

TRANSFORMATION OF THE AL QAEDA THREAT AS NEW SECURITY CHALLENGE

Aleksandar Glavinov¹ – Nenad Taneski²

ABSTRACT

Eleven years after the tragic events of September 11 and the killing of Osama bin Laden the world began to believe that the latter marked strategic defeat and the end of Al Qaeda. During the past year the intelligence agencies announced that the current structure of Al Qaeda does not have a hierarchy in its structure and that it had been decentralized, without clear center of gravitation. At first glance, this news may have seemed encouraging and positive. But the reality is different. The number of terrorist attacks carried out by Al Qaeda after the death of their leader has risen in 8% as compared to the previous year. Al Qaeda has used the Arab Spring and created thus the largest shelters and operational bases throughout the Arab world that it had been striving earlier to create for more than one decade. After almost two years from the beginning of the Arab revolution and the decapitation of Al Qaeda, the global Islamic movement became bigger and stronger. The dissatisfaction from the negative effects from the Arab spring all over the Muslim world was additional driving force that increased the global Islamic propaganda campaign. In the last decade the western allies won every battle, but they obviously lose the war against the global Islamic movement. This paper analyses and redefines the level of threat and the current condition of Al Qaeda as well as its transformation under the influence of the revolutionary changes in the Arab world.

Key words: Al Qaeda, global threat, Islamism, terrorism, international security

Introduction

On 17 December 2010, a vendor from Tunisia – **Mohamed Buazizi**, was molested, humiliated and his products confiscated by the municipal authorities. As a sign of protest to the injustice that had been made he burnt himself to death. His act became catalyzer of the Tunisian revolution that incited demonstrations and unrest throughout Tunisia as a sign of protest against the police brutality and call for solving the social and political issues in the country. (Kareem, 2011). He is credible for suppressing the young Arab's frustrations in the region against their governments that turned into mass demonstrations, uprisings and revolutions known as Arab Spring (Gelvin, 2012, s. 32). So far they have resulted in fall of the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya (Clare, Herrmann, 2012, s. 32).

¹ Aleksandar Glavinov, PhD., Military Academy „General Mihajlo Apostolski“, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, aglavinov@yahoo.com.

² Nenad Taneski, MA, Military Academy „General Mihajlo Apostolski“, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, nenoreal@yahoo.com.

In May 2011, with the killing of **Osama bin Laden** by the US Special Forces, Al Qaeda bore the most dramatic defeat ever. These events brought into question the sustainability of Al Qaeda and certain analysts claimed that the death of **bin Laden** and the Arab Spring represent new beginning of the Al Qaeda strategic defeat.

1 Evolution of the Threat

The events of September 11 represent worrying moment in the evolution of Islamic extremism and its regional and transnational networks. This new trend of extremism among the militant Muslims points out to one inflexible and dogmatic ideology which core is represented by a deviated version of the concept of Jihad. Enrooted in the Afghan Jihad of the 1970's and the Russian-Afghan war, the Afghan civil war, this brand of Islamic extremists made huge breakthrough in Europe through the Bosnia conflict and the conflict in Chechnya. These conflicts lead to the formation of geographically dispersed network of extremists having similar experience that with the support from local individuals managed to conduct large number of terrorist attacks.

In the time of the terrorist attacks of September 11, Al Qaeda was an organization with *strategic* center of gravity set in the ideological global re-islamisation, and on *operational* level the center of power gravitated around **bin Laden** and his Egyptian deputy, **Ayman al-Zawahiri** with whom they established complete control over the group activities (Bergen, 2011).

At that time, according to the assessments of the security forces it is estimated that the core of Al Qaeda listed 500 to 1000 people most of whom with military experience from Afghanistan (Ken, 2006). The US actions in the first two months of the Operation Enduring Freedom neutralized around 80% of the Al Qaeda fighters forcing the survived members and **Bin Laden** to flee to Pakistan. (Congressional Research Service, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, 2011). In that period Al Qaeda is represented as hierarchy organization with clear commanding and controlling net-like chain with **Bin Laden** in the center and secret cells worldwide, ready to attack the Western enemies, at any moment (Williams, 2002).

By creating Al Qaeda, **Bin Laden** formed a widely spread Islamist army that included militant terrorist groups from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Oman, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Somalia and Eritrea (National commission on terrorist attacks, *Staff Statement No. 15, Overview of the Enemy*, 2004). In these states the army is represented by terrorist – insurgency cells infiltrated in the local societies. Each cell operates independently or under control from the center. Their main aim was liquidation of military representatives and civilians that operated for the US and their allies. These cells gained material support and operational directions through the

network comprised by under-cover “dormant” agents. These cells operate as the Mao Tse Tung guerilla “*they are fishes and the society is the water they live in*” (Tse-Tung, 1962, p. 43). At that time Al Qaeda had strong commanding unity in the frames of its military element. There appeared constantly new leaders of the rebellion networks to substitute for the ones that had been killed, imprisoned or driven away after the US offensive in Afghanistan. These new leaders have expanded in the Middle East and Asia. They had limited communications, but still conducted the operational control successfully. (Schmidt, Farah, 2002).

2 Dispersing and Spreading the Threat

In the years to come the persistent counter-terrorist operations limited the Al Qaeda operational training and attacking capabilities. Al Qaeda relied increasingly on its associated terrorist members (AQAM) from Pakistan (FATA) including the Pakistani Taliban and the Hagani network, Al Qaeda from the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, Al Qaeda in the Islam Maghreb (AQIM) in Algeria and Northern Africa and Al Qaeda in (AQI) that represent today critical factor and center of gravity at operational level. Due to their decreased capacities for terrorist actions the core part of Al Qaeda with all its capacities redirected its center of gravity in undertaking the role of global ideological leader of the Sunni Islamic rebellion focusing on inspiring the global Islamic community to continue the Jihad against the US and their allies, maintaining at the same time the ideological purity of the movement. (Nelson, Sanderson, 2011)

The Al Qaeda allies accepted increasingly its ideology for global war and some of them become part of this terrorist organization by taking its brand, but continuing to act locally. With this trend Al Qaeda became more decentralized as compared to ten years before and its efficient work depended greatly on the autonomy of the leaders of the groups, its cells, allies and its capability to inspire new so called homegrown terrorists.

In Europe, in the past years there were events taking place that caused additional disturbance and fear from completely different threat that had not been identified until then – homegrown terrorism linked with Al Qaeda. More than 200 people were killed and over 1500 injured as a result of the terrorist attacks in Madrid, on March 11, 2004. On February 11, 2004 in Netherlands the Dutch film director **Theo van Gogh**, one of the most famous people that publically and permanently criticized Islam, was killed. The fact that London has been for a long time solid ground for the Islamic extremism was confirmed on July 7, 2005 (Phillips, 2007) with the series of suicide terrorist attacks when 52 people were killed and 700 were injured. (Majeed, 2005) The investigation proved that the attack had been directly linked to Al Qaeda. (Al Qaeda Today: *The New Face of the Global Jihad*, Frontline, 2005) In November 2006 the Director at that time of the MI5, **Elisa Manningham Buller** stated that a

network has been revealed with around 1 600 active members that from passive supporters turned into active terrorists ready to be involved in the process of planning and conducting terrorist attacks in Great Britain or other locations abroad. (Jordan, 2006) Already in November next year the new MI5 Director **Jonathan Evans** said that this number had increased for 400 persons as compared to the year before and so in Britain there are at least 2000 people that represent “direct threat to the national security”. He said that people younger than the age of 15 had been recruited to conduct terrorist activities planned by Al Qaeda. (Thousands Pose UK Terror Threat, *BBC News*, 2007) On November 4, 2007 in Germany, prevented was a terrorist attack that was to be conducted by a car-bomb against the US base. Four people were arrested and 700 kg hydrogen peroxide and 26 detonators were seized. Two of the people arrested were German converts from Christianity to Islam and the others were Germans with Turkish origin, trained in the terrorist camp at the Afghan-Pakistani border. According to the German security services, at least 220 Germans have completed terrorist training in the training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan; half of them have returned to Germany. (Rosenbach, Holger, 2011) Next example of homegrown terrorism inspired by the Islam is the one of 24 March 2012 in Toulouse, France. This new kind of security threat seen in the homegrown terrorism whose perpetrators are radical Islamists did not evade Macedonia either. After the decisive action undertaken by the Macedonian Ministry of Interior with regards to the murder of five people at the Smilkovci Lake – Skopje, on 13 April 2012, the Macedonian authorities came out with a statement that it was an act of terrorism conducted by followers of the radical Islam – most of them Macedonian citizens confirmed by the Macedonian Ministry of Interior to have been fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan against the NATO forces.

It is clear that from the beginning of this century the homegrown terrorism connected with militant Islamism and inspired by the Al Qaeda center of gravity is the Islamist militant Jihad ideology that is in state of permanent increase. Al Qaeda and its allies have increased their activities aimed at inspiring and recruiting new homegrown terrorists in countries worldwide. The inspiration and recruitment of new homegrown terrorists is mainly and most easily conducted via Internet where the number of Jihad web-sites faces dramatic increase and often the social networks are also used for communication.

2.1 Al Qaeda Regeneration after the Arab Spring

The fall of the regimes as consequence of the Arab Spring created a security vacuum that Al Qaeda filled in wisely. The collapse of the Egyptian government enabled Al Qaeda to introduce its own sells in Sinai. During the first week of August, 2012, more than 15 Egyptian policemen were killed by the

Islamic fanatics linked to Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda used the completely the fall of the regime in several Middle East states to undertake operational activities in Mali, Yemen, Libya and lately – in Syria and Iraq.

From the beginning of Spring 2012 it became evident that Al Qaeda constantly tries to use the advantages of the chaos in Syria by realizing large number of terrorist attacks against government targets. Syria became magnet for the Sunni extremists, including those that work under the black flag of Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda made an attempt to connect its terrorist-insurgency movement in Iraq with the revolution in Syria, describing them as conflicts among sects – the Sunnis against the Shiites. (Norland, 2012)

The fragile government institutions in Iraq erode under the pressure of Al Qaeda and the Sunni rebels and the government control over the Sunni settlements is getting increasingly weaker. On 23 July 2012 more than 100 people were killed in the Al Qaeda offensive called “*Breaking Walls*”. (Ghazi, Norland, 2012) Al Qaeda in Iraq will probably continue in offensive and taking advantage that it believes it deserves.

In August 2012 Al Qaeda committed suicide attack in Yemen killing over 45 people. Al Qaeda has imposed its influence in the period of protests against the former President **Ali Abdula Salleh**. The government in Yemen faces severe security problems in the war against the Al Qaeda cells that are placed all over the country, avoid direct fight and apply guerrilla tactics. (BBC News Middle East, *Yemen suicide bomber kills 45 in Abyan*, 2012)

Al Qaeda in the Islam Maghreb (AQIM) became one of the most well-known Al Qaeda branch. AQIM has permanently young recruits ready to act against Western targets. They kidnap and kill tourists and their influence constantly grows in northern Africa. This Algerian Islamic militant group transformed from nationalist rebellion into movement under the ideology of the global Jihad. This Algerian group offered Al Qaeda hundreds of experienced fighters and potential connections with the militants living in Europe. During the last 20 months terrorism suspects with North African origin were arrested in Spain, Switzerland, France and Italy. (Mekhennet, Shmitt, Sciolino, Williams, 2012)

Approximately one month after the death of **Bin Laden**, Al Qaeda filled in the place and Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri was declared the new Al Qaeda leader. Within the last year intelligence experts declared that currently the Al Qaeda structure is decentralized without clear center of gravitation, but with powerful, sustainable and prosperous ideology enhanced with global propagandist campaign. This represents additional problem in identifying cells and preventing terrorist actions. This thesis is supported by the fact that the number of attacks carried out by Al Qaeda in 2010 increased in 2011 in 8%. (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Report on terrorism 2011*, National Counterterrorism Center, Washington, DC., 2012)

In the last decade the success of Al Qaeda is evident – period when the US and their allies bore four significant defeats. The first defeat was the attacks of 11 September. The second is the US defeat in Iraq from where the Americans are withdrawing. The third is the unsuccessful campaign carried out by the US and its allies in Afghanistan. In this war the US lost their allies. The Great Britain, French and German governments have already announced their leaving. (Q&A: Foreign forces in Afghanistan, BBC, 2012) The Americans are also tired of the war. As the Soviets did, the Americans will also leave Afghanistan defeated. The fourth and strongest strike, according to Al Qaeda has been carried out by the Arab people expressed through the “*revolution against the American enemies*”. (Cherian, 2011) According to Al Qaeda this is global Muslim rebellion that needs to incite the terrorist campaign. In this decade main objective would be imposing the Sheriat all over the world. On 12 September 2011 an Al Qaeda medium – Sahab, published a message by **Dr. Ayman al -Zawahiri** titled as “*Dawn of Imminent Victory*” where he says:

“I remind my brothers that America had thought that the Arab region had been stable under its control through a group of cooperative rulers, whom America had appointed and positioned. But the blessed mighty Arab uprising earthquake came to flip America’s calculations upside-down.” (Zawahiri Al, 2011)

According to the Western intelligence agencies, the Islamist veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan conduct trainings in several bid terrorist camps in Syria where there are around 100 Muslims with European passports included. After the completion of the training they will return home, ready to carry out terrorist actions. Also, there are fears that the Assad chemical weapons gets into the hands of the Islamists. (Joscelyn, 2012)

Obviously, Syria and Egypt will represent new Islamist bases for preparing and carrying out terrorist attacks in Europe.

Conclusion

Following the chronological analysis of the terrorist attacks from 2000 to-date, it can be concluded that Al-Qaeda has definitely gone through a period of transformation that influenced its operational capabilities and hierarchy structure. It still has the capacity to carry out large scale attacks. The arrest of the three Al Qaeda operatives in Spain – two of them were from Russia and one from Turkey, for planning terrorist attack in Spain or another European country – confirms that Al Qaeda still has strong structure in Europe. In the meantime, the British authorities have accused five people for terrorism, because of their participation in terrorist training in Pakistan. **Osama bin Laden**’s goal was to “*move, incite, and mobilize the [Islamic] nation*” until the Islamic revolutionary movement reaches its “*ignition point*”. Despite his death, Al Qaeda continues to mobilize and attract wide support from the Muslims and non-Muslims in the US and European states.

Today in this era of globalization, the threat is being transformed and is posed by the Al Qaeda associated members. It has as his permanent legacy its developed diffuse and elastic networks of ideological proselytes that immune to the threats that killed him. The Al Qaeda associated movements do not have need of central command to coordinate their activities. They can now independently plan attacks that fit in the global agenda. Their aim is to attack the Western allies that are positioned in the frames of their regional bases. Concurrently, Al Qaeda continues to create new cells in the US and Europe whilst its propagandist campaign is aimed at inciting domestic terrorist attacks through hidden Jihadists that operate silently, alone and are very difficult – almost impossible to trace.

The Al Qaeda mistakes are fewer and invisible; its ideology continues to develop in every corner of the globe, whilst its associate members quietly and efficiently operate against the Western allies. Despite the successes achieved in the fight against terrorism, the threat from Al Qaeda has not yet been eliminated and the fight is far from being over. On 20 November 2012 the US Defense Minister, Leon Panetta said: “*We have slowed the primary cancer -- but we know the cancer has also metastasized to other parts of the global body*”.

Bibliography:

- Al Qaeda Today: The New Face of the Global Jihad. *Frontline*. [online] January 25, 2005. [cit. 01.06.2012] Available at:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/etc/today.html>
- BERGEN, P. 2011. *Ten Years On – The Evolution of the Terrorist Threat Since 9/11*. Washington, DC : New America Foundation, 22 June 2011.
- BBC News. 2007. *Thousands Pose UK Terror Threat*. [online] November 6, 2007. [cit. 01.06.2012] Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7078712.stm
- BBC News, 2012. *Yemen suicide bomber kills 45 in Abyan*. [online] 5 August 2012. [cit. 23.12.2012] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19132096>
- CHERIAN, J. 2011. War of terror. *Frontline*. In *India's National Magazine*. [online] Volume 28, Issue 20, Sep. 24, 2011. [cit. 23.02.2012] Available at:
<http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2820/stories/20111007282000400.htm>
- CLARE, F. – HERRMANN, D. 2012. *Corruption: An International Interdisciplinary and Multi-Sectoral Reader*. Farnham : Gower Publishing, Ltd., Surrey, 2012. 283 pg. ISBN 987-1-4094-1129-1
- Congressional Research Service, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*. Washington, DC : Congressional Research Service, 25 January 2011, p. 8.
- GELVIN, J. 2012. *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2012. 208 pg. ISBN 978-0-19-989-177-1
- GHAZI, Y. – NORLAND, R. 2012. Iraq Insurgents Kill at Least 100 After Declaring New Offensive. In *The New York Times*. [online] July 23, 2012. [cit. 24.12.2012]

Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/24/world/middleeast/iraqi-insurgents-kill-dozens-in-wave-of-attacks.html>

JORDAN, M. 2006. Britain's MI5 Warns of Rising Terror Threat. In *The Washington Post*. [online] November 11, 2006. [cit. 01.06.2012] Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/11/10/AR2006111000138.html>

JOSCELYN, T. 2012. *Al Qaeda emir's hand in Egypt and Syria*. [online] December 20, 2012. [cit. 22.12.2012] Available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2012/12/die_welt_al_qaeda_emirs_hand_i.php

KAREEM, F. 2011. Slap to a Man's Pride Set Off Tumult in Tunisia. In *New York Times*, 23 January, 2011. [online] 2011 [cit. 05.01.2013] Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/22/world/africa/22sidi.html?_r=3&pagewanted=2&src=twrhp&

KEN, S. 2006. The Al Qaeda Clubhouse: Members Lacking. In *Harper's Magazine*. [online] July 5, 2006 [cit. 28.09.2012] Available at: <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2006/07/sb-al-qaeda-new-members-badly-needed-1151963690>

MAJEED, T. 2005. *London Bombings: Looking Back At July 7*. [online] 2005, O.M. Center For Policy Studies. [cit. 01.06.2012] Available at: <http://www.opinion-maker.org/2010/07/london-bombings-looking-back-at-july-7/>

MEKHENNET, S. – SHMITT, E. – SCIOLINO, E. – WILLIAMS, M. 2012 A Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Qaeda Lifeline. In *The New York Times*. [online] June 7, 2012. [cit. 14.12.2012] Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01algeria.html?pagewanted=a>

National commission on terrorist attacks, *Staff Statement No. 15, Overview of the Enemy*. [online] June 16, 2004. p. 3. [cit. 24.09.2012] Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/shoulders/CommissionStatement15.pdf>

NELSON, R. – SANDERSON, T. 2011. *A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011*. Washington, D.C. : Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011. ISBN 978-0-89206-626-1

NORLAND, R. 2012. Al Qaeda Taking Deadly New Role in Syria's Conflict. In *The New York Times*. [online] July 24, 2012. [cit. 20.12.2012] Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/25/world/middleeast/al-qaeda-insinuating-its-way-into-syrias-conflict.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *Report on terrorism 2011*. Washington, D.C. : National Counterterrorism Center, 2012. p. 11.

PHILLIPS, M. 2007. *Londonistan*. New York : Encounter Books, 2007. 237 pg. ISBN 1-59403-144-4.

Q&A: Foreign forces in Afghanistan, BBC. 2012. [online] 11 March 2012. [cit. 25.03.2012] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11371138>

ROSENBACH, M. – HOLGER, S. 2011. *Homegrown Terror Takes on New Dimensions*. [online] 05.09.2011 [cit. 04.06.2012] Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-jihad-homegrown-terror-takes-on-new-dimensions-a-761391.html>

SCHMIDT, S. – FARAH, D. 2002. *Al Qaeda's New Leaders: Six Militants Emerge From Ranks to Fill Void*. Washingtonpost.com, 29 October.

TSE-TUNG, M. 1962. Mao's Primer on Guerrilla War. In *Marine Corps Gazette* Vol. 46, No. 1, January 1962. p. 43.

WILLIAMS, P. 2002. *Al Qaeda: Brotherhood of Terror*. New York: Alpha, 2002, Chapters 7 and 8, 213 pg. ISBN 0-02-8643352-6

ZAWAHIRI AL, A. 2011. *Dawn of the Imminent Victory*. [online] September 12, 2011. [cit. 30.03.2012] Available at: http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/al-qc481_idah-the-dawn-of-imminent-victory-ten-years-since-the-blessed-tuesday-raids-en.pdf