

Al-Qaeda's Infrastructure in the Arabian Peninsula

From the Point of View of Arab Researchers and Studies

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General

In October and November of 2010, the Arab media quoted studies and statements made by Arab researchers regarding the recent changes in Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). One cannot exclude the possibility that some of the studies and the journalistic coverage is essentially biased and meant to point to a certain weakening and laxity in the organization's activity, while at the same time emphasizing the success of the Arab countries in coping with this infrastructure.

From the portrayal made by the Arab researchers, the following points come up:

- *For tactical reasons, the organization was forced to carry out smaller, cheaper and less spectacular terrorist attacks, due to the pressure put on the organization by security forces in the area. This pressure is expressed in the increased surveillance capabilities and in drying out the organization's financial resources. Following these steps, the organization is on the defensive and carries out small and simple terrorist attacks only to prove that it still exists.*
- *These terrorist attacks are aimed at economic targets and especially oil installations, which are vulnerable due to the difficulty in securing them.*
- *The change in the organization's operational pattern is backed up by an operational doctrine based on religious justifications pertaining to "economic Jihad" whose objective is to wear the enemy down and cause as much economic damage as possible.*
- *The continued pressure on the part of security forces in the area alongside the change in the operational pattern is also accompanied by a change in Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's conduct, expressed in its breaking off from*

the parent organization and the use of small unstable cells, so as to increase their ability to mislead security forces.

- *Researchers contend that Al-Qaeda still suffers from an ideological weakness due to the deviation from the religious ideas of the organization's founders, especially regarding the determination of enemies.*
- *Al-Qaeda also has some "foreign" involvement, as it receives the aid of foreign, most likely Iranian, intelligence services.*

The Inability to Execute Large-Scale Terrorist Attacks

According to Dr. Anwar Ashqi, Chief of the Middle East Center for Legal and Strategic Studies in Saudi-Arabia, the decision to carry out assassinations and cheap small-scale terrorist attacks is a tactic taken by the organization as a result of the drying up of its financial resources and of the effective action taken by Saudi security services, but it does not signify a change in the organization's strategy of sowing chaos and destruction. Al-Ashqi claims that, in the past, the organization targeted innocent people, but with Saudi-Arabia's advancement in its war on terrorism, Al-Qaeda began focusing its efforts on political assassinations so as to silence the people constituting a source of concern for the organization, such as media professionals, public figures, security officials and philosophers. Al-Ashqi referred to Saudi-Arabia's war on terrorism which includes both propaganda and security activities. With regards to propaganda, he stated, Saudi-Arabia has founded a national dialogue center and the "Intellectual Security" Center, alongside its international propaganda efforts. In the field of security, Saudi forces moved from a defensive stance to an offensive one, with the aim of thwarting terrorist attacks at the preparation stage rather than apprehending terrorists after the attack. This was enabled by developments in

the Saudi security forces' capabilities. As a result, the organization attacks only easy targets solely for the purpose of displaying its presence. According to Al-Ashqi, the organization suffers from severe financial constraints and the terrorist attacks using packages, which cost the organization a mere 4,200\$, are testament to this fact.¹

Al-Ashqi is not alone in pointing this change in the operational pattern seen in Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Alongside the publications from November 2010 on the recent exposure of 19 Al-Qaeda cells in Saudi-Arabia, the Saudi Al-Riyadh newspaper published a statement made by Dr. Khaled Mansour Al-Durais, Supervisor of the Prince Naif Chair for Intellectual Security Studies. Al-Durais pointed out that due to the weakness in Al-Qaeda's infrastructure it is now planning smaller attacks compared to those it carried out before. He likened the organization's operational pattern to the activity of snakes; adapting quickly to changes in their situation and said that the organization is using "a snake's tactic of misdirection" comprised of no movement or any attention-drawing activity and the setting up of traps, deception and fraud.²

The Attrition War Doctrine Using Small-Scale Terrorist Attacks and Attacking Economic Targets

The Al-Arabiya network's website published on November 25th 2010 a summary of a study conducted by the Al-Mijhar Research Center in Dubai, titled "The Attrition Strategy: Al-Qaeda's aim to attack oil and economic targets", claiming that Al-Qaeda is not only waging a military campaign but also an economic war in which it targets oil installations as part of its attrition strategy and that it also

¹ Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, 29.11.2010: <http://www.aawsat.com/>

² Al-Riyadh, 28.11.2010: <http://www.alriyadh.com/>

carries out many small-scale terrorist attacks to preserve its media presence and to shock countries.

Al-Qaeda also works on establishing a religious Sharia foundation for its new activities as part of what is called "The Economic Jihad Strategy", or as Al-Qaeda in Yemen calls it, "The Attrition Strategy" or "The Thousand Cuts Strategy". The study points to the fact that oil installations are deemed easier to attack and more difficult to defend when compared to other targets, especially when discussing oil pipes and oil tankers and states that Al-Qaeda is well aware of this fact.

The authors of the study noted that Al-Qaeda considers attacking oil pipes as a prolonged war of attrition that will weaken its enemies – both the US and Arab countries. Al-Qaeda's objective via these small-scale attacks is to create media presence and to reassure its supporters by undermining the countries' stability and deterrence. These attacks are based on a conceptual-ideological foundation and constitute part of the "economic Jihad". The authors of the study note that the Al-Qarawi Brigades are focusing on economic and industrial targets in the Gulf's oil industry and are responsible for the terrorist attack against the MV Star on the summer of 2010.

The last part of the study focuses on the possible impact of these terrorist attacks and recommends not to be drawn by Al-Qaeda's threats and its small terrorist attacks whose aim is to undermine security and wear out security forces in order to carry out larger terrorist attacks. The study recommends a number of steps to ensure the safety of oil installations such as the use of non-flammable materials, permanent deployment of fire brigades, development of oil tankers etc.³

³ Al-Arabiya, 25.11.2010: <http://www.alarabiya.net/>

Changes in the Pattern of the Organization - "Nano-Cells"

Dr. Khaled Mansour Al-Durais, Supervisor of the Prince Naif Chair for Intellectual Security Studies, pointed out the organization's use of "nano-cells", *i.e.* – small cells disconnected from one other.⁴

According to the study conducted at the Al-Mijhar Center, Al-Qaeda's strategy in attacking the oil industry is based on guerrilla doctrines and on small temporary cells, much like the Al-Qarawi Brigades and Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Iraq's operational patterns, following the ideological similarity between Zarqawi and Al-Hukaymah, founder of the Brigades and their ideologue.⁵

The Organization's Ideological Weakness and its Ideological Break-Off From the Parent Organization

Dr. Ali Khashiban, a Saudi researcher specializing in Islamic organizations, told Al-Hayat newspaper that it seems Al-Qaeda in Yemen is isolated from the parent organization in Afghanistan and pointed out that Saudi-Arabia is now facing a new Al-Qaeda generation, entirely different from the first generation in that the ideas it embraces in Yemen do not coincide with Bin Laden's ideas and those of his deputy, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, especially regarding the determination of the primary enemies.

According to Al-Khashiban: "The discourse of Al-Qaeda in Yemen is purely political and is not a discourse stemming from religious ideas as is the case in the parent organization and is currently directed at the political and security leadership with the aim of attacking the social and political security". Al-Khashiban mentions that Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan is operating in Europe and the

⁴ Al-Riyadh, 28.11.2010: <http://www.alriyadh.com/>

⁵ Al-Arabiya, 25.11.2010: <http://www.alarabiya.net/>

United States, while its branch in Yemen has broken off from the parent organization.⁶

Muhammad Faiz Farhat, a researcher at the Egyptian "Ahram" Center, also claims that Al-Qaeda's discourse has disintegrated, losing its zeal and consistency. Although Farhat discusses Al-Qaeda in general and not Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, he nonetheless makes the same point. Farhat contends that Al-Qaeda has declared a Jihad war on what it called "the prime enemy", meaning the Jews and the Crusaders. However, in practice, most of Al-Qaeda's efforts are not focused on the external enemy that constitutes its main objective, against which Al-Qaeda claims to be fighting. Other than Afghanistan and Iraq, where American and Western forces are currently deployed, there is no clear presence of American or Western "enemies" and Al-Qaeda's activity in south-east Asia, Yemen and Somalia is an example of the change the organization has undergone; from carrying out Jihad against "the external enemy" to carrying out Jihad against "the internal enemy".⁷

A study conducted by the Al-Mijhar Center also focuses on the ideological weakness the organization is suffering. The title of the first part of the study is "Al-Qaeda's economic Jihad notions: the weakness of the religious [component] and the hegemony of the ideological [component]". This part of the study relates to the religious and ideological foundations of the economic attrition war waged by Al-Qaeda and the weakness of Al-Qaeda's religious justifications on the subject.

⁶ Al-Hayat, 7.10.2010: <http://ksa.daralhayat.com/>

⁷ Al-Hayat, 6.11.2010: <http://international.daralhayat.com/>

The Involvement of "Foreign" Security Forces

Dr. Ali Khashiban contends that one cannot rule out the possibility that "a hostile Intelligence Force" in the region provides Al-Qaeda with material support, whether directly or indirectly. Al-Khashiban presents a few circumstantial evidence for this involvement and explains that the organization's failed attempt to attack the aircraft used by the emir Muhammad bin Naif, the Deputy Minister of Interior and of Security Affairs, is a result of sensitive security information that reached the organization, which raises the question, alluding to the Intelligence Services of a country in the region, where has this information come from? He pointed to the fact that the organization had enough time to prepare the attack, the SAM 6 missiles and mortars and to fortify itself in houses near the airport in Sana'a.⁸

Summary

These studies depict a picture according to which Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has recently undergone an ideological and organizational transformation as well as transformations in its operational patterns. Studies present the organization as dispersed, detached from the central leadership of the Al-Qaeda parent organization and as a weak organization forced to carry out cheap small-scale terrorist attacks as opposed to the large-scale attacks of the past. Studies further depict the organization as suffering from an ideological weakness due to the absence of a real enemy to fight, as the original enemy the parent organization has declared war on no longer exists. In addition, it has been implied that the organization receives Iranian support.

⁸ Al-Hayat, 7.11.2010: <http://ksa.daralhayat.com/>

One cannot rule out the possibility that these studies are biased with the aim of stressing the weakening of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's infrastructure, while trying to glorify the efficiency and efficacy of regional security forces in dealing with the organization. Furthermore, one should take into account that political elements in the region have a vested interest in pointing out Al-Qaeda's ideological weakness in order to discourage the population from identifying with it. Another interest is to point to a connection between Al-Qaeda and Iran, thus "killing two birds with one stone". Accuse Iran, an adversarial regional power of the Gulf countries in general and Saudi-Arabia in particular, of supporting Al-Qaeda, thus undermining the legitimacy of the Iranian regime on the one hand and on the other, exploiting Sunni-Shiite hostility in order to discourage the local population from joining Al-Qaeda or from identifying with the organization.