ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY

The Future of Jihad

The peak of al Qaeda activity in the West has passed, but there is likely to be a second, low-level campaign of al Qaeda terrorism in the future, argues Thomas Hegghammer. Hegghammer is the Zukerman fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. He noted that following the death of Osama bin Laden, Western-oriented global jihadism is on the decline, though some ideologues will want to finish what bin Laden started. Hegghammer made his remarks at a CSIS Middle East Program roundtable entitled "The Future of Jihad" on February 28, 2013.

While acknowledging that various forms of Islamism and local jihadism will be around for some time, Hegghammer focused his argument on the threat posed to the West by globally-oriented jihadi groups. Al Qaeda Central (AQC), until recently led by Osama bin Laden and now under the leadership of Ayman al Zawahiri, established itself as the principal foe of the United States and the West with the September 11, 2001 attack. Over the past decade, so-called al Qaeda affiliates emerged across the Middle East. These affiliates—al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—remain sympathetic toward AQC but do not share the same global strategy focused on attacking the West.

AQC, in its current manifestation, is crumbling. It is losing personnel faster than it can recruit, membership is under 100, most leaders have been removed, and plot frequency and quality are down. Jihadi groups thrive when little is known about them, and governments currently have the informational advantage over AQC, Hegghammer noted. The academic community understands AQC extremely well, and the intelligence community knows it even better. The United States and its partners have used their improved intelligence to dismantle AQC leadership and thwart its objectives. Hegghammer nonetheless expects a second wave of transnational anti-Western jihadism to emerge in the coming five to fifteen years.

Hegghammer identified several reasons why such a resurgence might occur. Radicalism will continue to provide a base of support for jihadi activity. Islamism, Hegghammer argued, is a deeply ingrained part of political culture in many countries, and jihadism as a broad concept is well ingrained in Islamist thought. Ideologies that inspire terrorism do not have an expiration date. Moreover, jihadists face no shortage of grievances toward the West.

In addition, past terrorism campaigns have exhibited a similar model where a second wave emerges after a lull in activity. Jihadists also tend to emulate their past and present leaders; it is therefore only a matter of time before someone seeks to assume bin Laden's mantle.

PARTICIPATING SCHOLAR

Thomas Hegghammer is the Zuckerman Fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University for 2012-2013 and a senior research fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) in Oslo. He has previously held fellowships at Harvard, Princeton, and New York Universities and has commented widely in the international media. Hegghammer studies militant Islamism with a particular focus on transnational jihadi groups. His book *Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) won the silver medal of the Arthur Ross Book Award from the Council on Foreign Relations. He also co-authored *Al-Qaida in its own Words* (Harvard University Press, 2008) and *The Meccan Rebellion* (Amal Press, 2011). His other publications include academic articles for *International Security* and the *Journal of Peace Research*, op-eds for *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, and reports for the International Crisis Group and the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He is in the process of completing two books: a monograph about the jihadi ideologue Abdallah Azzam and an edited volume about "jihad culture," both for Cambridge University Press. ■

From the other side, Western governments' budget cuts as well as internal and external distractions among Middle Eastern states will lead to a relative weakening of states' repressive capabilities. Finally, the unpredictability of technology could equalize the playing field if, for example, jihadi groups gain access to encryption technology that would allow them to communicate privately.

A new jihadi group, Hegghammer speculated, would most likely settle in a semi-governed area, such as the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region, and would probably resemble a larger-scaled version of the Foreign Operations Unit of AQAP, a cabal formerly led by two U.S. citizens, Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan. It would need to form close relationships in the West, particularly with semi-radical communities in Europe, Hegghammer added. This new wave would be able to recruit from local jihadi groups and from among jihadists released from detention. Released jihadists have established contacts and enlisted new recruits while in prison, and more of them will be released in coming years. Observers should not measure a new jihadi group's impact by the scale of its attack, Hegghammer clarified—in fact, it would likely be less ambitious than the original al Qaeda—but rather by its ability to wage a continual campaign.

The al Qaeda affiliates, meanwhile, have not been attacking the West. Hegghammer proposed two overlapping reasons for this. First, the United States and the West established a formidable deterrent. Perpetrators are almost always caught following an attack on Western targets, Hegghammer noted, and thus it is rare for a cell to be able to launch multiple attacks. It is clear that groups like al Shabaab in Somalia and AQIM are "fearful of the fireball" that would result from a strike against the United States or the West.

In addition, most al Qaeda affiliates and other jihadi groups across the region, such as Ansar al-Sharia in Libya and Jabhat al-Nusrah in Syria, have a primarily local focus, and their foot soldiers generally join for proximate reasons. Hegghammer said that recruits often join through social networks, for companionship, or in search of adventure. These newly conscripted jihadists may have a vague notion that there is injustice in the world, but ideological indoctrination generally follows from this belief rather than driving it. Moreover, many of these groups establish legitimacy by providing social services. This model, though, is "fundamentally incompatible with [the] maximalist aims" of groups like al Qaeda, Hegghammer stated.

Hegghammer expressed little worry that fighters would spill over from the Syrian conflict into other conflicts or transnational jihadi groups. While Syrian jihadi groups are difficult to analyze because their ideology is fairly opaque, Hegghammer stated, they have issued few explicitly anti-Western remarks. He concluded that the aftermath of fighting in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s was the exception rather than the rule. Once the fighting slowed in Iraq, for example, very few fighters from that struggle joined the global cause.

Hegghammer concluded his talk with four recommendations for the West. He cautioned against comparing the demise of al Qaeda to the end of the Cold War and specifically against dismantling the intelligence capabilities built over the past decade. He urged governments to keep track of foreign fighters because they will be instrumental to any transnational jihadi effort. He recommended monitoring ideological production as a key source of early warning signs of an attack. Finally, he suggested continuing to keep an eye on semi-radical communities in Europe and the United States as potential recruitment grounds. ■

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