda is weaker or stronger than in the past, and what threat level do it and its affiliates represent in terms of a renewed intense campaign of worldwide terrorism.

The assessment that al-Qaeda has not only grown very weak but is on its deathbed, made in the past by President Obama, seemed premature even as it was uttered. The assessment was based on the fact that the organization was badly damaged from the anti-terrorism campaign waged against it for more than a decade, and especially in the last few years, when al-Qaeda lost its legendary leader Bin Laden, and many of its senior commanders were either assassinated with drones or apprehended, thus crippling the organization's ability to attack the West. The anti-terrorism campaign also forced the organization and its affiliates to devote significant time, money, and efforts merely to survive and remain at large. The Arab Spring bore the message that the masses in Arab nations preferred unarmed popular uprisings for the sake of liberal democratic notions over the worldview espoused by al-Qaeda, preaching the removal of the old regimes by means of militant jihad. This gave rise to the hope that the deathblow to the organization would soon be dealt.

But in their quest for survival and even rejuvenation, the leaders of al-Qaeda and its affiliates chose to adopt the Arab Spring in order to turn it into an Islamic Spring. They encouraged the toppling of regimes even at the hands of elements not their own and even in the name of ideals antithetical to their own beliefs as a means to their own end. They exploited the growing instability in various parts of the Middle East and Africa to secure the release of their operatives from jail, amass arms, and deploy in regions with weak governments. Thus al-Qaeda was prepared to assist Salafist and jihadist organizations in the Maghreb, Sahel, North and Central Africa, Sinai, and recently also in specific locations in Syria. Thousands of new volunteers are streaming to these battlefields and are accruing combat experience, forging relationships with fellow travelers, and becoming more fervent in their global jihad commitment. For al-Qaeda and affiliates, these are manpower reserves, ready to embark on a new wave of global terrorism.

Al-Zawahiri and his associates are hoping that the completion of the US withdrawal from Iraq and the anticipated withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan in 2014 will allow al-Qaeda, which is apparently stationed now in the tribal region of Pakistan, to reassert itself and operate freely in the region. Al-Qaeda still has a reserve of veteran commanding officers and a mechanism for attacks abroad that continues to recruit, train, and operate activists, including Western loyalists. All of this gives hope to al-Qaeda and its closest associates – al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and al-Qaeda in the Maghreb – and their more removed affiliates, such as Jabhat al-Nusra operating in Syria, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis operating in Sinai, the Somali al-Shabab and Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Ansar al-Sharia organizations active in various Middle Eastern countries that they will be able to renew their onslaught of attacks.

Thus, while al-Zawahiri's vision of establishing a caliphate and restoring Islam's lost glory seems imaginary, it is likely that al-Qaeda, by means of its affiliates and perhaps also on its own, will try to renew its efforts to carry out a grand terrorist campaign, as it did in the past, following the withdrawal of the United States and NATO from Afghanistan. As demonstrated by the experience of this past week, the terrorists' rate of success in realizing their objectives depends largely on the effectiveness of the anti-terrorist campaign to foil their intentions. The key is the ability of local intelligence and law enforcement agencies to cooperate with one another and with foreign intelligence agencies. In addition, intensifying the public relations and diplomatic campaign, designed to tarnish al-Qaeda's dubious luster blinding many young Muslims around the world, is of supreme importance.

For Israel, there is major significance to the success of stopping the attempts of al-Qaeda and affiliates from returning to large scale terrorist activity. Abroad, Israeli and Jewish targets are particularly attractive to global jihadists. Within Israel's borders, al-Qaeda affiliates are preparing to carry out their declared intentions of exploiting their proximity to harm Israeli civilians and soldiers. Clear evidence of this was provided recently when an Ansar Beit al Maqdis terrorist cell was discovered plotting to fire missiles at Eilat. Near Israel's border with Syria, global jihadists are fighting the Assad regime, waiting for a lull and the opportunity to operate against Israel. Thus Israel, along with Western, Arab, and other nations, at the forefront of the fight against global terrorism and global jihad and is an important contributing partner to this campaign.

