



To What Extent Does Al-Qaeda Still Pose a Threat to European Societies?

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Theme: Al-Qaeda and its local or regional extensions also controlled by the leaders of that terrorist structure currently pose a threat to European citizens and interests.

Summary: Al-Qaeda still exists as a terrorist structure differentiated from other groups in the global neo-Salafi Jihadist movement and it continues to pose a real threat to European societies. This threat may be direct or indirect. It is particularly serious in the case of the United Kingdom, although by no means insignificant for other European Union countries. The most plausible attack, if al-Qaeda itself participates in its planning and execution, would be highly lethal, probably catastrophic and perhaps even involving the use of non-conventional weapons. However, other less spectacular and very lethal incidents are more likely if simply instigated or facilitated by al-Qaeda. In the short and medium term, it will be difficult for state security agencies to successfully thwart all these planned terrorist attacks on European citizens and interests.

Analysis: Al-Qaeda, that is to say, both the collective of individuals under the charismatic leadership of Osama bin Laden and the strategic management of Ayman al Zawahiri since the 1990s and, following the decentralisation of this terrorist structure, also the local or regional extensions controlled by both leaders, has intervened directly in a substantial number of the hundreds, if not thousands, of attacks perpetrated over the past two decades by individuals and groups belonging to the global neo-Salafi Jihadist movement. Specifically, however, it has perpetrated or facilitated only a limited number of the Jihadist terrorist incidents committed inside the European Union or against citizens or interests of EU countries outside the Union itself.

Indirectly, al-Qaeda has often instigated attacks on European targets by its affiliated groups and organisations or by independent cells whose activities are inspired by the ideas and repertoire of violence promoted by the main figureheads of international terrorism. Of all this there is past evidence as well as recent indications that al-Qaeda continues to pose a serious threat for European institutions and populations. Its leadership, its closest associates and the activists most closely linked to the organisation are still determined to commit a spectacular attack on European soil, which could even include an act of non-conventional terrorism, while they continue to encourage or facilitate the terrorist activities of other groups and organisations related with the global neo-Salafi Jihadist movement.

Background facts

The first terrorist episode in Western Europe involving al-Qaeda was on 25 July 1995. On that day, an explosive device blew up in a busy underground regional train station in Paris, killing eight people and injuring close to 80. Between August and October of that

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same year, there were a number of other incidents in the same metropolitan area, although on a smaller scale, as well as one other in the city of Lyon. Their perpetrators were members of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), from Algeria, plus its supporters in the case of later episodes. This organisation emerged from the context of Islamist insurgency in Algeria and was already under the influence of al-Qaeda, which expressly helped finance the terror campaign in France.

Almost nine years later, on 11 March 2004 in Madrid, 10 bombs placed during the morning rush hour on four local trains on their way to a central railway station blew up in a synchronised manner, killing 191 people and injuring more than 1,500. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by the military committee of al-Qaeda, although a number of individuals linked, among others, with the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) were responsible for planning and perpetrating the attacks. Although Spain could be considered to be a general target for this new international terrorism since the mid-1990s and specifically since the end of 2001, it was not until October 2003 when Osama Bin Laden first mentioned this country as a target for the global neo-Salafi Jihadist movement.

On 7 July 2006, early in the morning, three suicide terrorists blew up the explosives they were carrying, at almost exactly the same time, on various points of the London underground, and a fourth blew himself up in a bloody attack on a London bus, almost one hour later. The explosions killed 52 people. At first, al-Qaeda's secret European wing claimed responsibility for the attacks. Ayman al-Zawahiri not only admitted to having perpetrated them in a video message released two months later, but one year later he revealed on the Internet that two of the four young British men who were British citizens, second-generation descendents of Pakistani immigrants, and who had chosen London to commit what they saw as their operation of martyrdom, had been at an al-Qaeda training camp in Pakistan, where they were groomed to commit such an act.

But European citizens and interests have been affected by al-Qaeda terrorism elsewhere in the world too, sometimes as the prime targets and sometimes as circumstantial victims. In April 2002, for example, The Islamic Army for the Liberation of Holy Places, a name given to an al-Qaeda cell, admitted killing, among others, 14 German tourists on the Tunisian Island of Djerba. In the same year, a French oil tanker was attacked by al-Qaeda off the coast of Yemen, in another example of the devastating impact of terrorist activity that is structurally decentralised but financed and facilitated from the central core of al-Qaeda, albeit subject to improvisations which quite often make the plans go awry. In recent years, al-Qaeda or one of its regional extensions under the control of al-Qaeda leaders have perpetrated and are still perpetrating attacks against European targets in the context of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Furthermore, a number of potentially very serious incidents in Europe and abroad against European targets, always linked to al-Qaeda, have been thwarted just in time by the various European state security agencies. Even before 9/11, these agencies managed to avoid a number of massacres such as one individuals linked to al-Qaeda had planned for Christmas 2000 in Strasbourg. European police and intelligence services, often in cooperation with those of other countries, were also able to prevent, among many other planned attacks, one against the US embassy in Paris in the Autumn of 2001. Al-Qaeda had provided training, funding and logistic backing to the North Africans belonging to the cell in charge of the operation.

In December 2001, a Briton then aged 28 who had converted to Islam, called Richard Reid, tried unsuccessfully to destroy an aircraft belonging to a US airline which had taken off from Paris and was on its way to Miami, by detonating an explosive device hidden in his shoes. He was not working alone. He belonged to al-Qaeda and had been sent on the suicide mission by the then head of its military committee, Khaled Shaikh Mohammed.

The latter, alongside Yemeni citizen Ramzi Bin al Shibh, both involved in the 9/11 attacks, later devised a sophisticated plan to attack London's Heathrow airport, which other leading members of al-Qaeda tried to perpetrate when the two were eventually arrested by the Pakistani authorities.

Targeting selection

To no small extent, the current threat from international terrorism to the institutions and inhabitants of the European Union still comes directly from al-Qaeda, although a possibly greater threat comes from its affiliate groups and organisations. This can be deduced from the statements which Osama Bin Laden has released since the mid-1990s and from the various declarations by Ayman al Zawahiri. These messages contain a generic threat to all European societies, since they belong to the Western world and since their governments are portrayed by the global Jihadist leaders as allies of the United States. But they are frequently more specific in regard to a series of European countries which are pinpointed as particular targets.

Throughout 2006, as a matter of fact, there were a number of examples of this threat to European societies as a whole and those aimed specifically at interests and citizens of particular nations, both at home and abroad. In March last year, Ayman al Zawahiri reiterated in a tape broadcast over the Internet, his usual call to Muslims to, as he put it this time, 'attack the West like in New York, Madrid and London'. In June, this time in a video which was accessible from a well-known radical Islamic website, he urged Muslims in Afghanistan to fight foreign troops there, which, as is well known, include European contingents, and specifically troops from Spain.

At the end of July, in another video broadcast on the Qatari TV channel al-Jazeera, Ayman al Zawahiri again insisted on his hostility towards 'Western civilisation and its leader the United States', this time adding that among the territories which were once Muslim and which it is necessary to 'free' by way of a Jihad is 'al-Andalus', which must be taken as a specific threat to Spain and, although this is less talked about, to Portugal. In this latter country there have already been attempted attacks by individuals linked to global Jihadist terrorist networks, some perhaps close to others near the command core of al-Qaeda. In September, again in a video broadcast, the global terrorist strategist expressly mentioned France and, as a whole, the countries which supported United Nations Resolution 1701 on Lebanon, where soldiers from a number of European countries, including Spain, are deployed under UN mandate.

In December last year, Al-Jazeera again broadcasted extracts of another message from Ayman al Zawahiri, in which for the umpteenth time he asserted that the aims of the global Jihad were, on the one hand, to reconquer the lands which were historically Muslim and, on the other, to create an Islamic Caliphate in accordance with the Sharia or Islamic law, supposedly in its strictest version which appeals to hard-line Salafi Jihadism. Furthermore, he vehemently accused the United Nations of legitimising in its Charter the occupation of what he considers to be historically Muslim territories by non-Muslim governments and of forcing the countries belonging to this international body to recognise and accept, among others, 'Spain's occupation of Ceuta and Melilla'. Once again, a reference to Spain.

These and other remarks, such as those referring to the cartoons featuring Mohammed in Denmark, may certainly trigger attacks in European countries, or against European people or interests abroad, by groups and organisations linked to al-Qaeda or by independent cells inspired by the same objectives and procedures. In this regard, leaders of al-Qaeda are acting as instigators of terrorist violence against European people and institutions by members of the global neo-Salafi Jihadist movement. They do so in the first place by pinpointing European society as a whole as part of the Western world, which in

turn is portrayed by al-Qaeda leaders as enemy of the Islamic Nation; and secondly by mentioning a series of specific countries, based on their history, recent incidents or because they have sent troops to certain places of conflict such as Afghanistan, Iraq or Lebanon. In an evaluation of the terrorist threat this is equivalent to targeting.

Operational Implication

The ongoing threat posed by al-Qaeda for European institutions and societies is not only indirect; it is also direct. In other words, it relates to the intervention of al-Qaeda's leaders and planners, facilitating or perpetrating attacks on European targets within its own borders or on closely linked targets abroad. This was the case even before 9/11 and has continued to be the case ever since, as made evident by some of the incidents which I have already mentioned. Last year, al-Qaeda's leaders were likely to have been involved in plans to simultaneously introduce liquid explosives in small concealed containers in hand luggage in a bid to destroy various commercial aircraft on routes between London and a number of US cities; the plans were uncovered and foiled by UK security agencies in August 2006.

According to all indications, al-Qaeda still seeks to perpetrate a major terrorist attack, perhaps on a catastrophic, and maybe even non-conventional scale, in Europe. Just as it is still trying and will continue to try to do so in the United States. Many observers say that it is no longer an organisation, but a movement or ideology. The fact is that, despite having been deprived of its sanctuary in Afghanistan and being steadily undermined during the last five years, al-Qaeda is still going strong; it is settled in a tribal region of Pakistan bordering with Afghanistan; it is outside any effective state authority; it has reorganised much of its operational base both in that region and in one province of Iraq; it still has thousands of activists; and it is involved in terrorist activities in both its immediate South Asian environment and in other geopolitical locations where regional cells operate or where it has elements deployed which often act as agents or intermediaries. What is questionable is the degree of control exercised from the central core of al-Qaeda's command on plans to commit terrorist attacks outside its immediate environment, including Europe.

Al-Qaeda's current difficulties in directly committing attacks in the EU, above and beyond issues of approval and planning, may explain its cooperation with local or regional groups which have infrastructure and activists in Europe, such as the fully-aligned Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) or the somewhat more diffuse Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), as well as other North African and Asian networks which may also be mobilised. This does not mean that the core of the global terrorism movement lacks any presence in Europe, perhaps through a network of intermediaries or envoys who act as agents in specific operations. Al-Qaeda has been decentralised since the end of 2001, but there are signs of regionalisation too, and this could well extend to Europe. One of the reliable messages claiming responsibility for the 7/7 attacks in London expressly mentioned an al-Qaeda organisation for the Jihad in Europe.

In Western Europe, the threat from al-Qaeda is especially relevant in the case of the United Kingdom, where a worrying number of individuals and existing Jihadist networks inside the country maintain close ties with al-Qaeda's command and operations core in South Asia, specifically Pakistan, where its epicentre is located. Indeed, the Director General of MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, revealed to a small group of academics in London last November that her agency was aware of at least 30 plots to commit attacks on British soil and that the most serious threat comes, literally, from 'resilient networks, some directed from al-Qaeda in Pakistan, some more loosely inspired by it, planning attacks including mass casualty suicide attacks in the United Kingdom'.

However, the fact that al-Qaeda does not have similar capacities of penetration in other European countries does not diminish the overall threat. A Lahore newspaper which is considered to be reliable and well informed published a report in December 2006 on British and other European Muslims, possibly radical converts among them, who received one year's training at a secret al-Qaeda camp near the Afghan border. The most likely kind of attack in which al-Qaeda might be involved in the planning or execution stages in Europe in the short and medium term range from multiple attacks against soft, unprotected targets, using explosives and not requiring prolonged and complicated preparation but causing a high number of casualties, to those involving non-conventional radioactive or chemical weapons, and spectacular and even catastrophic attacks on hard, high-security targets but which are symbolically highly significant.

Al-Qaeda will continue to try to obtain chemical and radiological weapons and the risk of their being used in terrorist attacks in the EU is not insignificant and is on the rise. Recently, the Italian secret services drafted a confidential report on the operating scenarios of the threat from global terrorism, in which they do not rule out a 10-kiloton atomic attack by al-Qaeda on a city or the hypothesis of an attack using chemical weapons. The targets of forthcoming attacks in EU territory are nevertheless more likely to be commercial aircrafts or public transportation systems, national critical infrastructures, places where large numbers of people gather together and public buildings or official premises. Also recently, thanks to the cooperation between European and US intelligence services, it has emerged that in Pakistan, and therefore in all likelihood in connection with al-Qaeda, plans have been devised to perpetrate a spectacular and highly lethal attack on the Channel Tunnel.

Conclusion: Al-Qaeda, as the founding core and permanent reference for all the acts involved in the global neo-Salafi Jihadist movement, still poses a very serious threat to the European societies. This terrorist threat is both direct and indirect, and it is very real in any case. Al-Qaeda may instigate attacks on European institutions and citizens by other individuals or groups which are involved in Jihadist terrorism, as it has been doing. However, it is equally likely to become involved at the operating level in a major terrorist attack, as it already appears to have done. It is also possible that al-Qaeda might cooperate with other local or regional extensions of its own global terrorism network to plan and perpetrate a particular incident or a campaign of terrorist attacks in the territory of the European Union.

Nevertheless, the threat from al-Qaeda does not affect all European countries to the same extent. Neither is there a uniform threat from groups or organisations linked to its terrorist structure nor from independent cells inspired by its ideology. Terrorism directly relating to al-Qaeda is of more concern in the United Kingdom than in any other EU country, although the threat to Europe as a whole is by no means insignificant. The most likely kind of attack directly involving al-Qaeda itself would be a very serious and perhaps even catastrophic act of terrorism, possibly using non-conventional weapons. Such an attack might be aimed at symbolically relevant targets despite high security. However, this kind of attack is still less likely than other kinds of incident involving al-Qaeda or one of its regional extensions as facilitators, which could potentially be highly lethal but aimed at much less well-protected targets. It will be difficult to prevent such events from causing a major shock in European society in the near future, despite all the preventive efforts by police and intelligence services.

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