

# Al-Qaeda in the Asia Pacific: Origin, Capability, and Threat

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Al-Qaeda al-Sulbah (The Solid Base) is the first multinational terrorist group of the twenty-first century. While past and present terrorist groups generally have a national base, limiting their terrorist campaigns to a single theatre, al-Qaeda is an umbrella organization waging multiple campaigns both against the West and against Muslim regimes friendly to the West. In addition to its core force of 3,000 members, al-Qaeda has established linkages with two-dozen Islamist groups. Driven by the ideal of a universal jihad, al-Qaeda has been able to politicize, radicalize, and mobilize Muslims throughout the world. With its global reach, al-Qaeda presents a new kind of threat hitherto unimagined by counter-terrorism practitioners and security and intelligence professionals.

By Rohan Gunaratna

Between pre-modern Afghanistan and post-modern continental United States via Europe and Asia, al-Qaeda has built a state-of-the-art terrorist network for moving funds, goods, and personnel recruited from around the world to reach its targets. It is the painstaking and steadfast construction of this network over many years that enabled al-Qaeda to mount 9/11. Al-Qaeda's targeting reflects its sophistication as a professional terrorist group. After the East Africa bombing – a land suicide attack on a US diplomatic target – the US strengthened security at all US missions overseas. However, instead of another land suicide operation, al-Qaeda mounted a sea-borne suicide operation. After al-Qaeda attacked the USS Cole in October 2000, the US invested in perimeter security. However, al-Qaeda evaded these measures and struck America's most outstanding landmarks from the sky. Al-Qaeda planned to strike the US once more with a radiological dispersal device using Jose Perdilla, an American Muslim, an operation that was disrupted at the reconnaissance stage. As it is al-Qaeda's doctrine to learn from its experiences and failures, it is most likely to use the lessons learned for a future attempt at destroying its third target, the US Congress. And as terrorist groups employ cost-effective tactics, al-Qaeda is likely to use civilian infrastructure once again to attack Western targets.

In keeping with its founding charter authored by Sheikh Dr Abdullah Azzam in March 1988, al-Qaeda is the 'spearhead of Islam', 'the pioneering vanguard of the Islamic move-

ments'. Because of the inspirational value, al-Qaeda's gives preference to suicide attacks. Attacking highly prestigious and symbolic targets is difficult, requiring extensive planning and preparation over a long period of time across several countries. To strengthen Islamic movements worldwide al-Qaeda – together the Islamic Movement of Taliban and the Maktab al Khidamat lil Mujahidin al-Arab – has trained several tens of thousands of Western, Middle Eastern, African, Caucasian, Balkan, and Asian Muslims.

## Decentralization

Al-Qaeda's training infrastructure has gravely suffered as a result of US intervention in Afghanistan since October 2001. However, al-Qaeda began decentralizing, opening new training facilities for recruits from Mindanao in the Philippines to Pankishi Valley in Georgia, long before 9/11. In forming the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders in 1998, al-Qaeda networked with and in some cases co-opted groups – from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Far East to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Central Asia and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat in North Africa. Telephone intercepts indicated that in early 1999 at the request of al-Qaeda's head of external operations Abu Zubaida, the MILF opened special camps for training foreign recruits. These camps were all situated in what is called the Abu Bakar complex, which was later overrun by the Philippine military. At that point, another al-Qaeda associate – Lashkar Jundullah – established a facility in Poso,

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Gunaratna delivering the IIAS Annual Lecture at DeBalie, Amsterdam, 14 June 2002

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Sulawesi, Indonesia. Similar facilities were later established in Algeria and Chechnya. Although the loss of Taliban control in Afghanistan was a massive blow to al-Qaeda, the support it enjoys in the tribal areas as well as its pre-9/11 decentralization is likely to ensure its survival.

Al-Qaeda's post-9/11 pronouncements – including Abu Gaith Sulayman's recorded message – reflect both its intention and will to attack Western and especially US targets. Although it has lost key leaders such as its military commander Mohommad Atef, alias Abu Hafs, al-Qaeda's core leadership is still intact.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the Islamist milieu in both the Muslim territorial and migrant communities continues to provide recruits, finances, and other forms of support, allowing it to replenish its human and material losses. As a result, al-Qaeda's global network – with members drawn from 46 countries and activities in 98 countries – is still functional, including its operatives in Europe (according to CIA

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estimates). Although the planning and preparing for attacks by its operational cells have been disrupted in Western Europe, al-Qaeda's support cells are still active in propaganda activities, raising of funds, recruiting, procuring supplies, and mounting surveillance on intended targets. Its collaborators, supporters, and sympathizers are filling the leadership vacuum created by the first wave of arrests of al-Qaeda leaders in Europe immediately after 9/11. The post-9/11 cells are more clandestine, compact, and self-contained, thus hard to detect and disrupt.

### Current threat

After 9/11 al-Qaeda attempted but failed to destroy US, UK, Australian, and Israeli diplomatic missions, attack both a US warship off Singapore and US and British warships in the Straits of Gibraltar, and poison the water supply to the US embassy in Rome. In addition to the shoe-bomber, Richard Reid, trying to destroy an aircraft over the Atlantic, al-Qaeda also attempted to bomb the US embassy and American cultural centre in Paris and attack the US base in Sarajevo. A Sudanese member of al-Qaeda fired a surface to air missile at a US warplane taking off from the Prince Sultan airbase in Saudi Arabia in December 2001. Al-Qaeda suicide bombers also attacked a French oil tanker off Yemen and US troops in Kuwait in October 2002. To instigate Islamists to strike worldwide Jewish targets, Nizar Seif Eddin al-Tunisi alias Nizar Nouar, a Tunisian al-Qaeda suicide bomber, rammed into Ghriba Synagogue, Africa's oldest Jewish synagogue, with a Liquid Petroleum Gas vehicle, killing 14 German tourists, including one child, and 5 Tunisians in Djerba, Tunisia on 11 April 2002. Al-Qaeda's front, The Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Sites, claimed the attack, which was subsequently confirmed as being an al-Qaeda operation in an interview with Abdel Azeem al-Muhajir, an al-Qaeda military commander.

Due to the difficulty of operating in the post-9/11 environment, al-Qaeda has delegated and diffused many of its responsibilities to other Islamist movements (parties and groups) under its umbrella. Al-Qaeda is operating through a number of groups with which it shared training, financial, and operational infrastructures in Afghanistan – a phenomenon most visible in Pakistan. Beginning with the massacre of the Christians in Bhawalpur in the Punjab district in October 2001, al-Qaeda has launched a number of terrorist operations, including the kidnapping and murder of the *Wall Street Journal* journalist Daniel Pearl and a church bombing in Islamabad, killing a US diplomat's wife and daughter. A suicide bomber of Harakat-ul Mujahidin-al-Aalami, an al-Qaeda associate group, killed 11 Frenchmen and 12 Pakistanis on 18 May 2002. The well-planned attack was conducted after mounting surveillance on the Sheraton hotel

and the bus route used by French naval engineers and technicians working on the submarine project in Karachi. The suicide vehicle bomb attack by an al-Qaeda associate group against the US Consulate in Karachi on 14 June 2002 injured a US marine and killed 11 Pakistanis. Using the same vehicle, they also targeted President Musharraf on 26 April, but the remote control failed to detonate the explosives.

### Taliban and al-Qaeda

While the Taliban is a guerrilla force operating somewhat openly, al-Qaeda remains a clandestine terrorist group. Their combined strategy is to install a regime that is friendly, or at least neutral to the Islamists in Pakistan. As they believe that the future survival of al-Qaeda and the Taliban along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border will depend on their ability to generate sustained support from Pakistan, they are likely to target Musharraf repeatedly. Al-Qaeda also mounted at least two clandestine operations to assassinate President Hamid Karzai and cabinet ministers. On 29 July 2002 an Afghan and a foreigner were arrested when driving through the centre of Kabul in an explosive (Semtex)-laden vehicle. In September 2002, a second al-Qaeda assassination operation was disrupted by Karzai's US bodyguards and, immediately after, an unknown group positioned a claymore mine on a route usually taken by the presidential motorcade.

### Primary target

The US remains the principal target of al-Qaeda as reflected when Osama stated: 'The battle has moved to inside America. We will continue this battle, God permitting, until victory or until we meet God.'<sup>2</sup> Until the US intelligence agencies infiltrate terrorist groups, which cannot be accomplished in the short term, the US will remain as vulnerable as it was before 9/11. Other governments have also earned the wrath of al-Qaeda. After, for example, the Singaporean government disrupted cells of Jamaayah Islamiyah (al-Qaeda's arm in Singapore), the leadership relocated to Indonesia and vowed to crash a plane on to the Changi international airport in Singapore. Similarly, in retaliation for Pakistan's support for the US, several Islamist groups in Pakistan are attacking soft targets nationwide.

With unprecedented security, intelligence, and law enforcement cooperation as well as with heightened public alertness, al-Qaeda is unable to engage in extensive and long-term planning and international preparation, a pre-requisite for conducting coordinated simultaneous attacks. Nonetheless, its super cells are likely to plan, prepare, and execute another mass casualty attack. For the time being due to the limitations of mounting another large-scale operation to attack a population centre, economic infrastructure, and symbolic/prestigious targets inside the US, a range of other

#### Editors' note >

Dr Rohan Gunaratna presented the 2002 IIAS Annual Lecture entitled 'Al-Qaeda in the Asia-Pacific: Origins, Capability, and Threat'. The above article is a shortened and edited version of Dr Gunaratna's full article, which can be found on: [www.iias.nl/iiasn/29/gunaratna.html](http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/29/gunaratna.html)

options remains open – from ‘going to sleep’ or hibernating, taking opportunity targets, to tasking other groups. Of the dozen medium- and small-scale attacks conducted by al-Qaeda and its associate groups only a few have been successful. They have failed due to tighter international, especially US, security countermeasures and hurried al-Qaeda planning. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda ideology ensures that, like a revengeful and a retaliatory wounded animal, the group is determined to strike back. As a result of a range of countermeasures, the spectrum of threat is expanding to include a wider range of targets as well as a change in the modus operandi. Al-Qaeda is operating through other Islamist groups, providing them trainers and funds, influencing their strategic and tactical direction, and is also likely to operate through associated groups.

### **Importance of Afghanistan-Pakistan borders**

The developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan are central to the survival of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. These two groups are adapting to the security environment and can be seen to have undergone three internal strategic changes. First, Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban and former head of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, has assumed the principal responsibility of fighting the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. In the fight, Osama bin Laden himself has pledged loyalty and allegiance to his leadership. Since Osama went into hiding, as the ‘leader of the Faithful’, Mullah Omar spearheaded the regrouping and re-organizing of the Taliban after 9/11. After re-establishing communication with the scattered units of the Taliban, he regrouped them along secure areas of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Their dream is to consolidate, as they did during the Soviet period, the strength of the Taliban and deepen their strategic influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan by preparing for a campaign of protracted guerrilla warfare. To rebuild support, the Taliban indoctrinates the Afghan people both directly by disseminating propaganda and through supporters and sympathizers scattered throughout Afghanistan.

Second, over the past year, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have replaced losses in the rank and file. Except during the first three months of confrontation, there are no signs of mass desertions from the Taliban or al-Qaeda, indicating the state of the morale within the rank and file. To compensate for the total loss of Pakistani state support of the Taliban, Mullah Omar has established Lashkar-e-Omar – a covert network of support organizations in Pakistan – to sustain a low intensity campaign in Afghanistan and in the area. By instigating its associate groups in Kashmir such as Harakat-ul Mujahidin and Jayash-e-Mohammad to intensify the violence in Kashmir, the Taliban forced Pakistan to re-deploy its troops on the Afghan border along the India-Pakistan border. With the

increased porosity of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have re-established their lines of communication, supplies, and recruits into Pakistan. The Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other associate groups are all harnessing the Islamist milieu in Pakistan and overseas (both territorial and migrant) to ensure a revival of support (encouragement, funds, and supplies). Conflicts of international neglect where Muslims are suffering – Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Maluku, Mindanao, and Algeria, among others – ensure continuity of support.

Third, al-Qaeda’s deputy leader Dr Ayman Al-Zawahiri is playing a more substantial role. To topple Karzai in Afghanistan and Musharraf in Pakistan, al-Qaeda has established networks of collaborators, supporters, and sympathizers in both these countries. To coordinate and conduct operations, al-Qaeda is seeking to re-establish communication with its associate groups and command cells respectively. To revive support al-Qaeda is establishing linkages with its affiliate NGOs and other charities overseas. Although suicide terrorism coupled with conventional attacks has proven to be the most effective, with the failure to strike tactical US, Allied, and coalition targets, al-Qaeda and its associated groups are likely to go down the road of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) terrorism. Although it is still the ‘spearhead of Islam’ and the ‘pioneering vanguard of the Islamic movements’, al-Qaeda has inspired and instigated a wider constituency of groups and individuals to take on the fight for Allah. These Islamist groups continue to inspire and instigate violence against ‘the enemies of Islam’, ‘the infidels’, and the ‘unbelievers’ both by word of mouth and in over 1,000 sites on the Web. They are operating across a wide spectrum, from low to high tech, stretching government resources, and weakening security countermeasures. This demonstrates the success of al-Qaeda in educating a much wider constituency to challenge the West and Muslim regimes friendly to the West.

### **Southeast Asian network**

Most academics find it difficult to understand al-Qaeda because the group functions both operationally and ideologically.<sup>3</sup> In addition to dispatching its operatives to target countries, it provides the experts, training, and resources to other Islamist political and military organizations to advance a common goal. In the same way it has penetrated existing Islamist networks worldwide, al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia penetrated Jemaah Islamiyyah (JI), a regional organization with overground and underground networks extending from southern Thailand to Australia. Among the groups it has infiltrated and influenced are Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia; Jashkar Jundullah, Indonesia; and Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Philippines. When JI wanted to destroy the US, British, Australian, and Israeli diplo-

matic targets in Singapore, al-Qaeda dispatched four Afghan-trained Arab suicide bombers to Southeast Asia. In an interview, an al-Qaeda detainee stated: ‘We did not want to risk using Asian Muslims for a landmark operation.’<sup>4</sup>

By physical and intellectual contact, al-Qaeda members (ideologues, trainers, operatives) and its literature (www.alneda.com) have physically and ideologically strengthened a dozen Islamist terrorist groups, numerous political parties, charities, and individuals. Towards a Darulah Islamiah Raya, about 400 Islamists have been trained in facilities in Afghanistan (Derunta, Khalden, etc.), Pakistan (Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar), Malaysia (Negri Sembilan), Indonesia (Poso, Sulawesi), and the Philippines (Mindanao) since 1993. In the region, it has created a mission and a vision for the Islamists to create a caliphate comprising Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Mindanao.

### **The future**

In many ways, al-Qaeda decentralized before 9/11. With focused targeting on the Afghan-Pakistan border where both al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Mullah Omar Faction) are concentrated, the group will depend on its regional networks, such as its Southeast Asian network, to continue the fight. Al-Qaeda’s disrupted Singapore operation clearly demonstrates the group’s intentions as well as its capabilities and opportunities for attacking target-rich Southeast Asia.

Largely due to the tireless efforts of the intelligence community, especially of the Singaporean service, the region is aware of the existence of a resilient terrorist network. Only a regional approach involving all ASEAN countries can prompt the region to comprehensive and sustained action.

The first step towards reducing the immediate threat to Southeast Asia is to develop and implement a multi-pronged, multi-dimensional, multi-agency approach by ASEAN countries to target al-Qaeda’s support and operational infrastructure at home and in the immediate neighbourhood. ◀

*Dr Rohan Gunaratna is author of the international best seller Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). ISRRGunaratna@ntu.edu.sg*

### **Notes >**

- 1 See pages 288–9 of Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, New York: Columbia University Press (2002).
- 2 Interview with Tayseer Allouni, al-Jazeera’s Kabul correspondent, 21 October 2001.
- 3 As al-Qaeda, a secret organization, continues to pose a threat, governments do not wish to make information about the group public.
- 4 The author interviewed a number of al-Qaeda and Taliban detainees, including the American-Taliban John Walker Lindh in US custody.