

AL QAEDA, TRENDS IN TERRORISM AND FUTURE POTENTIALITIES: AN ASSESSMENT

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AL QAEDA, TRENDS IN TERRORISM, AND FUTURE POTENTIALITIES: AN ASSESSMENT*

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This paper assesses current trends in terrorism and future potentialities. It examines first the presumed state of al Qaeda today with particular reference to its likely agenda in a post-Iraq war world. It then more broadly focuses on some key current terrorism trends in order to understand better both how terrorism is changing and what the implications of these changes are in terms of possible future attacks and patterns. The discussion is organized along three key questions:

- What is the state of al Qaeda today and what effects have 18 months of unrelenting war had on it?
- What do broader current trends in terrorism today tell us about future potentialities?
- How should we be thinking about terrorism today and tomorrow?

What is the state of al Qaeda today?

The headline at the top of *The Washington Post's* front page last Christmas Eve brought neither cheer nor comfort to a city still reeling from the terrorist attacks that had laid waste to the World Trade Center and destroyed part of the Pentagon 15 months earlier. "In U.S.," it read, "Terrorism's Peril Undiminished: Nation Struggles on Offense and Defense, and Officials Still Expect New Attacks." The gloomy prognosis of senior Bush administration officials and intelligence and law enforcement experts was reflected in their conviction that it was only a matter of time before another major attack targeted the nation's capital. Al Qaeda's penchant to return to targets that previous attacks had failed to destroy consumed these experts' thoughts and therefore they viewed the White House and U.S. Capitol as at the top of the terrorists' hit list. So likely was such an attack

* Paper presented at the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy and Geneva Center for Security Policy 3rd Annual Conference, "The Middle East After Afghanistan and Iraq," Geneva, Switzerland, 5 May 2003. A synopsis of this paper was also presented at a meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C. Office, 8 May 2003.

that one White House counterterrorism official interviewed for the story had actually come to fear for his own safety. “They are *going* to kill the White House,” he remarked. “I have really begun to ask myself whether I want to continue to get up every day and come to work on this block.”¹

Less than three months later, however, a dramatically different view was showcased in another front-page *Washington Post* story on the same subject. “Al Qaeda’s Top Primed To Collapse, U.S. Says,” it trumpeted, explaining that the recent arrest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed—al Qaeda’s titular operations chief and reputed mastermind of the 9/11 attacks—and the “mother lode” of information (consisting of “hundreds of leads”) found on computers and other documents seized after his capture accounted for this dramatic volte-face. “I believe the tide has turned in terms of al Qaeda,” Congressman Porter J. Goss, the chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Intelligence Committee and himself a former CIA case officer, was quoted. “We’re at the top of the hill.” “It’s a very, very big deal,” enthused Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet. “We’ve got them nailed,” said an unnamed intelligence expert, who still more expansively declared, “We’re close to dismantling them.”²

The newfound optimism of Bush administration officials and intelligence experts alike about al Qaeda’s declining fortunes was further evidenced this past month after repeated threats of renewed attack by Usama bin Laden and some of his most devoted followers in retaliation for the U.S. invasion of Iraq failed to materialize.³ Citing administration sources, an article in the *Washington Times* on 24 April reported the increasingly prominent view of official Washington that al Qaeda’s “failure to carry out a successful strike during the U.S.-led military campaign to topple Saddam Hussein has raised questions about their ability to carry out major new attacks.”⁴

Without doubt, the inability of bin Laden and al Qaeda to make good on any of their preinvasion threats is a monumental setback given that he has long considered

¹ Barton Gellman, “In U.S., Terrorism’s Peril Undiminished: Nation Struggles on Offense and Defense, and Officials Still Expect New Attacks,” *The Washington Post*, 24 December 2002.

² Dana Priest and Susan Schmidt, “Al Qaeda’s Top Primed To Collapse, U.S. Says,” *The Washington Post*, 16 March 2003.

³ See, for example, CNN, “Alleged bin Laden tape a call to arms,” at <http://cnm.com/2003/WORLD/meast/02/11/sprj.irq.wrap> and bin Laden’s statement, “We want to let you know and confirm to you that this war of the infidels that the U.S. is leading with its allies . . . we are with you and we will fight in the name of God.”

⁴ David R. Sands, “Al Qaeda’s credibility ‘on the line’ as war in Iraq winds down,” *Washington Times*, 24 April 2003. See also Dennis Pluchinsky, “Al Qaeda Identity Crisis,” *Washington Times*, 28 April 2003.

himself and his movement the true defenders of Muslims everywhere. Al Qaeda's conspicuous inaction is if anything all the more galling to its sympathizers, its supporters, and perhaps even its rank and file in light of a long string of past pronouncements decrying the mistreatment of Iraqis under the yoke of the American-influenced, United Nations-imposed sanctions and oft-lamented alleged deaths of literally hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children.⁵ Yet, while developments in recent months present new evidence of significant progress in the war against global terrorism, it would be imprudent to write al Qaeda's obituary just yet—much less discount its ability to mutate into new, more pernicious forms. In this respect, there are at least six reasons for cautious and careful assessment:

1. Disagreement over precisely what al Qaeda is
2. The propaganda value of bin Laden's prescient analysis
3. The imperative of individual jihad fused with collective revenge
4. The operational possibilities presented by the occupation of Iraq
5. The competence and determination of the remaining al Qaeda leadership cadre
6. The resiliency of al Qaeda and the likelihood of a post-bin Laden al Qaeda

Let us briefly consider each.

Disagreement over precisely what al Qaeda is. It is remarkable that more than a decade after its founding, six years after it first came to international attention, and 18 months after the simultaneous attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon catapulted it to prominence, al Qaeda remains such a poorly understood phenomenon. The ways in which it is variously described or perceived is a case in point. Is it a monolithic, international terrorist organization with an identifiable command and control apparatus or is it a broader, more amorphous movement tenuously held together by a loosely networked transnational constituency? Has it become a franchise operation with like-minded local representatives independently advancing the parent organization's goals or does it still function at the direction of some centralized command nucleus? Is al Qaeda a concept or a virus? An army or an ideology? A populist transnational movement or a vast international criminal enterprise? All of the above? None of the above? Or, some of the above? The fact that this question provokes more disagreement than

⁵ See "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," Azzam Publications translation in Yonah Alexander and Michael S. Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida: Profile of a Terrorist Network* (Ardsley, NY: Transnational Publishers, 2001), Appendix 1 A, p. 19.

agreement in government, intelligence, and academic circles suggests that any claims of certitude about this or that development having incontrovertibly affected al Qaeda's health and longevity should be viewed with skepticism. The widely divergent views of Khalid Sheik Mohammed's role and importance is a case in point. While he is lauded by some as a prize catch at the nexus of all past and future al Qaeda operations, others dismiss him as a small fish, maintaining that, while Mohammed may have "huge knowledge of 9/11," he has little knowledge of subsequent al Qaeda operations and none of future planned attacks, and has had no contact with bin Laden for more than a year.⁶

The propaganda value of bin Laden's prescient analysis. To bin Laden's loyal followers, active supporters, and passive sympathizers, the analysis he first presented in the seminal August 1996 fatwa, the "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," comes across, if anything, as only more prescient and accurate today.⁷ Seven years ago, he argued that the "Crusader military forces" of the United States and United Kingdom had established a beachhead in Saudi Arabia from which they intended to impose a new imperialism on the Middle East in order to gain control over the region's oil wealth.⁸ To those already inclined to this view, recent events cannot unreasonably be seen to have provided further evidence of the acuity of bin Laden's analysis.⁹ Given the long-established sophistication of bin Laden and al Qaeda's propaganda efforts—employing multimedia vehicles, including prerecorded video- and audiotapes, CD-ROMs, DVDs, and the Internet; dramatically choreographed and staged dissemination opportunities; and other mass outreach techniques (e.g., via al Qaeda's phantom al Neda Web site and those of sympathetic, above-ground radical

⁶ This view is expressed by at least some European and American analysts with access to senior intelligence sources in their respective countries.

⁷ "My Muslim Brothers of The World," bin Laden wrote. "Your brothers in Palestine and in the land of the two Holy Places are calling upon your help and asking you to take part in fighting against the enemy your enemy and their enemy the Americans and the Israelis. they are asking you to do whatever you can, one own means and ability, to expel the enemy, humiliated and defeated, out of the sanctities of Islam." See *Ibid.*, Appendix 1 A, p. 21.

⁸ "Destruction of the oil industries. The presence of the USA Crusader military forces on land, sea and air of the states of the Islamic Gulf is the greatest danger threatening the largest oil reserve in the world. The existence of these forces in the area will provoke the people of the country and induces aggression on their religion, feelings and prides and push them to take up armed struggle against the invaders occupying the land; therefore spread of the fighting in the region will expose the oil wealth to the danger of being burned up." *Ibid.*, Appendix 1 A, p. 8.

⁹ See, for example, Thom Shanker and Eric Schmidt, "Pentagon Expects Long-Term Access to Four Key Bases in Iraq," *New York Times*, 19 April 2003; and, "Rumsfeld Denies the U.S. Has Plans for Permanent Iraq Bases," 21 April 2003 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/22/international/worldspecial/22PETN.html>.

Islamic sites and organizations)¹⁰—it is likely that this message will be peddled with increasing fervor for its intended motivational and recruitment value. If the American military presence in Iraq is prolonged and if al Qaeda is able to commence a sustained guerrilla warfare campaign against American forces stationed in Iraq or positioned in the region, this propaganda would likely strike a responsive chord throughout the Muslim world and possibly rejuvenate the flagging movement.

The imperative of individual jihad fused with collective revenge. Bin Laden has long defined the imperative of jihad as an individual responsibility incumbent upon Muslims everywhere. “It is no secret that warding off the American enemy is the top duty after faith and that nothing should take priority over it,” bin Laden wrote in his 1996 declaration of war. “Without shedding blood no degradation ... can be removed from the forehead I remind the youths of the Islamic world,” he had also stated.¹¹ Two years later, bin Laden reiterated how all ulema “are unanimous that it is an individual duty to fight an invading enemy.”¹² This was repeated again in his message of 9 December 2001, when bin Laden declared that “jihad has become fard-ain [obligatory] upon each and every Muslim. . . . The time has come when all the Muslims of the world, especially the youth, should unite and soar against the kufr and continue jihad till these forces are crushed to naught, all the anti-Islamic forces are wiped off the face of this earth and Islam takes over the whole world and all other the other false religions.”¹³

Though tempting to dismiss such appeals as anachronistic braggadocio, they may yet acquire new resonance at a time when Muslims reportedly harbor a deep sense of humiliation and resentment over the relatively bloodless conquest of Baghdad and the perceived unbridled projection of American power and influence into the region.¹⁴ To al Qaeda’s skillful propagandists, recent developments might be effectively parlayed as the latest in an ignominious series of historic Muslim defeats by the West that must now be avenged. Indeed, the concept of vengeance has long figured prominently as a rallying cry

¹⁰ See the analysis in Bruce Hoffman, “Underground Voices: Insurgent and Terrorist Communication in the 21st Century,” unpublished paper presented at the August 2002 meeting of the Insurgency Board, held at RAND’s Washington, D.C., office.

¹¹ “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” in Alexander and Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden’s al-Qaida*, Appendix 1 A, p. 19.

¹² Quoted in Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Dulles, VA: Brassey’s, 2002), pp. 53 and 70. This book, written by a 20-year veteran of the CIA’s operations directorate, is without doubt the preeminent work on bin Laden and al Qaeda.

¹³ Ben Venzke and Aimee Ibrahim, *The al-Qaeda Threat: An Analytical Guide to al-Qaeda’s Tactics and Targets* (Alexandria, VA: Tempest Publishing, 2003), p. 160.

¹⁴ Professor John Esposito makes this latter point in his book, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, as quoted and discussed in Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes*, p. 10.

in both bin Laden's and al Qaeda's messages. As previously noted, the requirement to avenge the shedding of innocent Muslim blood and especially that of Muslim children in Iraq and Palestine have been persistent bin Laden-cum-al Qaeda themes.¹⁵ In his December 2001 message, for example, bin Laden struck a familiar note when he warned: "Those [Westerners] who talk about the loss of innocent people didn't yet taste how it feels when you lose a child, don't know how it feels when you look in your child's eyes and all you see is fear. Are they not afraid that one day they [will] get the same treatment?"¹⁶ Particularly at a time when al Qaeda is weakened, the call for revenge coupled with the regenerative power of a single, new dramatic terrorist attack could breathe new life into the movement.

The operational possibilities presented by the occupation of Iraq. Since at least 1996, bin Laden has argued about the asymmetric virtues of guerrilla warfare and repeatedly extolled the victory he claims was achieved with this tactic in Somalia against American forces in October 1993.¹⁷ "[I]t must be obvious to you," bin Laden declared in his 1996 declaration of war, "that, due to the imbalance of power between our armed forces and the enemy forces, a suitable means of fighting must be adopted i.e. using fast moving light forces that work under complete secrecy. In other word to initiate a guerrilla warfare, were [sic] the sons of the nation, and not the military forces, take part in it."¹⁸

A virtually identical call to arms was issued just two months ago when Qaeda released the fifth and sixth installments of a series of articles entitled *In the Shadow of the Lances* that had begun to appear shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Although the previous installments had been written by al Qaeda's putative spokesman, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, the two latest were authored by Saif al-Adel, one of the movement's most senior operational commanders and a former Egyptian Army Special Forces officer who joined al Qaeda with the 1998 merger of Ayman Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad. In it, al-Adel advocates the use of guerrilla warfare tactics against the American and British

¹⁵ "More than 600,000 Iraqi children have died due to lack of food and medicine and as result of the unjustifiable aggression (sanction) imposed on Iraq and its nation," bin Laden wrote in 1996. See "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," in Alexander and Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida*, Appendix 1 A, p. 19.

¹⁶ Quoted in Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, p. 47.

¹⁷ Specifically, the events where 18 U.S. Army Rangers and Delta Force commandos were killed in fighting with Somali militiamen and allegedly al Qaeda fighters. See Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), passim.

¹⁸ "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," in Alexander and Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida*, Appendix 1 A, p. 11.

forces in Iraq and provides detailed practical advice on its implementation.¹⁹ Further, in a 9 April 2003 declaration posted on al Qaeda's phantom Web site, al Neda, which was clearly written after American forces had entered Baghdad, the virtues of guerrilla warfare are again lavishly extolled. Under the caption "Guerrilla Warfare Is the most Powerful Weapon Muslims have, and It is The Best Method to Continue the Conflict with the Crusader Enemy," prominent lessons of history are invoked to rally the jihadists for renewed battle. "With guerilla warfare," the statement explains,

the Americans were defeated in Vietnam and the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan. This is the method that expelled the direct Crusader colonialism from most of the Muslim lands, with Algeria the most well known. We still see how this method stopped Jewish immigration to Palestine, and caused reverse immigration of Jews from Palestine. The successful attempts of dealing defeat to invaders using guerilla warfare were many, and we will not expound on them. However, these attempts have proven that the most effective method for the materially weak against the strong is guerrilla warfare.²⁰

If it is accepted that one of bin Laden's aims in the 9/11 attacks was to draw the United States into a costly ground campaign in Afghanistan, where American forces would be ground up and defeated much as the Red Army was more than a decade ago, then Iraq arguably presents him with a crucial, second (final?) bite of the apple. Iraq may thus prove an irresistible opportunity for the mujahideen to avenge the stunning defeat of the Taleban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan a year ago. In this respect, what we in the United States and the West would regard as a decisive victory, bin Laden and his followers (however illusory) likely dismiss as a one setback or a mere lost battle in a long war. Further, whereas we have become accustomed to measuring wars that are fought and won in a few months, if not a matter of weeks, our adversaries see this conflict as an epic contest lasting years, if not decades. As such, the deployment of American military forces from Djibouti to the border of Iran may now be seen by al Qaeda strategists as presenting

¹⁹ See "Al-Qa'ida Organization Addresses a Message to Iraqi, Islamic Peoples (Internet) www.alfjr.com in Arabic," 5 March 2003. [Posting by "Ayn al-Haqiqah," entitled "The al-Qa'ida Organization Writes a Letter to the Iraqi People" in the "Issues of the Islamic Nation" section of the chatroom of www.alfjr.com, on 5 March 2003.] See also Ben Venzke and Aimee Ibrahim, *al-Qaeda's Advice for Mujahideen in Iraq: Lessons Learned in Afghanistan*, v 1.0 (Alexandria, VA: IntelCenter, 14 April 2003), passim.

²⁰ MEMRI Special Dispatch—Jihad and Terrorism Studies, 11 April 2003, no. 493 quoting <http://www.cubezero.nt/vhsvideo/imagis/?subject=2&rec=1043>.

the movement with a “target-rich environment” alongside multiple new operational opportunities and, as such, simply the next phase in a long struggle.

The competence and determination of the remaining al Qaeda leadership cadre. To date, nearly half of the senior al Qaeda leadership has been killed or captured. Among them are important operations commanders like Khalid Sheik Mohammed, Mohammed Atef, and Abu Zubayda (Zayn al-Abidin Mohammed Husayn), as well as key financiers like Mohammed Mustafa Ahmed Hawsawi (who was arrested with Mohammed). Their deaths and apprehension have appreciably weakened al Qaeda and undermined its operational capabilities. But, at the same time, the vital core leadership arguably remains at large or at least unaccounted for. Among them are the nucleus of fighters from Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) that Ayman Zawahiri brought into al Qaeda in 1998. This is particularly significant with respect to al Qaeda’s longevity and regenerative capacity, since this group is among the best educated, most highly skilled and motivated, and most competent cadre in the movement. Indeed, only one of the original EIJ operatives in al Qaeda’s upper echelon (Atef) has been among those senior cadre killed or arrested since 9/11. Accordingly, the movement’s core competency arguably remains intact. In this respect, if bin Laden himself were killed or captured, bin Laden’s deputy, Zawahiri, would presumably replace him. As Zawahiri is often cited as the real “brains” behind bin Laden, and was certainly instrumental in al Qaeda’s transformation to a terrorist group with real global reach after its merger with EIJ, the implications of his accession to power cannot be blithely dismissed. Moreover, given that Zawahiri lost both his wife and only son as a result of a U.S. air strike in Afghanistan in November 2001, a strong personal motive of uncompromising enmity motivated by a burning vengeance (especially since one of the deaths involved Zawahiri’s lone son—the only progeny of Zawahiri’s who could carry on the family name) might possibly impel what is left of al Qaeda toward aspirations of renewed and intensified violence.

It must also be said that, even in the post-9/11 era, when al Qaeda has been relentlessly tracked, harassed, and weakened, a “corporate succession” plan of sorts has seemed to function. Al Qaeda thus appears to retain at least some depth in numbers as evidenced by its replenishment abilities to produce successor echelons for the mid-level operational commanders who have been killed or captured. This may be a reflection of the vast reservoir of trained jihadists from which al Qaeda, at least theoretically, can draw. In his January 2003 state-of-the-union speech, President Bush himself referred to tens of thousands of persons who had been trained during the past decade in al Qaeda camps in the Sudan, Yemen, and Afghanistan and thereby comprise this cadre. More

recently, the head of Germany's intelligence service put their number at some 70,000 worldwide.²¹ Even if this figure is grossly exaggerated in terms of those individuals who swore the oath of allegiance to bin Laden and were inducted into al Qaeda proper (as opposed to being trained as Taleban militiamen for the civil war being fought against the Northern Alliance), the potential pool of even a few thousand well-trained and battle-hardened fighters ensures at least a sufficiently deep well of expertise from which to continue to draw.

Moreover, in terms of al Qaeda's finances, sufficient monetary reserves likely still exist. According to one open source estimate, some \$120 million of *identifiable* al Qaeda assets to date has been seized or frozen.²² Given that bin Laden reputedly amassed a war chest in the billions of dollars, ample funds may still be at the disposal of his minions. At one point, for example, bin Laden was reputed to own or control some 80 companies around the world. In the Sudan alone, according to Peter Bergen, he owned all of that country's most profitable businesses, including construction, manufacturing, currency trading, import-export, and agricultural enterprises.²³ Not only were many of these well managed to the extent that they regularly turned a profit, but this largesse in turn was funneled to local al Qaeda cells that in essence became entirely self-sufficient, self-reliant terrorist entities in the countries within which they operated.²⁴

The resiliency of al Qaeda and the likelihood of a post-bin Laden al Qaeda. In the final analysis, al Qaeda's resiliency (and longevity) is not predicated on the total number of jihadists that it may have or have not trained in the past, but on its continued ability to recruit, to mobilize, and to animate both actual and would-be fighters, supporters, and sympathizers. In this respect, it is significant that, despite the punishment meted out to al Qaeda during the past 18 months—the arrests and personnel losses, the dismantling of its operational bases and training camps in Afghanistan, the smashing of its headquarters and its mass expulsion from that country—as early as March 2002 the movement quickly recommenced active propaganda and communication efforts. A professionally produced al Qaeda recruitment video, for example, suddenly appeared which was circulated around various foreign Muslim communities in hopes of attracting new martyrs to bin Laden's cause. The seven-minute videotape, seized by American authorities sometime during the

²¹ Statement made at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, 23 January 2003.

²² Electronic newsletter of the Orion Group, 24 April 2003.

²³ Peter Bergen, *Holy Terror, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Free Press, 2001), pp. 47–49.

²⁴ Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*, p. 34.

spring of 2002, openly extolled the virtues of martyrdom and solicited new recruits to bin Laden's cause. It presented various scenes of jihadists in combat that were followed by the images of 27 martyrs shown in rapid succession with the name of each listed, where they are from, and where they died. Twelve of the martyrs were then featured in a concluding segment accompanied by the voiceover: "They rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah: And with regard to those left behind who have not yet joined them in their bliss, the martyrs glory in the fact that on them is no fear, nor have they cause to grieve." The video closes with a message of greeting from the "Black Banner Center for Islamic Information" along with accompanying contact details for those interested in joining al Qaeda for the purpose of becoming a martyr. At a time when the greatest military onslaught directed against a terrorist group in history had crushed al Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan, it is remarkable that this terrorist movement was still actively seeking to rally its forces and attract new recruits to a struggle that it clearly regarded as far from over. Abu Ghaith, the group's chief spokesman, said as much. "Those youths that destroyed Americans with their planes," he declared, "they did a good deed. There are thousands more young followers who look forward to death like Americans look forward to living."²⁵

The persistent reappearance of the al Neda Web site is another example of al Qaeda's unremitting recruitment and morale-strengthening efforts. The site, which is published in Arabic only, continues to disseminate its anti-American and anti-Western messages. Three basic themes are emphasized:

- The West is implacably hostile to Islam.
- The only way to address this threat and the only language that the West understands is the logic of violence.
- Jihad is the only option.

The theory of jihad in particular is elaborated in great detail with continued exhortations to Muslims that Islam involves commitment to spread the faith by the sword. In addition, regular summaries are posted of news affecting the Islamic struggle against the West, including al Qaeda's own accounts of ongoing fighting and skirmishing with American and allied forces both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, along with a selection of suggested

²⁵ Unclassified portions of Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Operations, classified title, 3 April 2002, p. 9.

readings, including books by approved authors.²⁶ Justification is also provided for the September 11 attacks, with video clips and other messages praising the operation and citing Islamic legal arguments to justify the killing of civilians. As with many other terrorist group sites, poetry is also used to glorify the sacrifices of martyrs and the importance of unrelenting struggle against Islam's enemies. According to British journalist Paul Eedle, the "site works to maintain the morale of al-Qa'ida supporters in the face of obvious reverses since September 11."²⁷ In particular, articles posted on the site have sought to draw a connection between the destruction of the World Trade Center and the cumulative blow struck against the U.S. economy by the September 11 attacks. Among the claims of proof the site offers are the weakening strength of the American dollar, the precipitous decline of the U.S. stock market, and the loss of confidence both at home and abroad in the American economy. Parallels are drawn with the decline and ultimate demise of the Soviet Union precipitated by the mujahideen and the jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s.²⁸ Indeed, this has long been a consistent theme of bin Laden's propaganda: The United States is often described as a "paper tiger," on the verge of financial ruin and total collapse much as the USSR once was, with the power of Islam poised similarly to push America over the precipice. In bin Laden's last publicly known address to his fighters in December 2001, he played up that theme, stating that, "America is in retreat by the grace of God Almighty and economic attrition is continuing up to today. But it needs further blows. The young men need to seek out the nodes of the American economy and strike the enemy's nodes."²⁹

Al Qaeda's ability to carry on the struggle, however, has also not been predicated on propaganda alone. Despite its crushing defeat in Afghanistan, during 2002, terrorist incidents linked to al Qaeda occurred in places as diverse as Tunisia, Pakistan, Jordan, Indonesia, Kuwait, the Philippines, Yemen, and Kenya. Targets included German, Australian, and Israeli tourists; French engineers; and a French oil tanker—as well as such long-standing ones as American diplomats and servicemen. Al Qaeda has continued to use suicide bombing tactics—both at sea and on land—and on one occasion kidnapped and subsequently executed an American journalist (Daniel Pearl). Commercial aviation also remained a significant al Qaeda target. In December 2001, for example, a terrorist

²⁶ Presentation made by the British journalist Paul Eedle, "The Language of Jihad" at the Third Annual Conference of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, St Andrews University, Scotland, 8 June 2002.

²⁷ Eedle, "Terrorism.com," *The Guardian* (London), 17 July 2002.

²⁸ Eedle, "Terrorism.com," 17 July 2002.

²⁹ Translation by, and personal communication with, Eedle, 31 July 2002.

with a bomb hidden in his shoe attempted to blow up a U.S. aircraft en route from Paris to Miami. Eleven months later, a group in Kenya linked to al Qaeda tried to shoot down an Israeli charter flight with a handheld surface-to-air missile.

In this respect, the post-9/11 al Qaeda has shown itself to be a remarkably nimble, flexible, and adaptive entity. In fact, al Qaeda appears almost as the archetypal shark in the water, having to constantly move forward, albeit changing direction slightly, in order to survive. Hence, the loss of Afghanistan may not have affected al Qaeda's ability to mount terrorist attacks to the extent we imagine. Afghanistan's main importance to al Qaeda was a massive base from which to prosecute a conventional civil war against the late Ahmad Shah Masoud's Northern Alliance. Arms dumps, training camps, staging areas, and networks of forward and rear headquarters were therefore required for the prosecution of this type of conflict. These accoutrements, however, are mostly irrelevant to the prosecution of an international terrorism campaign. The al Qaeda attacks successfully perpetrated in Tunisia and Pakistan last spring, in Bali, Yemen, and Kuwait in October, and in Mombassa in November attest to this. Indeed, previous "high-end" al Qaeda plots predating its comfortable relationship with the Taleban in Afghanistan demonstrate that the movement's strength is not in geographical possession or occupation of a defined geographical territory, but in its fluidity and impermanence. The activities of the peripatetic Ramzi Ahmad Yousef, reputed mastermind of the first World Trade Center bombing, during his sojourn in the Philippines during 1994 and 1995 is a case in point. Yousef's grand scheme to bomb simultaneously 12 American commercial aircraft in mid-flight over the Pacific Ocean (the infamous "Bojinka" plot), for example, did not require extensive operational bases and command and control headquarters in an existing country to facilitate the planning and execution of those attacks.

Rather, what was critical to the success of 9/11 were three capabilities that al Qaeda likely still retains. First was the ability to identify of a key vulnerability or gap in the defenses of its principal enemy—America—that could be mercilessly exploited (e.g., the U.S. commercial aviation security structure). Second was the effective use of deception on board the four hijacked aircraft where the passengers and crew were deliberately lulled into believing that if they behaved and cooperated as they were told—the standard operating procedure for crew and passengers on hijacked aircraft that historically had enhanced chances of survival—they would not be harmed. Third, suicide attack was employed to ensure the attack's success. None of these essential qualities was dependent on al Qaeda having a base of operations in Afghanistan—and thus could likely be replicated in some future plan that successfully identifies and exploits a gap in our

defenses and then cleverly and adroitly assembles the operational requirements for that attack to succeed. Even if the 2002 al Qaeda attacks pale in comparison and sophistication with such spectaculars as the 1998 embassy bombings, the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000, and 9/11, the potential rejuvenating power of a terrorist spectacular—however crude and directed against a soft target, such a bar in Bali on Saturday night—nonetheless demonstrates the ability of even one significant, new terrorist incident to instantly reignite worldwide fears and concern.

In addition, the means and knowledge to continue to prosecute the struggle have been disseminated throughout the world. The 13-volume *Encyclopedia of Jihad* and one-volume *Jihad Manual* have been loaded onto the World Wide Web, transferred onto discs and CD-ROMs, and e-mailed to jihadists and would-be jihadists. As a review text with which to brush up on one's skills, a training manual to impart information and instruction to others, or even as a recruitment vehicle, al Qaeda's abiding faith in the power of communication, whether through propaganda or instructional treatises, has ensured a steady flow of information to its far-flung sympathizers and supporters.

Finally, bin Laden has likely prepared for his own death and in turn has formulated a succession plan of his own, not necessarily with regard to who will replace him as leader but in order to ensure the continuation of the movement and revolution that he set in motion. On several occasions, for example, bin Laden has spoken of his own martyrdom and openly welcomed it. In August 1998, he declared that "I am fighting so I can die a martyr and go to heaven to meet God. Our fight is now against America. I regret having lived this long. I have nothing to lose." And, again four months later, he proclaimed, "I am not afraid of death. Rather, martyrdom is my passion because martyrdom would lead to the birth of 1,000s of Osamas."³⁰

What do broader current trends in terrorism today tell us about future potentialities?

First and foremost (and at the risk of stating the obvious), it must be said that we are in a transitional state, with our counterterrorism measures improving and becoming stronger while al Qaeda constantly scrambles and struggles to adapt itself to the new, less congenial operational environments in which it must exist. During this period of adaptation, there will be continued low-level attacks and, as has been the pattern of late, mostly against accessible, soft targets. Particular emphasis will continue to be laid on the exploitation of local causes with which al Qaeda's ongoing propaganda efforts will be

³⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 31 and 6.

realigned to fit its pan-Islamist ideology. In many instances, these local cells will also continue to be surreptitiously co-opted by al Qaeda so that, unbeknownst to their rank and file, the group will in fact pursue al Qaeda's broader, long-range goals in addition to or instead of its own, more parochial goals. This process has been evident in some of the Jemmah Islamiya attacks in Indonesia and Singapore as well as among some Algerian terrorist cells operating in European countries. During this transition, we are also likely to see increased recruitment targeting second- and third-generation European Muslims living in diaspora communities there. Particular recruitment efforts have already been focused, for example, on Muslim youth living in the Netherlands who it was previously assumed had been completely assimilated into their new host countries and cultures.³¹ Al Qaeda operatives will thus seek to embed themselves in, and draw new sources of support from, receptive established Muslim communities. In this way, new recruits can be drawn into the movement who may not have previously come under the scrutiny of local or national law enforcement.

The main challenge for al Qaeda, however, will be to promote and ensure its durability as an ideology and concept. It can only do this by staying in the news; by elbowing any would-be terrorist competitors out of the limelight; and through new attacks promoting its continued relevance to Muslim affairs. Violence will continue to be key to ensuring its continued presence as an international force. Critical to this will be its ability to mount a guerrilla-cum-terrorist campaign against American forces both in Iraq and deployed in support of those operations throughout the Middle East. If, six months from now, this promised campaign has not materialized and we experience no more significant al Qaeda terrorist attacks anywhere (e.g., along the lines of even the October 2002 Bali bombings), only then may we begin writing al Qaeda's obituary.

Second, while what al Qaeda might do and how it would do it is of course unclear, developments in Israel over the past 12–18 months provide some important clues, not just as models for potential future al Qaeda operations, but as possible templates for attacks by other terrorist groups. The Israelis at times perhaps overstate the point that the type of terrorist attacks experienced in Israel or directed against Israeli targets elsewhere rarely remain confined to Israel and Israelis alone, eventually expanding to embrace other countries in different situations and circumstances. Indeed, as one leading Israeli strategist and military analyst reflected in a recent discussion of potential future terrorist

³¹ See General Intelligence and Security Service, *Recruitment for the jihad in the Netherlands: from incident to trend* (The Hague: Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, December 2002).

trends and tactics: “We had the same discussion back in 1968 when El Al aircraft were hijacked and people said this is your problem, not ours.”³² As we know only too well today, ensuring the security of civil aviation remains a pervasive, global challenge. Accordingly, it may be useful to look at recent trends in terrorism in Israel for the clues and insight they potentially offer with respect to threats other Western countries—and especially the United States—might face. In this regard, there are at least four potentially significant developments of which note should be taken:

1. The sustained campaign of suicide bombing that has convulsed Israel since the start of the Second Intifada in September 2000. Although this tactic surfaced in Israel in 1993, and thereafter became a regular security problem, fully 70 percent of all such incidents have occurred during the past 20 months. Indeed, of the approximately 700 Israelis killed since then, suicide bombers are responsible for the deaths of nearly half.
2. The attempt to bomb a large gasworks on Ramat Ha-Sharon, a Tel Aviv suburb, that would have a potentially catastrophic impact, not just on the city and its inhabitants but on nearby vital, sensitive government installations whose destruction was considered the attack’s secondary goal.
3. The use of SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles in an attempt to shoot down a charter Israeli passenger aircraft as it took off from the Mombasa, Kenya, airport.
4. The growing use of poisons in suicide bomb attacks and attendant increase of interest in chemical warfare among some Palestinian groups.

At least two of the above attacks that were foiled (the gasworks and SAM attack) came uncomfortably close to succeeding. Given that none had any especially unique operational or technical requirement, the ease of their implementation in other countries cannot be discounted. Indeed, one has to ask whether American or any European society can easily bear any one of those types of attacks.

Worse still, between and beyond the above attacks, one can conjure up immense concerns that fit uncomfortably with the capabilities found across the terrorist technological spectrum. The Israeli concept of “mega terrorism” is particularly instructive in this respect. This concept embraces not only the obvious—terrorist use of WMD or more discrete CBR weaponry, the targeting of infrastructure, and mass casualty

³² Interview, Dan Scheuftan, National Security Studies Center, Haifa University, December 2002.

events—but arguably more prosaic types of incidents such as suicide bombings; terrorist attacks on kindergartens and primary schools; and the assassination of a range of political leaders below that of presidents or prime ministers, including mayors, high court judges, or leading parliamentarians, in ways that while perhaps not causing extensive human loss of life or physical damage would nonetheless have profound, far-reaching psychological repercussions on the targeted society. In other words, a deliberate and calculated infliction of sharp, almost unbearable pain—but in modest amounts—that would nonetheless be designed to attempt to bring society to its knees. The sniper incidents in and around metropolitan Washington, D.C., last fall provide an uncomfortable example of the comparative ease with which such societies can be profoundly affected and unsettled.

How should we be thinking about terrorism today and tomorrow?

In the post-9/11 environment, terrorism's power—to coerce and intimidate, to force changes in our normal behavior, and to influence our policies and affect how and on what we spend money—has increased enormously. In this respect, the stakes have not only grown, but public fears and expectations have as well. More and more, the metric of success in the war on terrorism is defined as the ability of intelligence agencies and law enforcement organizations to prevent, preempt, and deter attacks. Conversely, the metric of success for the terrorists has become simply the ability to act. Although there is a world of difference between bombing a bar in Bali and attacking the Pentagon, the impact is not necessarily as dissimilar. Al Qaeda's power and receptiveness in parts of the world today is in fact based on the extraordinary success achieved and attention generated by the 9/11 attacks. Accordingly, the enormous rejuvenating and regenerative capacity of a new, successful attack cannot be underestimated.

Also, given that the war on terrorism will itself inevitably change during this third phase (now that the war in Iraq has been won) to become primarily a war of attrition, we have to be careful to avoid fatigue and impatience and, not least, overoptimism. The problem is that countering terrorism is akin to taking a time series of photographs. The image captured on film today is not the same as yesterday nor will it be the same tomorrow. The fundamental nature and character of terrorism changed with 9/11 and moreover has continued to change and evolve since then. It is becoming increasingly difficult to categorize or pigeonhole as an identifiable phenomena, amenable to categorization or clear distinction. The traditional way of understanding terrorism and looking at terrorists based on organizational definitions and attributes in some cases is no

longer relevant. Increasingly, lone individuals with no connection with or formal ties to established or identifiable terrorist organizations are rising up to engage in violence. These individuals are often inspired or motivated by some larger political movement that they are not actually a part of, but nonetheless draw spiritual and emotional sustenance and support from. Indeed, over the past 10 years or so—with the exception of the two World Trade Center attacks and that on the Pentagon—all of the most significant terrorist incidents that occurred in the United States were perpetrated either by a lone individual or very tight two- or three-man conspiratorial cells. The “Unabomber,” Theodore Kaczynski; Timothy McVeigh; Eric Rudolph, who bombed the 1996 Atlanta Olympics as well as gay bars and abortion clinics; the lone gunman of Palestinian extraction who opened fire on the observation deck of the Empire State Building in 1997; the two Palestinians who, later that year, plotted a suicide bombing attack on the New York City subway; the July 4 shooting at Los Angeles International Airport by a naturalized American-born who had emigrated from Egypt; and the D.C.-area snipers, John Muhammad and John Lee Malvo, demonstrate the power to inculcate fear and terrorize in a target society by even very modest levels of, albeit well-calculated, pain.

In conclusion, whatever the future holds for bin Laden and al Qaeda, it is indisputable that they have had a seismic effect on the United States and the entire world. Bin Laden is in fact one of few people alive who can claim to have fundamentally changed the course of history. And, in this respect, the epic battle that he launched is not over yet. The multiyear planning period of all previous al Qaeda spectacles alone suggests that it is too soon to write off either bin Laden or his jihadists. Accordingly, some monumental new operation may have been set in motion before 9/11 that is now slowly and inexorably unfolding. Indeed, because of the destruction of the Taleban and because of what al Qaeda sees as America’s global “war on Islam,” the movement’s sense of commitment and purpose today is arguably greater than ever.