Al Qaeda in Transition: Dangers and Opportunities

John McLaughlin
Prepared for the Aspen Homeland Security Group
June 24, 2013

It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the changes in Islamic extremist terrorism over the last five years may ultimately be as consequential in the realm of terrorism as those that came about in the broader geopolitical sphere after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Back then, the international system moved rapidly from a bipolar world to a unipolar one. In the narrower sphere of terrorism today, the changes of recent years have taken us from the unipolar and hierarchical world that the 9/11 era Al Qaeda represented to the multipolar and highly networked world that is contemporary terrorism.

Many of the terms intended to capture this change, like Al Qaeda 2.0 or 3.0, tend to skip over the very distinct stages that this brand of Islamic extremism has moved through over the last 20 years.

Al Qaeda 6.0 comes closer to capturing these stages, which might be defined as:

1. **Financing Terror**: the 1993-96 period with Bin Ladin mostly in Sudan providing inspiration and money to support operations;

2. **Going Operational**: the 1996-98 period when Bin Ladin, having moved to Afghanistan, shifts into direct action with attacks on US embassies in Africa;

3. **Classic Al Qaeda**: the 1998-2001 period featuring the attempted millennial attacks, the attack on the USS Cole warship, and the 9/11 plot;

4. **Plotting on the Run**: the 2001-06 period, when Al Qaeda scatters from Afghanistan but manages still to inspire and help plan a series of successful and unsuccessful attacks, ranging from the 2005 London subway bombings to the foiled 2006 plot to blow up airliners crossing the Atlantic;

5. **Spinning Off Affiliates**: in 2006-09 a number of powerful affiliates gain prominence or crystallize, especially in Yemen and North Africa;

6. **Network of Networks**: 2009-Present, as affiliates begin to cooperate and communicate among themselves, some still to looking to Al Qaeda core for inspiration or direction, others more internally-driven.

So today’s Al Qaeda is fundamentally different from the one we knew for years.

- Its center of gravity is no longer in the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas, if indeed it has a center of gravity;
It is caught up in the debate over tactics, goals and leadership that we always thought would come in the wake of Bin Ladin's death;

Al Qaeda’s adherents and those merely inspired by it are harder to locate, contain, and penetrate;

But they remain radical, militant, anti-West, violent, and dangerous.

So this is a highly fluid moment of transition in international terrorism -- a moment when *we can confidently discern trends but cannot predict end states with any assurance.*

What are these changes, what are their consequences, and what uncertainties do they leave us with? Most of this can be captured by looking at **three major trends:**

**First,** the physical field of battle is changing fundamentally. The most obvious dimension is the US departure from Iraq and coming withdrawal from Afghanistan. For the last decade, the most visible fights have been in those countries and their borderlands, and the presence of allied forces has constricted terrorist freedom of maneuver and provided intelligence platforms for the collection of very granular data on jihadists operating there.

The future evolution of both countries can only be a matter of speculation. But even if neither becomes a major terrorist safe-haven, it seems fair to conclude that terrorists who choose to operate there will be able more easily to move, train, and communicate than when under constant pressure from numerous and highly maneuverable US and allied forces. Meanwhile, we and our counterterrorist partners will face the challenge of having to monitor, detect, and combat radical Islamists remotely or from a much smaller number of fixed platforms.

Moreover, in Iraq, a combination of factors -- Shiite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's authoritarianism, Sunni attraction to the plight of brethren in neighboring Syria, the hardening commitment to autonomy among Kurds -- has raised anew questions about the country's long-term cohesiveness.

More immediately, this has opened up new opportunities for Al Qaeda in Iraq and given it a new lease on life. With sectarian strife on the rise, deaths from violence in recent weeks are at the highest point since the sectarian civil war of 2006. Meanwhile, the border separating western Iraq from eastern Syria is for all practical purposes no longer a border, with local tribes straddling it and the pipeline that once carried foreign fighters into Iraq via Syria now effectively reversed.

It was once the "worst case" to suggest that Syria and Iraq could each come apart. But with the sectarian violence in Syria and the centrifugal pressures in Iraq, this is no longer so hard to imagine. In that case, the map of the Middle East would have to be withdrawn. And this would occur in circumstances brought about in part by terrorist groups who would then have the means to influence the outcome.

A scenario along these lines has long been a "best case" for Bin Ladin's often-underrated successor Ayman al-Zawahiri. It is easy to imagine him somewhere in his hideout relishing the prospect, earnestly
seeking to bring it about, and taking pleasure in the fealty of both the Syrian and Iraqi branches of Al-Qaeda.

And in Afghanistan, the danger is not just that US withdrawal will weaken a deterrent to terrorism. It is also likely to stimulate the neighboring countries’ habit of treating Afghanistan as a pawn in the regional chess game. India, for example, is likely to become more active in the country in order to deny Islamabad the strategic depth that a weak or easily influenced Afghanistan has always represented for Pakistan on its western border. This in turn would work against any rapprochement between India and Pakistan in their long-running regional feud. And when India and Pakistan are at odds, opportunities open up for terrorists.

The contingencies in this region are now such that little can be said with certainty. The only certainty is that Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan will in the future be less easily monitored and trends there less easily shaped -- and this includes the activities and fortunes of terrorist groups that choose to locate and operate there.

In many ways these are the least complicated ways in which the environment for terrorism is changing. More complex and probably more consequential in the long run is a second trend: the changing pattern of governance in the areas of greatest concern.

Starting with the advent of civilian rule in Pakistan in 2008 and continuing with the Arab Spring two years later, the South Asia/Middle East/North Africa region entered an era of transition that marked the end of predictability in estimating terrorist fortunes there.

Leaving aside a couple Gulf countries, it is hard to disagree with Robert Kaplan's observation that only two countries in this area today exercise full sovereignty over their territory -- Israel and Iran. In most other countries, governments do not exercise confident control much outside their urban capitals. This is especially the case in North Africa, where borders are hardly patrolled at all and where the terrain is marked by militant camps and corridors, long stretches of desert, mountain passes, and remote valleys. In short, many of the political changes of recent years have added dramatically to the region's ungoverned or sparsely governed space.

While political leaders in this area still worry about terrorism, it is no longer the driving concern it was when greater stability reigned in the region, mostly under authoritarian governments. Instead regional regimes are focused on:

- Establishing a new constitutional order (Egypt);
- Surviving sectarian strife (Syria, Iraq);
- Managing protest in the midst of democratic transition (Tunisia);
- Ensuring the durability of civilian rule (Pakistan);
- Supplanting tribal differences with a semblance of central authority (Libya);
- Maintaining a balance between secular and religious forces (Turkey);
• Or riding out the political storm that hit the region two and a half years ago (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria).

In this region, terrorists gain when sovereignty is in question and governments are distracted by issues more central to their near-term survival.

Intelligence services there that once focused on a granular understanding of society in the service of authoritarian regimes are today either non existent or dividing attention to terrorism with attention to higher priority concerns. As with the governments they are supposed to serve, they are trying to find their way in new political circumstances with new masters (Egypt, Tunisia), seeking to establish themselves in competition with powerful militias (Libya), or helping established governments ride out growing pressures for change (Jordan, Saudi Arabia).

• Very few intelligence tasks require an unrelenting and singular focus as the price of success -- but counterterrorism is one of them.

All these trends taken together mean that Al Qaeda and associated terrorists now have a larger area for safe havens and operational bases than they have had in more than a decade -- and they are using it.

Syria is of course exhibit A. Beyond its potential geopolitical significance, Syria is now an engine driving the movement the way Iraq did in the middle of the last decade or the way the mujahedeen war against the Soviets in Afghanistan did in the 1980s.

The country is now a magnet for foreign fighters from as near as Iraq and Jordan, as far away as Bangladesh and Britain, and from across North Africa.

• Martyrdom reports and other data on the web suggest that as many as 7 - 10 % of the rebel force now consists of fighters from outside Syria.

• Their enemy in Syria -- the ruling Alawite minority -- is a tailor-made drawing card for the most radical Sunni Islamists, who consider this a heretical sect.

• And because Syrian ministries are staffed by Alawites unlikely to survive a transition bloodbath, there will be no administrative continuity if and when Bashar al-Assad falls -- a recipe for greater chaos than we saw, say, in post-Saddam Iraq and a circumstance in which those who are best armed, organized, and disciplined are likely to prevail.

As was the case at the end of the Afghan war in the 1980s, fighters trained in Syria are likely to filter back to their homelands, many now also in transitions that were unimaginable in the aftermath of past insurgencies. These fighters will be hoping for opportunities to use their skills to advance jihadist causes there.

This is nowhere more the case than in North Africa, where the weakness of many new central governments combines with geography to create some of the world's least governed spaces.
Heralding the likely future and emblematic of the opportunities this opens up for extremists was the January 16 attack on the In Amenas natural gas facility in southern Algeria. This has been much less discussed than the attack on the US facility in Benghazi, Libya but it is of equal or greater importance in what it tells us about the evolving nature of the threat.

Directed by first generation Al Qaeda veteran and breakaway Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) fighter, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the attack was carefully planned for weeks and carried out with precision. Illustrating the freedom with which extremists can move in this area, Belmokhtar was able to use networks across the region to acquire weapons and recruit fighters from Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria, and Mauritania. He was clearly able to tap into other networks; some of Belmokhtar’s Egyptians had also taken part in the Benghazi attack.

Although the occupying force of terrorists at the facility was brutally suppressed by Algerian security forces, nearly 40 civilians were killed along with close to 30 militants. Belmokhtar’s stated objectives were to avenge the French intervention against extremists in northern Mali and to exert pressure on the Algerian government, by any measure the most authoritarian government still standing in the region.

Looking at the region as a whole, the likelihood is for more incidents like the In Amenas and Benghazi attacks, largely due to the combination of porous borders, weak security environments, populations 60 - 70 percent under the age of 30 and broadly sympathetic to jihadist causes, and terrain marked by historic and well-traveled smuggling routes.

**A third major trend** in the evolving terrorist movement is the heightened degree to which terrorists are now debating future strategy while learning from and adapting to the circumstances flowing from the death of Bin Ladin, the Arab Spring, and the instances in which they have either been defeated by counterterrorism forces or rejected by other Muslims.

On strategy and targets, a robust debate is underway. There are undoubtedly some in the Al Qaeda core and in the stronger affiliates, such as Yemen’s Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQ/AP), who still relish the prospect of a major attack on the US homeland -- and have not given up on it. Most experts would say their chances of bringing this off have diminished, but it is prudent to recall that each time we discover one of their methods, they surprise us with a new one or at least impress us with their ingenuity -- the underwear bomb, the package bomb, the surgically implanted bomb. And so it is hard to believe that they have given up trying to surprise us with innovations designed to penetrate our defenses.

We should be especially mindful of this given the uncertain status of WMD material in the chaotic Syrian conflict. Additionally, among the AQIM documents recovered in northern Mali is a professional training manual for SA-7 surface-to-air missiles; this could be in contemplation of using such weapons against the regime in Syria -- or against a civilian airliner, something that terrorists have tried but failed to do in the past.

Moreover, we have been taken by surprise when smaller, less well-understood groups have taken it into their heads to point an attacker toward a US homeland target, as Pakistan’s Tehrik e Taliban did with Faisal Shazad, the failed Times Square truck bomber of 2010.
And Bin Ladin's simple and basic message -- that the Islamic faith and territory are under attack, that the west is anti-Islam, and that followers are duty bound to fight back -- continues to reverberate on the internet and among radical preachers, ensuring that an inestimable number of Boston-style jihadists will pop up with various schemes inside the US.

This said, even Ayman Zawahiri has on occasion favored smaller targets outside the US homeland, in contrast to Bin Ladin's fixation on the US "far enemy". And one theme we are seeing among the affiliates now is their attraction to local targets associated with weaker local government in places like Tunisia, Libya, and Jordan.

So the movement is now pulled in many directions -- not abandoning altogether the idea of a US homeland attack but drawn more immediately to "softer" US and partner targets and intrigued by the possibility of scoring gains in a region now characterized by weaker and more distracted local governments.

Related to this is the degree to which the movement is now learning from its mistakes. We see this particularly in the way it is reflecting on the fact that populations have resisted jihadist rule when they have gained control of specific localities.

- There is a growing realization that they cannot gather many adherents when they treat populations harshly and fail to provide any useful services.

- This is spelled out explicitly in very revealing documents recovered from AQIM safe-houses after the French chased them from northern Mali.

- AQIM leader Droukdel in one lengthy document is sharply critical of fighters and commanders for having been much too hard on locals, especially women, and seeking to rush adoption of Sharia law; he says they must bring people along slowly as they would "babies".

We see a similar dawning among the jihadists of Yemen, Iraq and Al Qaeda’s Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) affiliate in Syria, along with a new trend of providing practical services to populations that fall under their sway. And in the Maghreb, the Ansar al-Sharia movement, particularly strong in Tunisia and Libya, is encouraging its adherents to integrate into society, as opposed to heading for training camps in the mountains.

This brand of Islamic extremism may be on its way toward a kind of Hezbollah model; the Iran-inspired group has long been noted for provision of social services that help bring populations to its banner. This would make it still harder to detect terrorist activities, separate them sufficiently from populations, and root them out.

In sum, Al Qaeda today may be weakened, but its wounds are far from fatal. It is at a moment of transition both in terms of its internal deliberations and its external opportunities. Some of those opportunities hold the potential to energize the movement and give it new momentum. And should it gain in those ways, it will not be the Al Qaeda we have known. It is likely to be a more variegated and less hierarchical adversary that would still hold the potential to do significant harm to American and allied interests. An adversary more difficult to categorize, detect, or contain.
So in contemplating whether and when this war might end and thinking about the future of the Islamic extremist movement, we must pay close attention to all of these trends and to what the extremists themselves tell us about their aspirations -- bearing in mind the wisdom J. R. R. Tolkien has Eowyn speak in Lord of the Rings: "It needs but one foe to breed a war, not two..."