Exploiting the Fears of Al-Qa’ida’s Leadership

By James J.F. Forest

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, al-Qa’ida has been portrayed by the press, pundits and the former Bush administration as a fearsome monolithic entity, a dark demon waiting to strike the United States at a moment’s notice. Limited attention has been given to the glaring vulnerabilities that al-Qa’ida’s leaders worry about every day. In addition to the usual operational security challenges with which any clandestine organization grapples, al-Qa’ida desperately seeks to influence perceptions throughout the world of its legitimacy, organizational unity, relevance and competence. This article will briefly examine each of these goals to illustrate the larger point that al-Qa’ida’s fears can be made real, producing a significant and lasting impact on the organization’s future.

Legitimacy Lost
Al-Qa’ida fears fatwa (religious decrees) more than bullets or Hellfire missiles. A central component of al-Qa’ida’s propaganda requires gaining and maintaining legitimacy within the Muslim world. Failure to gain legitimacy will undoubtedly doom their cause and the future of the movement. Thus, al-Qa’ida’s leaders were greatly concerned when Saudi Arabia’s top cleric, Grand Mufti Shaykh Abdul Aziz al-Ashaykh, gave a speech in October 2007 warning Saudis not to join unauthorized jihadist activities, a statement directed mainly at those considering going to Iraq to fight U.S.-led forces. Similarly, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, a former top leader of the armed Egyptian movement Islamic Jihad and a longtime associate of Ayman al-Zawahiri, recently published a book that renounces violent jihad on legal and religious grounds.

The Threats from Within

There is a considerable amount of infighting, conflict and disorganization within al-Qa’ida. Analysis of al-Qa’ida documents captured in several countries (and now stored in the Department of Defense’s Harmony database) have brought to light a number of ideological and strategic debates among al-Qa’ida’s top leaders. In one letter, the author, “Abd al-Halim al-Adl, expressed concern that al-Qa’ida is “experiencing one setback after another,” and placed the blame for this squarely on the shoulders of Usama bin Ladin. Other letters revealed corruption and malfeasance within al-Qa’ida’s rank-and-file. Captured documents have illuminated several cases of embezzlement, counterproductive violence, insubordination, criminal activity (including drug running) and other activities that undermine the desperately promoted perception of al-Qa’ida members being devout Muslim “holy warriors.” Indeed, Khalid Shaykh Muhammad—the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks—was a flamboyant, globe-trotting womanizer and drinker who spent lavishly and stayed in plush hotels until his 2003 capture in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

Finally, al-Qa’ida members are human, and as such are not invulnerable to fear. The organization’s leaders are aware of this, and are concerned about cowardice (or the appearance thereof) within the ranks. Although they may not entirely fear the U.S. legal system, CIA secret prisons, the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, or being killed by a U.S. airstrike, they do fear the middle ground between death and a humane Western legal system: their repatriation to Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey or any number of countries where the respect for human

4 Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting Al Qaeda’s Organizational Vulnerabilities (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006).
rights is often lacking. As demonstrated by postings on jihadist web forums (and by recent “recantations” by Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Saudi cleric Nasir bin Hamd al-Fadl and others), there is significant concern among al-Qa`ida’s rank-and-file about the potential pain and suffering at the hands of interrogators in those countries. This, in turn, impacts their courage and commitment to actions that support al-Qa`ida’s ideology.

Ignorance and Ineptitude
Al-Qa`ida’s leaders do not understand the United States as well as they claim. The occasional propaganda blunder by Ayman al-Zawahiri and others have illustrated their ignorance about American society and values. Few of al-Qa`ida’s senior members have lived or spent considerable time in a Western country, and thus their knowledge of culture, social and political trends is drawn mainly from open sources via the media, the Internet, and books.

This lack of knowledge was reflected in a 2006 study by Muhammed Khalil al-Hakaymah on how the U.S. intelligence system works, and what the intelligence community can and cannot do legally under U.S. law. His ambitious 152-page report was circulated widely on Salafi-jihadist websites, but cites a number of conspiracy websites and other dubious sources to support his assertions. As a result, he provides bogus information, such as details of how South Korean intelligence influences U.S. national security agencies through the Washington Times, a newspaper controlled by the Unification Church.

The limits of al-Qa`ida’s knowledge impact the quality of intelligence available to make strategic decisions. Just as in any other organization, the fear of taking action based on faulty intelligence is unavoidable in al-Qa`ida, where leaders constantly worry about the unknown when planning their operations. As Gaetano Joe Iardi recently observed, “by satisfying the organization’s need for operational certainty and providing a basis upon which detailed plans can be constructed, intelligence is the fulcrum on which al-Qa`ida exists.” Thus, one finds a consistent drumbeat of appeals for intelligence from al-Qa`ida’s leaders throughout the online discussion forums frequented by jihadist supporters and sympathizers.

Finally, there are fears about potential ineptitude (or perceptions thereof) among al-Qa`ida’s rank-and-file. Some online jihadists have expressed considerable disappointment at the failure of al-Qa`ida’s leaders to conduct an attack during the U.S. election period, portraying this as a major opportunity squandered. Impatience is a common attribute throughout the terrorist world. A more important concern among al-Qa`ida’s members and supporters, however, revolves around questions of organizational capabilities. While the Arab mujahidin had little to do with Soviet troops leaving Afghanistan in 1989, they did acquire useful skills in conducting irregular warfare against a superior enemy. Many of these seasoned veterans formed the core of al-Qa`ida at the turn of the century and have been the focus of various post-9/11 intelligence and military actions. Presently, most new recruits to al-Qa`ida bring nothing of value: no military training, specialized skills or knowledge. All they share is a “desire to do something.” Some can avail themselves of opportunities to learn in rudimentary training camps in Pakistan, but more often it appears that Iraq has provided much-needed “on the job training” for these new recruits. Therefore, a key challenge for al-Qa`ida is trying to advance their organization’s objectives with a restricted knowledge base among their personnel resources.

Irrelevance
As Brian Jenkins recently observed, “these virtual jihadists are locked into a closed-loop discourse on the Internet that is increasingly irrelevant… That’s the biggest fear of the terrorists: One day Osama bin Laden will issue his 450th proclamation, and no one will really be listening.” A catalyst for the attacks on 9/11 was that al-Qa`ida’s leaders felt a need to prove to the Muslim world that they could support their words with deeds. Having captured center stage, they reaped the whirlwind of military-led responses and intelligence gathering that has seriously degraded their operational capabilities. Since then, Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri have tried mightily to keep a spotlight on themselves and their self-appointed vanguard group of “knights” by issuing periodic audio and video statements and encouraging a viral marketing campaign to support the global spread of their ideology. They clearly recognize the risk that, having been unable to orchestrate a follow-on attack equivalent (or greater) in scope and scale as 9/11, perceptions of their prominence and capabilities within the Muslim world are likely to diminish. Combined with the concerns described earlier about organizational ineptitude and opportunities squandered, this impatience among its followers may pressure al-Qa`ida’s leaders into hasty, desperate and sloppy decision-making, or even to a rapid downward spiral toward atrophy and disintegration.

Conclusion
Although al-Qa`ida must not be underestimated, it is important to recognize the terrorist group’s organizational vulnerabilities. Al-Qa`ida operatives work hard to shape a global perception that they are a powerful movement with tentacles and cells everywhere. This perception aids them by generating fear and causing governments to overextend and overspend on homeland security and counterterrorism efforts. An occasional terrorist attack in some corner of the world—whether it kills dozens, hundreds or thousands—feeds this perception. For al-Qa`ida to remain temporarily viable, the group is not required to conduct a steady drumbeat of attacks on U.S. soil; it only needs...
to conduct\textsuperscript{12} a terrorist attack at some location in the world, albeit preferably a media-rich Western target.

Al-Qa’ida is in danger, however, of being stalemated by counterterrorism successes, opposition by prominent clerics and Muslim groups, and problems within their own organization. They fear the decline in legitimacy that comes from a perception of inaction. Eventually, members and sympathizers will abandon all hope of achieving al-Qa’ida’s goals, and the overwhelming loss of money, recruits, safe havens and other necessary enablers will lead to its demise. This has been the trajectory of many terrorist groups throughout history, and al-Qa’ida’s leaders surely recognize this reality. Understanding al-Qa’ida’s fears will better help identify opportunities in which information operations and strategic communications efforts can lead to an acceleration of al-Qa’ida’s eventual decline and self-destruction.

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\textsuperscript{12} Or influence another group that shares its ideology to conduct a terrorist attack.
The history of al-Qa'ida has been extensively documented in many languages. Since the 9/11 attacks on the United States, massive research has been devoted to uncovering the origins of the global jihad movement, its strategies, concepts of operations, and ultimate aspirations.[1]. Such works have been assisted by the willingness of al-Qa'ida to talk openly about some parts of its narrative. While many aspects of al-Qa'ida's almost thirty-year history have been examined in impressive detail, other parts of the story remain shrouded in mystery. In some cases, gaps are caused by a lack of information. This study, conducted by the faculty and research fellows of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, serves multiple purposes, the most important of which is contributing to the depth of knowledge about the al-Qa'ida movement. Evidence supporting the conclusions and recommendations provided in this report is drawn from a collection of newly-released al-Qa'ida documents captured during recent operations in support of the Global War on Terror and maintained in the Department of Defense's Al-Qaida / Al-Qaeda (The Base), al Qadr Group for the Preservation of the Holy Sites International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Places Islamic Army for the Liberation of Holy Shrines. It is actually gaining ground and exploiting new opportunities. While many of Bin Laden's top lieutenants may now be dead, killed by US Special Forces or in drone strikes, jihadist groups in Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Libya and West Africa were able to mount several major operations during 2013. Al-Jazeera broadcast a statement by the group identifying itself as Tanzim Qa'idat Al-Jihad in Bilad al-Rafidayn (Organization of Jihad's Base in the Country of the Two Rivers).