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The Anatomy of the Jihadist Threat

On June 22, 2006, Shawn Brimley and Aidan Kirby, research associates in the International Security Program, discussed two recent developments in the global war on terrorism: (1) the disruption of a terrorist plot and arrest of 17 suspects in Toronto, and (2) the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq.

July 7, 2006, marked the first anniversary of the bombings on London's Underground. Coupled with the release of a new video depicting the testimony of Shehzad Tanweer, one of the four bombers, this anniversary has served to reinvigorate discussions on the nature of the group that carried out that attack. A year later, analysts continue to debate whether this group was an autonomous cell—a quintessential case of homegrown terrorism—or whether they had some connection to, or received some type of support from, the larger al Qaeda network. Although it appears that this group was largely homegrown, there also exists evidence to suggest that some sort of a network link may have been present. This issue has been argued intensely within the counterterrorism community for some time, and the dynamics of this debate reveal much about what we know about al Qaeda—and what we don't.

Other recent events have added complexity to the landscape of current threats. The recent unraveling of a terror cell in Toronto is notable both for what it reveals about the social dynamics of radicalization as well as for the risk posed by North American–based homegrown terrorists—whose experiences as first and second-generation Muslims are usually characterized by a more complete cultural integration as compared to their European counterparts. And, of course, the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June was an important tactical victory for U.S. and Iraqi forces but has created several questions of strategic consequence, including questions on the identity of his successor, the strategic goals of a newly led al Qaeda in Iraq, and the relationship between the foreign fighters and Iraqi insurgents.

In the midst of a complex and constantly evolving debate within the counterterrorism community, the development of two major schools of thought can be discerned. One school believes that because al Qaeda's leadership and hierarchy has been greatly damaged since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom (and the broader global "long war"), its primary role has been to inspire, rather than direct, terrorist operations in Asia and Europe. Another school believes that reports of al Qaeda's organizational demise have been greatly exaggerated and that the organization itself remains the dominant strategic threat.

Prominent terrorism analyst Peter Bergen (one of the only journalists to have actually interviewed Bin Laden before 9/11) has recently argued that the new Tanweer video implies a connection between at least one of the London bombers and al Qaeda. Indeed, Tanweer is shown threatening future attacks, and the video contains a statement by Zawahiri praising Tanweer's actions. It also contains the animated graphic of al Qaeda's video production arm. This development, as well as existing evidence that two of the bombers made trips to Pakistan in the years leading up to the attacks, has convinced some analysts that this was a 'classic al Qaeda operation' rather than an autonomous undertaking by entrepreneurial jihadists.

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Upcoming Strategy Hour

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Developments in Somalia and Implications for the U.S.

18 July 2006
B1A – 9:00am

Featured speakers:

Karin von Hippel, Project Co-Director, Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project

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Jennifer Cooke, Deputy Director, Africa Program

The Jihadist Threat

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Implicit in much of the current discourse is the assumption that only one paradigm can characterize the central threat at any one time. Since London, Madrid, and the recent disruption of a plot in Toronto, a greater understanding of homegrown cells has emerged; there have been an increasing number of examples of small groups, never trained or formally recruited, organizing themselves to execute attacks inspired by al Qaeda's goals and ideology.

Meanwhile, the core al Qaeda network led by bin Laden remains real and dangerous—and a shift toward a more consolidated global network remains a significant possibility given the situation in Iraq. There have been increasingly well documented connections between insurgent groups in Iraq and their counterparts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, reportedly including training exchanges. The increasing number of both suicide and IED (improvised explosive device) bombings in Afghanistan has led some analysts to conclude that operational linkages between far-flung jihadist groups could well be evidence of a resurgent al Qaeda hierarchy. Just last week, a plot targeting New York City trains was disrupted, revealing another case of a self-initiated cell that sought resources through a connection to the al Qaeda network. The relationship between this developing decentralized movement and the established global al Qaeda network is complex, often opaque, and yet crucial to better understand.

While it is only natural that large and growing analytical fields will experience the creation of, and competition between, conceptual paradigms (the Cold War–era offers innumerable examples of this dynamic), the truth is almost surely somewhere in between. The most likely future scenarios for al Qaeda may well be a disturbing blend of the two models: we may see veterans of the jihads in Afghanistan or, most likely, Iraq return to their home countries and lead, or inspire, others to join new cells to prosecute increasingly devastating urban violence. It is probable that we will also see increasing numbers of small, amateurish cells, initiating and launching their own attacks with or without support from larger networks.

As technology continues its rapid proliferation and capacity for violence continues to be distributed more widely via the Internet, it may become harder, if not impossible, to differentiate between these two models. What is clear, however, is that five years into the war on terrorism, we continue to face a constantly evolving threat. As the anatomy of the terrorist threat becomes more sophisticated, so too must our analytical approaches to countering it.

▪ ***Shawn Brimley, Research Associate, International Security Program***
▪ ***Aidan Kirby, Research Associate, International Security Program***