

20 September 2012

Transnational Terrorism – How Has It Evolved Since 9/11?

The weakening of Al Qaeda over the last decade has not prevented others from drawing inspiration from its objectives and worldview. In tracing the evolution of transnational terrorism since 9/11, Alex Mackenzie describes how this inspiration has transformed into the regionalization of the Al Qaeda brand.

By Alex MacKenzie for ISN

Even before 9/11, governments around the world recognised that there was a growing overlap between the activities of international and domestic terrorists. During the Cold War, for example, many Western governments were concerned that groups like West Germany's Red Army Faction were cooperating with European and Middle East-based counterparts. Moreover, it was acknowledged in the 1970s that domestic terrorists were also attracting moral and material support from other states. Among the most notable was the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), who received [weapons from Muammar Gaddafi's Libya](#) throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Accordingly, the threat initially posed by the most notorious transnational terrorist organization of the post-Cold War era – Al Qaeda – was hardly a new phenomenon. Formed just as Soviet forces were leaving Afghanistan in 1989, Al Qaeda was from the outset an organization that thrived on connections between like-minded counterparts. And by moving between Sudan and Afghanistan during the first half of the 1990s, Al Qaeda was also able to acquire a degree of state support for its activities.

However, what arguably makes Al Qaeda different from other transnational terrorists is the extent to which it has fostered support from other actors. By the time of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks, Al Qaeda was thought to have [links](#) with groups, cells and individuals around the world, in approximately seventy countries. Indeed, links cultivated prior to and after 9/11 add substance to [Olivier Roy's observation](#) that Al Qaeda is a 'brand name ready for franchise'.

9/11 and After

Despite previous attacks on the World Trade Center (1993), American embassies in East Africa (1998) and the USS Cole (2000), 9/11 amply demonstrated that Al Qaeda thrived upon diffused and informal networks of actors to support its activities and carry out attacks. While most of the hijackers were Saudi Arabian, the 9/11 attacks were planned in Europe by members of the so-called 'Hamburg cell'.

These included Mohammad Atta, an Egyptian student who was eventually identified as one of the ringleaders of the 9/11 attacks. It was [previously reported](#) that the 'Hamburg cell' had been planning attacks against US targets since the summer of 1999.

The diffused and decentralized nature of Al Qaeda became increasingly apparent after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. As coalition forces increased their presence throughout the country, most of Al Qaeda's leadership eluded capture and fled over the border to Pakistan. Although damaged, Al Qaeda was by no means destroyed and remained a potent regional and transnational organization. Indeed, its relocation to Pakistan had a particularly destabilizing effect on the country, especially in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Al Qaeda also drew support from opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This was [perceived by many Muslims](#) as part of a 'war against Islam', instead of a 'war on terror'. Moreover, while the Multi-National Force-Iraq was unable to uncover links between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda, the invasion of Iraq also drew attention and resources away from Afghanistan. This, in turn, provided Al Qaeda with much-needed [breathing space](#), opportunities to attract new recruits, and to inspire terrorist activities in Iraq.

However, while the death of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011 is likely to have had an impact upon the core leadership of Al Qaeda, it has not brought an end to the 'war on terror'. Instead, in the years since 9/11, it has become increasingly clear that Al Qaeda has been taken up as a brand name by terrorist organizations in other parts of the world. In doing so, Al Qaeda's ideological appeal and worldview are, even now, far from past their sell-by dates.

Increasing Regionalization

As the Al Qaeda brand became increasingly globalized, a trend has emerged whereby terrorist groups have renamed themselves 'Al Qaeda' without necessarily having any direct links. In other words, while some organisations or individuals within these groups will have direct links to Al Qaeda, others will simply have been inspired by the organization's message. Terrorist groups that have named themselves after Al Qaeda include Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), but affiliated groups are also thought to include Al Shabaab in Somalia and the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiah. Between them, these groups have been responsible for numerous attacks and contributed to deteriorating security situations in Yemen, some North African countries (particularly Mali and the Sahel region), and around the Horn of Africa.

In addition, the threats posed by Al Qaeda and the groups that it has inspired are constantly evolving. Among the most troubling trends has been the emergence of 'lone wolves' and 'amateur terrorists' who are believed to have self-radicalised in their country of birth. Perhaps the clearest example of this was with the men who bombed London in 2005, three of whom were born in the UK (the fourth was born in Jamaica). It is suspected that two of these men [travelled to Pakistan](#), perhaps to receive training at a camp. Such individuals or groups are extremely difficult for security agencies to detect and therefore pose a considerable threat to many countries.

Despite the efforts of governments around the world to combat terrorism, terrorist groups continue to find ways around new security measures. The latest example of [underwear bombs](#) without metal components (found in Yemen for use on a flight to the US) might not be detectable by the newest airport scanners. And while security forces managed to prevent this attack, it nevertheless demonstrates that the threat posed by terrorism to Western countries still exists and continues to evolve. A further issue of importance to terrorist actors is the ['crime-terror' nexus](#). Simply put, this is

the idea that terrorist groups fund their activities through criminal activities. In this regard, the examples of narco-terrorism in Latin America, [AQIMs use of kidnappings](#) to fund their activities, and the Taliban supplying much of [Europe's heroin](#) all demonstrate how terrorism poses several overlapping and complex threats.

State of Play

In 2011, Sunni extremists accounted for 56 per cent of all terrorist attacks and 70 per cent of all fatalities around the world. Over a similar time-period, attacks by Al Qaeda and its affiliates also increased by 8 per cent. The main [trouble spots](#) in terms of terrorist activities and casualties also remain Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia. Simply put, the problems posed by Al Qaeda and affiliate groups remain a significant challenge to national and international security. Since 9/11, trouble spots do appear to have emerged in new areas, such as the Sahel region of Africa.

Their emergence further reinforces that Al Qaeda's ideology and goals continue to inspire like-minded regional terrorist groups. Indeed, this particular threat continues to evolve and will not disappear any time soon. And while this article has focused heavily upon terrorist groups linked to Al Qaeda, Western countries must not blind themselves to other threats that can be as devastating as attacks by Islamist groups. In particular, this points to the possibility of emerging problems of nationalist, racist, or white supremacists, such as Anders Behring Breivik in Norway. In response, Western countries must be vigilant against terrorism from more than one source.

Alex MacKenzie is a researcher at the University of Salford. He has published a number of journal articles on the EU's global responses to terrorism, with a particular focus on the EU's partnership with the United States. For correspondence, email a.mackenzie@edu.salford.ac.uk.

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=152863>

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland