

Al-Qaeda's Waiting Game

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Americans tend to forget that while we were surprised by the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda was not. The attacks' exact date was known to bin Laden and two or three others only six days before Sept. 11, 2001, but they had long known the attacks were coming. Thus al-Qaeda was able to move important operatives, archives, material, and other assets out of Afghanistan in advance.

The al-Qaeda fighters who stayed to fight the U.S.-led coalition came from the organization's insurgent arm—which is al-Qaeda's largest component—and, according to the U.S. military, they turned in an excellent combat performance before withdrawing to Pakistan and elsewhere. U.S.-led forces, therefore, were never fighting remnants but a professional insurgent force that had no intention of standing and dying in the face of overwhelming American power. Al-Qaeda commanders applied to the letter Mao's guerrilla-war lessons and their own experience fighting the Red Army.

So al-Qaeda got out of Afghanistan in good shape and with little need to regroup, if regrouping is defined, as it has been by U.S. officials, as a thoroughly defeated military force trying to pull its fractured pieces back together. Al-Qaeda simply moved from one safe haven to another—from Afghanistan to Pakistan's Pashtun-dominated border provinces. From there, with the Taliban, it began to plot the reconquest of Afghanistan. Sayf al-Adl, then al-Qaeda's military commander, has written that bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and company concluded that it would take about seven years to re-establish Taliban rule. Al-Qaeda made its plans on that timetable and sent many of its insurgent fighters home to rest until they were needed. Far from regrouping, al-Qaeda decided to disperse and wait. Al-Adl adds that many of these fighters were in tears when they learned they would not immediately fight the U.S. military. Presumably their tears have now turned to grins.

Beyond failing to defeat or even permanently impair al-Qaeda Central—the forces commanded by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri—we now confront a substantial number of al-Qaeda franchises, 29 of whom have publicly declared their presence in such places as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt.

Terrorism experts typically describe these franchises as replacing the al-Qaeda threat that the military claims to have mopped up. This is incorrect. Al-Qaeda Central remains in business and able to attack the United States. The franchises form a second tier of threats in their local areas. In other words, where there was once one threat, there are now many. The proliferation of these franchises also underscores bin Laden's startling ability to continue inspiring and instigating Islamists to jihad despite his infrequent media appearances.

Thus the United States and its allies are not experiencing a resurgence of al-Qaeda and Taliban action, with the suggestion of spontaneous, unplanned attacks that designation carries. Rather, we are witnessing the early to early-middle phases of a long-planned campaign to reclaim Afghanistan for Islam. America's opponents are not swinging wildly at us but are progressing along a path they have delineated with patience, common sense, and professionalism.

Capitalizing on the swell of anti-Americanism that the Iraq War provoked across the Muslim world,

al-Qaeda has plenty of manpower and has imported the tactics of roadside bombing and suicide attacks perfected by its forces in Iraq. And because of the 2005-06 run-ups in oil prices, al-Qaeda's Arab benefactors are flush with cash. What this means for the United States is that al-Qaeda will be at the Taliban's side when, over the next several years, U.S.-led forces are evicted from Afghanistan and Mullah Omar once again unfurls the prophet's banner over that country.

And this may be the least of it. American defeat on the ground in Afghanistan could well be accompanied by another massive al-Qaeda attack inside the United States.

Our political and military leaders have swallowed the theory that al-Qaeda is a "terrorist group," so they believe, and have told Americans, that by fighting al-Qaeda on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq, they are preventing attacks in the United States. Nothing could be further from the truth, but, as Jefferson once said, "The moment a person forms a theory, his imagination sees in every object only the traits that favor that theory."

The al-Qaeda forces we are fighting in those two countries are the group's insurgent forces, not its "special forces" —those that attacked Washington and New York on 9/11. As noted, those forces left Afghanistan before the U.S. Marines landed and have been planning new attacks since then in Pakistan's border provinces, Saudi Arabia, Britain, and other secure locations in Europe, across the Muslim world, and perhaps even in the United States and Canada.

The lack of an al-Qaeda attack inside the United States since 9/11 proves only that there has not been an al-Qaeda attack in the United States since 9/11. That fact is in no way proof that our war on al-Qaeda has destroyed its capacity to hit America at home. The most that should be claimed is that the CIA rendition program may have disrupted and delayed operational planning. Alternatively, bin Laden may have decided that a near-term attack would reunite Americans at a time when our own folly is already sufficient to make the U.S. the second superpower to be defeated by Allah's mujahedin.

The question, therefore, is how much damage have we inflicted against al-Qaeda's terrorist arm? In terms of its most veteran leadership cadre, quite a bit. Under the CIA's rendition program—which I founded, first managed, and am accountable for—numerous senior al-Qaeda lieutenants have been incarcerated since mid-1995—those seized during President Clinton's tenure in Arab jails, those during President Bush's in U.S. facilities.

But here is where our leaders' sem-antic games play havoc with U.S. security. As Americans watch Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, Khalid bin Attash, and others testify at Guantanamo Bay, they should realize that these men represent the only successes our government has scored against the al-Qaeda arm that can attack inside the United States.

These are solid victories, but they have little strategic impact on al-Qaeda, for it is an insurgent group, not a terrorist group as our addled bipartisan leadership insists. By definition, it is always fighting a massively more powerful enemy. Because insurgent chiefs anticipate significant and continuing senior leadership losses, they put tremendous amounts of time and resources into succession planning. When men like Khalid Shaykh Muhammad and Khalid bin Attash are captured, al-Qaeda as an organization is badly stunned. But it is not permanently disabled because it has trained understudies waiting to assume starring roles. Indeed, al-Qaeda often rubs this reality in America's face by quickly publishing the name and curriculum vitae of the successor to a captured or killed senior leader. Al-Qaeda has lost at least four military commanders since 1989 and has continued not only to fight its war but to expand it across five continents.

The rendition program is the sole effective U.S. government attack against al-Qaeda's special forces. But it is not nearly enough. As the 9/11 Commission report documented, my senior officers and I told our superiors and the director of central intelligence in 1997 that the best the rendition program could do was to "hold the ring" until a much broader, U.S.-government-wide anti-al-Qaeda program could be put in place. The best rendition efforts could do was to disrupt the group's planning and operations by capturing senior leaders.

Today, the CIA is continuing to hold the ring—and increasingly the bag. Al-Qaeda has become smarter in terms of personal and organizational security, so fewer of its senior special forces leaders make mistakes that provide the chance to capture them. They also have learned to stay out of Pakistan's major cities, where President Musharraf's security services are facilitating their capture.

Americans stand at hell's gate in regard to al-Qaeda. Our country is vulnerable to attacks worse than those visited upon us on 9/11, yet Congress is busy reinstalling risk-aversion at the CIA by tearing the guts out of its rendition program. Since 9/11, the U.S. military has been engaged with the insurgent forces of al-Qaeda and its allies, forces entirely apart from the al-Qaeda forces that attacked in America.

All the while, al-Qaeda's ability to plan and execute attacks in the United States has been enormously aided by the Bush administration and the leadership of both parties in Congress. Like his Democratic predecessor, President Bush has cut manpower and funding for the Nunn-Lugar program, in place since 1991 to secure the Soviet nuclear arsenal, giving al-Qaeda a window of opportunity to acquire its weapon of choice for a domestic U.S. attack. The administration and Congress also have done nothing to effectively police and control U.S. borders, thereby failing to give state and local law-enforcement agencies a fighting chance to find out who is in America and what they are up to. And as a death-wish coda to the foregoing symphony of failures, Washington recently decided to issue 10,000 more visas to Saudi students.

More than a century and a half ago, Abraham Lincoln told Americans, "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time or die by suicide." Tragically, Lincoln's words are still pertinent. While the next knife plunged into America's innards will be labeled "al-Qaeda," the intellectual, policy, and political failures that accelerate its thrust and increase its lethality will be labeled "Made in the U.S.A. by presidents, senators, and congressmen."

Michael Scheuer, a 22-year veteran with the CIA, created and served as the chief of the agency's Osama bin Laden unit at the Counterterrorist Center. He is also the author of Imperial Hubris.

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