

Al Qaeda and the Tale of Two Battlespaces

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

Over the last year or so, a lot of debate has arisen over the physical strength of al Qaeda. Some experts and government officials believe that the al Qaeda organization is now stronger than at any time since the 9/11 attacks, while others believe the core organization has lost much of its leadership and operational capability over the past seven years. The wide disparity between these two assessments may appear somewhat confusing, but a significant amount of the difference between the two can be found in the fundamental way in which al Qaeda is defined as an entity.

Many analysts supportive of the view that al Qaeda has strengthened tend to lump the entire jihadist world into one monolithic, hierarchical organization. Others, like Stratfor, who claim al Qaeda's abilities have been degraded over the years, define the group as a small vanguard organization and only one piece of the larger jihadist pie. From Stratfor's point of view, al Qaeda has [evolved](#) into three different — and distinct — entities. These [different faces of al Qaeda](#) include:

1. The core vanguard group: Often referred to by Stratfor as the al Qaeda core, al Qaeda prime or the al Qaeda apex leadership, this group is composed of Osama bin Laden and his close trusted associates. These are highly skilled, professional practitioners of propaganda, militant training and terrorism operations. This is the group behind the 9/11 attacks.
2. [Al Qaeda franchises](#): These include such groups as al Qaeda in Iraq and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Although professing allegiance to bin Laden, they are independent militant groups that remain separate from the core and, as we saw in the 2005 [letter from al Qaeda core leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#), there can be a great deal of [tension and disagreement](#) between them and the al Qaeda core. These regional franchises vary in size, level of professionalism and operational capability.
3. The broader [grassroots jihadist movement](#): This group includes individuals and small cells inspired by al Qaeda but who, in most cases, have no contact with the core leadership.

Stratfor's Current Assessment of al Qaeda

We believe, as we did last summer, that the core al Qaeda group has weakened and no longer poses the [strategic threat to the U.S. homeland](#) that it did prior to 9/11. However, this does not mean it is incapable of re-emerging under less pressured circumstances.

On the franchise level, some groups — such as AQIM, the Yemen franchises and the franchises in Pakistan and Afghanistan — have gained momentum over the past few years. Others — such as those in Iraq, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, the Sinai Peninsula and Morocco — have lost steam. In our estimation, this ebb and flow has resulted in a constant threat on the franchise level, though the severity has migrated geographically as groups wax and wane in specific regions. The franchises have done little to expand their operations outside of their regions of interest and to conduct attacks against the "far enemy" — that is, attacks in the United States or Europe.

At the grassroots level, homegrown jihadists have posed a fairly consistent, though lower-level, threat. In the past, we have said that these jihadists think globally, but act locally. While there are far more grassroots jihadists than there are militants in the al Qaeda franchises and vastly more than in the small al Qaeda core, the grassroots jihadists tend to be [highly motivated, but poorly equipped](#) to conduct sophisticated terror attacks.

Beyond the Physical Battlefield

We believe that any realistic analysis of al Qaeda's strength must assess more than a basic head count of militants willing and able to conduct attacks. As we have noted previously, there are [two battlespaces](#) in the war against jihadism: the physical and the ideological. Although the campaign against al Qaeda has caused the core group to become essentially marginalized in the physical battlespace, the core has undertaken great effort to remain engaged in the ideological battlespace.

In many ways, the ideological battlespace is more important than the physical battlespace in the war against jihadism, and in the jihadists' war against the rest of the world. It is far easier to kill people than it is to kill ideologies. We have recently seen this in the resurgence of Bolivarian Revolution ideology in South America, despite the fact that Simon Bolivar, Karl Marx and Ernesto "Che" Guevara are long dead and buried. Ideology is the decisive factor that allows jihadists to recruit new fighters and gather funding for militant and propaganda operations. As long as the jihadists can recruit new militants, they can compensate for the losses they suffer on the physical battlefield. When they lose that ability, their struggle dies on the vine. Because of this, al Qaeda fears fatwas more than weapons. Weapons can kill people — but fatwas can kill the ideology that motivates people to fight and finance.

We are not the only ones who believe the ideological battlespace is critical. A video released earlier this month by al Qaeda mouthpiece As-Sahab entitled "The Word is the Word of Swords," one of al Qaeda's leading religious authorities, [Abu Yahya al-Libi](#) emphasized this point from within the network.

In the video, al-Libi said the jihadist battle "is not waged solely at the military and economic level, but is waged first and foremost at the level of doctrine." He also said that his followers are in a war against an enemy that "targets all strongholds of Islam and invades the minds and ideas in the same way it invades lands and dares to destroy beliefs and meddle with the sacred things in the same way it dares to spill blood."

Interestingly, although the video recording is dedicated to detailing the preparations for the [attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad](#), the bulk of the 64-minute video addresses the ideological war against al Qaeda and how "true Islam" has been undermined by leaders such as King Abdullah and the Saudi religious establishment.

In an ironic twist, the progress of the combatants is easier to assess in the ideological rather than physical battlespace — largely because most militants plotting terror attacks attempt to stay invisible until they launch their operations, while the ideological battle is for the most part conducted in plain sight.

One such visible indication on the ideological battlefield was a book written by al Qaeda's number two man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, which was released in March. The book — known as "The Exoneration" — is a long response to a book written by Sayyed Imam al-Sharif. Also known as Dr. Fadl, al-Sharif is an imprisoned Egyptian radical and a founder (with al-Zawahiri) of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

Published in 2007, al-Sharif's [book](#), "Rationalizing Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World," provides theological arguments that counter many of the core jihadist teachings. Included among those teachings is the concept of takfir, or the practice of declaring a Muslim to be an unbeliever in order to justify an attack against him. Al-Sharif also spoke out against killing non-Muslims in Muslim countries and attacking members of other Muslim sects.

Al-Sharif was a significant player in the development of the jihadist theology that shaped the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and eventually, through al-Zawahiri and other EIJ members who became influential members of al Qaeda, al-Sharif's concepts became instrumental in shaping the ideology of jihadism as promulgated by al Qaeda. One of his books, "The Essentials of Making Ready for Jihad," was reportedly required reading for all new jihadist recruits at al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The renunciation of jihadist ideology by such a pivotal figure was a significant threat — one serious enough to spur al-Zawahiri's refutation.

The Saudi ulema or Muslim scholars and former jihadist ideologues are not the only people assailing the ideology of jihadism. Of course, Western figures, such as Dutch parliamentarian [Geert Wilders](#) have been highly critical of jihadism. But these outsiders have little ability to sway Muslim opinion on the street — a critical objective in fighting the ideological battle. In recent years, however, we have seen more Muslim figures speak out against jihadism, which they believe is a perversion of Islam. However, criticism is not without danger. Figures such as Egyptian political analyst Daa Rashwan have been threatened with death because of their criticism of al Qaeda and jihadist ideology.

In addition to the previously discussed video, As-Sahab has released two other lengthy videos this month. The first, to commemorate the 9/11 anniversary, was called "The Harvest of Seven Years of Crusades." The second, called "True Imam," was released Sept. 29. Essentially, it was a tirade against the government of Pakistan and a [tribute to](#) Abdul Rashid Ghazi, who was killed in the July 2007 storming of the [Red Mosque](#) in Islamabad by the Pakistani military.

Overlap

Sometimes, things that emerge in the ideological battlespace can provide indications of important developments in the physical battlespace.

For example, one of the As-Sahab videos featured clips of [Mustafa abu al-Yazid](#) (aka Sheikh Said al-Masri). An Egyptian al Qaeda military commander, al-Yazid had reportedly been killed in an Aug. 8 operation in Bajaur. But since al-Yazid makes reference in the video to the Aug. 18 resignation of former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, he obviously was not killed 10 days earlier.

Two others noticeably absent from these three videos were Osama bin Laden and [Adam Gadahn](#). Bin Laden, who has not been heard from since a May 18 audio message, is once again rumored to be dead. Gadahn may also be dead, according to rumors that he was killed in a January airstrike in Pakistan's North Waziristan agency in which senior al Qaeda military commander [Abu Laith al-Libi](#) was killed. Gadahn, who has appeared in several al Qaeda video messages since emerging on the scene in 2004, has been conspicuously absent from the organization's propaganda since the January strike.

Typically, al Qaeda has been fairly forthcoming in "declaring the martyrdom" of fallen commanders like al-Libi. The death of a central figure such as bin Laden, however, could be seen as severely detrimental to the jihadist world's morale. Therefore, the group could be motivated to conceal his death. If bin Laden is still alive, however, we anticipate a message from him by the U.S. presidential elections Nov. 4, given his appearance before the 2004 presidential elections.

It would be somewhat out of character, however, for al Qaeda to avoid publicizing the death of a lesser figure such as Gadahn. With all the rumors circulating about jihadists seeking to use [European-looking operatives](#) in attacks against the West, one wonders if the silence regarding the American-born jihadist's fate is designed to keep U.S. authorities in suspense — or if it is a real indication that Gadahn is alive and has left his post in the ideological battlespace in order to go operational on the physical battlefield.

Of course, the fate of these individuals, even a central figure such as bin Laden, is not nearly as important as the fate of the ideology. And we will continue to focus on the ideological battlefield for significant developments there.

One place that needs to be watched carefully is Pakistan, where events like the Red Mosque operation and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto have potentially sown the seeds for a ripe ideological harvest for both sides. It will be important to watch and see if the [Marriott bombing](#) will, as some claimed, prove to be a watershed event that marks a change in public opinion capable of rallying popular support against the jihadist ideology in Pakistan.

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