The Terrorist Threat: US Facing New Challenges at Abroad and at Home

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A Changing Terrorism Landscape

Since the decimation of al Qa’ida’s central leadership beginning in mid-2008 and the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, terrorism experts have warned that homegrown terrorists, inspired by al Qa’ida’s ideology, pose the most imminent terrorist threat to the United States. These warnings were tragically borne out by the Boston bombings on 15 April 2013.

This incident, in which three Americans were killed and over 200 wounded, reflects the reality that homegrown terrorism in the United States will remain a threat indefinitely. The Boston Marathon bombings were quickly followed by an announcement from the Canadian Government that its security authorities had thwarted a plan by two extremists living in Toronto to bomb a passenger train on Canadian soil that was bound for or leaving from New York City. Even though Canadian authorities, working closely with US security officials, disrupted the plot long before it could be executed, the arrests further underscore the internal security challenges facing the United States at all levels of government. The threat of small, infrequent internal terrorist attacks will not go away; in the Boston case, it involved young extremists of Chechen descent whose assimilation into American society was less than complete.

Globally, the terrorism landscape continues to change rapidly. The terrorist threat to US interests and citizens has become more diverse and geographically distributed. As a consequence, events abroad suggest that the inbound threat to the US homeland may over time increase. The “Arab Spring” has turned to the “Arab Winter” in Egypt and Libya. Without a US presence in Iraq, moreover, ideological Islamic extremists are emerging in large numbers and sectarian violence in Iraq is again reaching major proportions.

Al Qa’ida followers, moreover, are endeavoring to exploit new opportunities that are presenting themselves in Syria, Yemen, and North and West Africa. It is widely reported that Al Qa’ida in Iraq, for example, is providing fighters in large numbers to Sunni opposition leaders in Syria fighting the Bashar al Assad regime. In Yemen, al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), even though under heavy pressure remains a distinct threat to US interests in the region and, through innovative bomb making, to the US homeland itself.

The threat to US interests in North and West Africa has increased over the last year in the form of al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram in Nigeria. The threat here remains regional, but no one should forget Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian “underwear bomber” who offered his services to AQAP in 2009, or Boko Haram’s attack against the UN Compound in Abuja in 2011.

In many respects, al Qa’ida today consists of loose networks and splinter groups which are far from monolithic. Even though they may espouse al Qa’ida ideology, many are criminals and brigands who are very different from the ideologically-driven al Qa’ida members, who retreated to Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in 2001. In this new environment, the Syrian civil war is serving as a
catalyst for major sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites that is spreading beyond the regime’s borders, shaking the entire Levant and beyond.

Syria has become a magnet for attracting extremists. For example, the sectarian violence has drawn in hundreds of highly trained and capable Hizballah Shia fighters to areas like Qusair and Aleppo; their arrival is transforming the battleground inside Syria along with the continuing flow of arms from both Russia and Iran. Sunni extremists are arriving in substantial numbers from Iraq, Egypt, and Arab states to fight against the Bashar regime. The conflict threatens to engulf the Levant, including the moderate, pro-Western monarchy in Jordan.

In this witches brew of developments in the Middle East and Africa, the growth of extremism, new safehavens where terrorists can operate, and long-standing al Qa’ida networks may foreshadow increased efforts to attack the US homeland from abroad.

**The In-Bound Threat: Al Qa’ida’s Core and Affiliated Networks**

As recently as June, the Director of NCTC stated that Al Qa’ida’s core, under continuing US pressure, remains essentially dormant in the tribal areas of Pakistan. The death of Osama bin Laden was a deeply demoralizing event for al Qa’ida’s depleted core leadership. Al Qa’ida reached its post 9/11 high-water mark in 2006-2007, by which time it had metastasized into a global terrorist movement and had formed a number of affiliated networks. It was during these years that al Qa’ida began to receive individuals from the West in substantial numbers who were inspired by the movement’s ideology and to train them in explosives and the use of weapons.

This effort, led by al Qa’ida’s external operational leader, Abu Ubaida al Masri, had the objective of developing trained operatives who knew Western culture and languages. Since the thwarting of the “liquid bomb plot” by British security officials in August 2006, al Qa’ida’s core has been in steep decline. The crushing of this plot, which had the objective of destroying multiple commercial aircraft crossing the Atlantic from the United Kingdom, was a turning point for al Qa’ida central, which has been on a downward spin ever since.

The United States, in an offensive led by intelligence and with partners globally, conducted relentless attacks to dismantle and destroy al Qa’ida leadership. Since July 2008, it has been reported that more than half of al Qa’ida’s top leaders have been killed. Almost all external operations chiefs as well as other top al Qa’ida leaders have died. For example, a year before the death of bin Laden, Shaykh Sa’id, al Qa’ida’s general manager, was killed in May 2010. Ati’yah abd al-Rahman, who assumed the number two position in al Qa’ida following bin Laden’s death, met his demise in August 2011.

Al Qa’ida’s core likely is not cohesive, and it no longer can command and control the global jihad. Its remaining leaders are under constant pressure and are trying to survive. When bin Laden died, he likely was not operating “a command and control center” as the media and some government officials have asserted. Having to rely on couriers and keeping current on world developments via a TV satellite dish hardly demonstrated operational control of a worldwide jihadist movement. With al Qa’ida fragmented, it is unlikely that Ayman al Zawahiri, the dour and non-charismatic successor to bin Laden, can resuscitate the organization’s capabilities or gain a position from which he can direct jihadist movements globally. As a consequence, it is likely that al Qa’ida is dependent upon affiliated networks—some new—to carry on the struggle against the “far enemy,” i. e. the United States.
Al Qa’ida-Linked Networks in Pakistan

Al Qa’ida’s current impotence in Pakistan is offset to a degree by Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), led by Hakimullah Mehsud. The TTP operates in Pakistan’s FATA and has historically had deep links to al Qa’ida’s core. It supports al Qa’ida by training operatives for attacks into Afghanistan as well as for Pakistani Government targets. It also trains operatives for attacks outside of the region. The TTP, for example, trained Faisal Shahzad, the naturalized American of Pakistani origin, who attempted to explode a bomb in Times Square on 1 May 2010. Nonetheless, it is tribally based and regionally oriented. Despite its rhetoric to wreak revenge on the United States—which it blames for the death of Baitullah Mehsud, the founder of the TTP, as well as the recent death of Wali Ur Rehman, the organization’s former second in command—the TTP is not capable of spearheading a global Islamic extremist movement or training operatives on a sustained basis for insertion into the United States.

The Haqqani network, led by Siraj Haqqani, son of the famed mujahedeen fighter Jallaluddin Haqqani, is the other regional tribal supporter of al Qa’ida. This network provides manpower to al Qa’ida for cross-border operations into Afghanistan and grooms operatives for al Qa’ida suicide operations. The United States has killed many Haqqani-trained operatives inside Afghanistan. In my view, however, the Haqqani militia is not focused on worldwide operations in the name of a global jihad. Formally designated a terrorist organization by the United States in September 2012, the network has suffered a number of casualties among its leaders, including the death of Jan Baz Zadran in October 2011.

The other dangerous terrorist organization in Pakistan is Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), operationally centered in the Northwest Province of Pakistan. LeT almost exclusively focuses on conducting attacks inside India and directed the attack against the Indian Parliament in 2001 and the Mumbai attack in late November 2008, which gave the group international notoriety. Even though it has demonstrated capabilities, open source reporting indicates that LeT is not a strategic outpost that poses a direct transcontinental threat to the United States, or even Western Europe.

Resurgence of Terrorism in the Middle East

Al Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI) is reinventing itself. The violence for the last three months between the country’s Sunni minority and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s Shia-led government is at a high level, with deaths now reaching 1,000 a month. With the departure of US forces in 2011, open source reporting indicates that AQI believes it can stage bombings unconstrained. AQI fighters are crossing the frontier in Anbar Province to join a leading anti-Bashar al Assad militia known as Jabhat al Nusra. AQI also is helping to bankroll the anti-Assad militia. Currently, it does not appear to pose a threat to the US homeland, but as it reestablishes itself in northern Iraq, it may begin to look externally.

In Syria, Jabhat al Nusra, which is ideologically and tactically aligned with al Qa’ida, has been winning battles and gaining support among the country’s population since its inception in January 2012. A number of the al Nusra fighters were involved with AQI during battles with US forces before they left in 2011; they are often seen as superior fighters to Free Syrian Army forces, who lack training and discipline in waging a guerrilla war against Syrian Armed Forces. The conflict has intensified in recent months with the arrival of hundreds of well-trained and disciplined Hizballah fighters. In many respects, with the addition of these fighters, the conflict is turning in favor of the al Assad regime, a development that can only add to growth of anti-US extremism in the Levant and the development of al Qa’ida-inspired groups.
Elsewhere in the Middle East, al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains a dangerous insurgent and terrorist organization, which continues to incite attacks against the United States. The transformation of AQAP into an active international affiliate occurred when Anwar al Awlaki, a cleric and US citizen who was operationally active in the organization, provided “spiritual guidance” for suicide operatives and led AQAP’s propaganda efforts against the West. Although al Awlaki is now dead along with other key AQAP leaders, the organization continues to publish INSPIRE, an electronic journal directed at inciting violent acts by young Muslims living in the West, as well as harbor bomb makers who are focused on developing explosives that are designed to evade Western security measures and attack the United States.

*Growth of Salafist Extremism in Africa*

On the African continent, we now find al Qa’ida affiliated networks operating in safehavens that were not foreseen five or six years ago. Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), for example, operates over an area larger than Texas. Its Libyan wing consists of members of Libya’s Islamic Fighting Group, a branch of which is Ansar al Sharia, which was involved in the attack on the US diplomatic post in Benghazi.

AQIM and associated splinter groups remain dangerous for Westerners as reflected in the attack this past January on the Tigantourine gas facility near In Amanas, Algeria, in which 37 foreign workers were killed, including three Americans. Although a number of top AQIM commanders, whose followers attacked the gas plant, have been killed, the organization remains a dangerous regional terrorist group. The intervention of highly capable French forces to support the outgunned Malian military has sharply constrained AQIM’s regional ambitions, but it remains well armed and operates over vast areas.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram, the violent Islamist group, has significantly stepped up attacks across the country’s northern state over the last year. Boko Haram fighters, moreover, have returned from Mali where they supported AQIM; these fighters have returned with a significant amount of sophisticated weaponry and experience in military tactics learned in combat there. The Abuja government is not anywhere close to suppressing Boko Haram and its more radical splinter group known as Ansaru. Boko Haram’s attack in August 2011 on the UN Compound in Abuja killed nine UN staff members and wounded many more; there is some evidence that the organization intended to attack the US Embassy but turned to the UN compound at the last moment because the Embassy was viewed as too heavily guarded.

In East Africa, al Shabaab, operating in Somalia and formally linked with al Qa’ida, still controls swathes of the southern part of the country and continues to wage war against the UN-backed Transitional National Government (TNG). But it continues to lose ground militarily and its support from the various Somali ethnic groups is diminishing as well. The number of Somali-Americans who have traveled to Somalia to support al Shabaab also has decreased. Earlier, several dozen young Americans of Somali descent raveled to East Africa to support al Shabaab; a number of these naturalized Americans participated in suicide attacks against elements supporting pro-TNG forces. The real threat from al Shabaab from an American perspective is from Somali-American young men, who have gone to Somalia, trained there, participated in military operations, and returned still radicalized.

The most serious potential threat for terrorism in Africa is whether AQIM, Al Shabaab, Boko Haram, or a splinter group have obtained Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) that were once secured in Libyan caches. Based on press reports, some MANPADS may be missing; at one time, Libya was believed
to have had at one time as many as 7,000 such weapons. Any use of these weapons against a commercial airliner would cause a paradigm shift in international aviation.

**Homegrown Terrorism: Threat Lessening?**

The US homegrown threat stems from a tiny minority of Muslims, a number of whom have converted to Islam or who are ethnically linked with Islamic countries overseas where extremist groups are flourishing. Many of these are newer immigrants who have arrived in the United States in the last fifteen to twenty years as refugees and asylum seekers. Some are strongly attracted to anti-Western extremist movements in their countries of origin, such as Somalia.

Despite the horror of the Boston Marathon bombing, there have been fewer successful terrorist attacks than forecast by a number of pundits; the anticipated spike in homegrown radicalization has not occurred. In large measure, the diminished foreign threat in-bound from al Qa’ida’s core in the FATA has contributed to the lack of enthusiasm among potential extremists here in the homeland. But the lack of attacks also reflects the major strides that the United States has made domestically in closing the many security vulnerabilities that existed in American society when 9/11 occurred.

Ideologically, al Qa’ida remains determined to strike the United States and will continue to encourage its followers to find any means to damage the United States. The Boston attack vividly demonstrated that the United States remains vulnerable to terrorism. It, above all, underscores the lasting resonance of al Qa’ida’s global jihadist message and the enduring importance of its propaganda to homegrown extremists operating within US borders. These extremists not only have legal status, such as the Tsarnaev brothers, but most importantly have the language and cultural skills to operate unobtrusively in Western societies. They may have little or no contact with hardened al Qa’ida operatives overseas, but have instant access to al Qa’ida ideology via the Internet, which fuels radicalization.

The Internet is the primary means by which al Qa’ida markets its messages on dozens of websites that command Muslims to either kill or support the killing of Westerners, especially Americans, in order to defend Islam. The late al-Awlaki, for example, urged in videos via the Internet for Muslims “to kill Americans,” a theme echoed repeatedly by Adam Gadahn, an American convert to Islam who remains located in the FATA. In 2011, Gadahn named forty prominent figures from the US government and private sector that he urged be assassinated.

Notwithstanding the Boston attack, the number of actual attacks from homegrown terrorists remains very small, with most attacks being foiled at the aspirational stage. The small number of attacks indicates that, overwhelmingly, the Muslim-American community remains hostile to the exhortations by individuals like Gadahn to violence. Most of the plotters arrested have demonstrated little competence in the building of explosive devices or executing their plans. The success in disrupting a number of plots, primarily by the FBI, unquestionably has had a strong deterrent effect on other would-be terrorists.

The US National Strategy for Counterterrorism, issued in the summer of 2011, focused on the ability of al Qa’ida and its affiliates to inspire people in the United States to attack from within. At the same time, despite significant effort and expenditure of funds, the United States still lacks a national effort to prioritize, synthesize, and manage domestic intelligence collection activities, and threat analysis. For example, there are no agreed upon domestic intelligence requirements. In our federal, state, and local system of government, roles and authorities have yet to be fully worked out. As demonstrated in the Boston bombing, there are disconnects in information sharing in some aspects of these relationships.
The activities of the Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) and the state and local fusion centers are not coordinated or integrated except in the most elementary ways.

**The State of Information Sharing**

Given that future terrorist attacks in the United States are more likely to come from within by individuals inspired by al Qa’ida’s ideology, the need for better domestic intelligence collection and analysis has never been a higher priority. Other Boston-type attacks seem likely to occur unless the current model of assuming that terrorist threat information will first come from federal agencies, which will then pass relevant information to local authorities, changes. This model no longer applies and would be a dangerous one to follow. Threat information is just as likely to come from local sources as from the federal government. Thus, intelligence must address both foreign-directed as well as homegrown terrorist operations.

The key to combatting terrorism in the homeland is information sharing, bi-directionally downward from the federal government and upward from the state and local levels. To succeed, it must involve a whole of government effort at home or abroad, of information sharing among intelligence, law enforcement, public safety, defense, homeland security and diplomatic communities. It must extend to all levels of government—federal, state, local, tribal and territorial and incorporate private sector partners and international allies.

The expansion of federal agency participation in Joint Terrorism Task Forces has dramatically improved communications, coordination, and information sharing, both at the federal level and the local level. The federal government, in particular, must do a better job communicating threat information to the owners and operators of critical infrastructure. At the federal level, the FBI and DHS need to do far more to develop a collaborative relationship, especially in areas such as border security and critical infrastructure.

Local police are in the best position to collect intelligence relating to the threat of terrorism. Ethnically, they reflect the local community, know the neighborhood, and are in a unique position to interact with disaffected community elements. They are responsible protection back to the local populace which wants protection from terrorism. This notwithstanding, there is substantial evidence that the federal government is not doing an adequate job over leveraging the knowledge and collection capabilities of local police departments.

Police departments, however, lack resources and training. They do not understand intelligence and have difficulty managing intelligence collection and analysis. Their forte is case-oriented criminal investigations. Development of their intelligence capabilities will take a long-term national investment, an unlikely development in the current constrained budget environment.

The same applies to the 70-odd fusion centers across the country. These centers have always been “all threats, all hazards” organizations, even though they were formed primarily to combat terrorism. They remain relatively nascent in their intelligence analytic capabilities and in understanding how to integrate collection at the local level with constrained federal support. Fusion centers’ great promise will only begin to be realized when they begin to build competent analytic cadres and to share information horizontally and regionally. DHS leadership and funding support is critical to the fusion centers and to their maturation. Director of National Intelligence support to DHS intelligence efforts will be essential to ensuring that they remain relevant to detecting terrorism threats at the very local level.
Private sector information sharing is lagging—particularly the communication of threat information from the government to the owners and operators of critical infrastructure. Perhaps more disturbing is that the federal government is not doing an adequate job of leveraging the knowledge and analytic capabilities of the private sector owners.

**Outlook**

Al Qa’ida’s core is likely to remain impotent for the foreseeable future, provided the United States maintains its current aggressive posture. The core will, however, continue to provide inspiration and ideology that will attract adherents globally, including individuals inside the United States.

Internationally, the outlook is troubling with the emergence of new terrorist safehavens in Africa and Middle East and groups like AQIM, AQAP, and Boko Haram presenting new and different threats to the West and Western interests. With the civil war in Syria feeding both Sunni and Shia extremism, the threat of anti-Western violence will become more likely, especially since governments cooperating with the United States in the region become more fragile.

The Boston Marathon bombings were “a wakeup call” to the American public of the threat of homegrown terrorism—a public that has come to expect that every terrorist plot, no matter how small, will be disrupted. Significant improvements in information sharing at all levels of government are urgently needed, especially with the private sector, if the United States is to protect its critical infrastructure from terrorism. Intelligence-driven counterterrorism operations can continue to reduce the terrorists’ operational abilities, but they cannot guarantee tranquility or end terrorism. Americans will have to learn to live with the continuing threat posed by a tenacious terrorist enterprise inbound as well as that posed by a small number of extremists who live within our borders.