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AL QAEDA TODAY

Recomposed Hierarchical Organization or Pan-Islamic Ideological Movement?

by Brig Barker
Special to CJJ

Many would say that Al Qaeda historically was an efficient, well-financed, and sophisticated organization prior to the events of September 11, 2001. Since the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S., the destruction of the terrorist training camps, and the target displacement of the previously identified leadership, the entity of Al Qaeda has undergone extensive reorganization. As such, the counterterrorism and law enforcement communities must unequivocally determine the existing state of the previously defined organization. Logically, questions most likely arise regarding whether the entity is a re-formed, yet smaller organization or if it has evolved into a global pan-Islamic social movement. With an established answer to this question, more appropriate strategic and tactical policies – both foreign and domestic – can be developed to defeat or potentially thwart the group's activities worldwide. This paper will seek to answer this question. The benchmark against which the entity will be defined will be Stojkovic, Kalinich, and Klofas' (2003) definition of an organization. Stojkovic et al. define an organization as "a collective that has some identifiable boundary and internal structure and that engages in activities related to some complex set of goals" (p. 6). Nevertheless, to establish a clear understanding of the entity, a brief history of its origins and dismantlement will first be provided. Subsequently, an analysis of its current state, to include an in-depth look at its organizational structure, leadership, communications, and recruiting, will take place. This will set the stage for further dissection to include a determination as to whether it fits the classic definition of an "organization." Finally, the paper will utilize the findings to further identify potential vulnerabilities in the entity to be used as considerations by the counterterrorism and law enforcement communities.

Although appearing to be a simple task, determining the entity's current state of being requires extensive analysis. Specifically this requires first unpacking what an organization actually looks like. Stojkovic et al. define an organization based on three important factors: structure, purpose, and activity. With this, an organization can be viewed as a bureaucratic structure with a rigid hierarchy of offices and an established division of

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labor as characterized by Weber (1947). This, of course, was historically accurate, but given the multiplication of nebulous entities potentially defined as organizations there may be more appropriate options. Stojkovic et al. also outline the importance of purpose in an organization. Here they detail the quickly emerging complexities in defining the entity's purpose. For the purpose of this paper, Al Qaeda's goals will be measured against Etzioni's (1964) definition of organizations as "social units deliberately constructed and reconstructed to seek specific goals" (p. 5). Finally, in looking at Stojkovic et al.'s definition of an organization, the third essential factor for consideration is that of the group's activities. Specifically, one question that should be answered is whether the organization itself carries out activities or if there are conglomerate entities that act on behalf of the group itself. Graphically speaking, are the group's activities solidly connected to the subgroup's activities or can the relationship be represented as a dotted line? All in all, the totality of the above three factors will be considered in review of Al Qaeda's activities.

BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION AND DEVOLUTION

First, a brief history is essential to the understanding of the organization as it evolved before September 11, 2001. Al Qaeda was established and founded by Osama Bin Laden in 1988 in Pakistan for the purpose of uniting Arab fighters against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Their activities included the financing, housing, recruitment, and training of Islamic extremists to assist Afghan resistance fighters (Terrorism Files, 2007).

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The group developed a worldwide network through expanded recruitment and support processes. They were a militant Sunni Muslim group dedicated to various self-proclaimed goals. These included expelling the non-Muslim presence from Muslim countries and overthrowing governments it felt were assimilating Western ways. As an organization, the group operated a consultant council (Majlis al Shura) with four committees. The council approved policies and activities while the separate committees (military, religious/legal, finance, and media) focused on their specific substantive issues. It is believed that the group eventually expanded to a membership of approximately 3,000 to 5,000 at its peak (SLATT, 2004). Financially, the group's leader, Osama Bin Laden, was the son of a billionaire from Saudi Arabia, worth approximately \$300 million. Organizationally, the group utilized various front companies and donations as part of financing their operations. The group finds its ideological roots in various Islamic militants, filtered through the teachings of Osama Bin Laden and the current number two lieutenant, Ayman Al Zawahiri. These historic Islamic militants include individuals such as Sayyid Qutb, Omar Abdul Rahman, Muhammad Abd Alsalam Faraj, and Abdallah Azzam. The organization became its own entity derived from two separate Islamic organizations identified as the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Maktab Al Khadimat (Office of Services). Although without religious credentials, Bin Laden is often exemplified as a spiritual leader within the organization. In 1996, Bin Laden declared war on the U.S. and, subsequently in 1998, he issued a fatwa (pronouncement) stating that it is the duty of Muslims to kill Americans. This was followed by the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in 2000, and the attacks on September 11, 2001 (CTC, 2007).

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the following activities took place leading to a purported diminished capability of Al Qaeda. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) commenced wherein the U.S. invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. OEF was a military response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, and included air strikes, the destruction of terrorist training camps, the capture of Al Qaeda leaders, and a resultant cessation of terrorist activities in Afghanistan (OEF, 2007). Conetta (2002) provides an executive summary of the immediate accomplishments of OEF which included the following:

1. 3,000 – 4,000 Taliban troops killed (including 600-800 Afghan Arabs believed to have been brought to Afghanistan through the Al Qaeda network)
2. Approximately 7,000 Taliban/Foreign troops taken as prisoners
3. At least eight of the twenty top Al Qaeda leaders were killed
4. Al Qaeda's infrastructure and operations were destroyed

Of course, additional dismantlement and disruption continue in Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). OIF officially began on March 20, 2003, and continues to date (OIF, 2007). On October 17, 2004, the late Abu Musab Al Zarqawi merged his organization with Al Qaeda under the banner of "Al Qaeda in Iraq." This network operating in Iraq continues suicide bombing attacks against both Western and Shiite targets.



With the above-mentioned operational successes of the U.S. both in Afghanistan and in Iraq, many would surmise that the group is now working at diminished capacity. Nevertheless, it appears that the group's "purpose" as an organization has remained the same. The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2006) provides that

Al Qaeda's believed purposes include the removal of all Western presence from Muslim lands, a reestablishment of the Islamic caliphate, severing Western alliances, and the establishment of Shariah (Islamic law) in Muslim countries. It appears that the entity remains committed to these goals even after September 11, 2001, as will be demonstrated further. This complies with Etzioni's (1964) identification of organizations that sometimes reconstruct their entity with specific goals in mind. With regard to their goals, Corera (2004) provides that it is important to understand the group's evolution in that their purpose has been as much inspirational as it has operational. Bin Laden speeches and those of his leadership to Western civilization are replete with confirmation that their group believes it is at war specifically with the U.S. Ayman Al Zawahiri, who is the first lieutenant of the group, stated in a speech on January 22, 2007, "It is the duty of every Muslim today to bear arms, and to serve or support those who are bearing arms. . . . At the end of my speech, I remind the Muslim Ummah of the duty towards its sons, the Mujahideen in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia, Algeria, and all lands of Islam. Back them with men, money, opinion, expertise, and prayers. And I mention specifically the two Islamic emirates in Afghanistan and Iraq, for they are waging battle in the two most crucial fields against the Zionist Crusade" (Centcom, 2007). It is clear that Al Qaeda is at war with the U.S. Their purpose then, given that they are led by religious leadership, appears to be that of a crusade. A crusade is defined as "any war carried on under papal sanction" (Dictionary.com, 2007). Empirically speaking,

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it is hard not to define their purpose as a crusade even though there are political undertones associated with the term. Given the leadership's statements and declarations, its primary purpose does not appear to be for political or capitalistic reasons, but for religious legitimacy and expansion.

LEADERSHIP AND REVERENCE

First, in looking at an organization's leadership one must first consider whether the "executives" fall in line as managers or leaders. Carlisle (1976) defined management as a "process by which elements of a group are integrated, coordinated, and/or utilized so as to effectively and efficiently achieve organizational objectives" (p. 7). Kotter (1990) defines leadership as "a process that helps direct and mobilize people and their ideas" (p. 7). Kotter continues, "Leaders establish direction by developing a vision of the future, align people through shared values and vision, and motivate and inspire people to move them toward a shared vision" (p. 8). Given the apparent autonomous operational activities of subgroups only linked symbolically to Al Qaeda, it appears that the group's leadership is not involved in deliberate "integration" and "coordination" with those beneath them. This deliberate collaboration appeared to be the case prior to September 11, 2001, but now is lacking or absent in global terrorist activities wherein subgroups claim their activities were sanctioned by Al Qaeda. It appears, then, that the upper echelon of the group resembles "leadership" as opposed to "management." In fact, the leadership, which includes individuals such as Osama Bin Laden, Ayman Al Zawahiri, and Adam Gadahn, are directly in line with Kotter's description of leadership. In their treatises, the leadership focuses on establishing direction, aligning individuals ideologically towards a goal, and providing inspiration and motivation. Although of nefarious and often diabolical intent, it must be conceded that the group's leadership is innovative and resourceful in providing charismatic inspiration to the global Islamic extremist movement. It appears that the executive upper echelon of Al Qaeda has become so effective in their inspiration and motivation that terrorist groups and individuals seem to claim linkage simply out of extreme reverence for the leaders. Aijaz Mangi (2003), a Pakistani political commentator, writes:

Osama bin Laden is a liberator of the downtrodden people. They do not only respect Osama bin Laden, they love him. They consider it a great achievement, if their lives are lost working for Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden has become a larger than life figure. Where is he and how is he taking care of himself are the most important questions in the world nowadays. He is a symbol of love. Osama bin Laden is a person in whom the entire world sees their hopes and wishes. Osama bin Laden is a symbol of peoples' hatred of the United States. Osama bin Laden has become as dangerous as a nuclear bomb. The United States can

never catch Osama bin Laden because he lives in the heart of every Muslim (p. 124).

Obviously this representation of Bin Laden's respected leadership by Muslims globally has far reaching consequences for Western societies. Because of Bin Laden's successful and sophisticated terrorist acts of the past, he is most likely seen as a person of action. One could surmise that Al Qaeda in its current status could be considered a more dangerous threat than before September 11 simply due to its far reaching connections and global inspiration. In that Islamic extremists cite and justify their actions based on Islamic scholarship, one must consider if Bin Laden's leadership is partially bound by his secular background. Moreover, if Bin Laden has secular, nationalist, and spiritual clout, his sphere of influence will most likely increase through ongoing propaganda. McAuley (2005) answers this question in stating that even Bin Laden himself claims spiritual leadership rights in that he has the right to speak on behalf of Islam because of his past actions. Consequently, Bin Laden can thus call himself a sheikh, despite his lack of religious credentials. Therefore, in looking at Bin Laden specifically, he appears to have strong leadership influence even beyond Al Qaeda. As an icon, he can represent a large majority of Muslim extremists worldwide either symbolically or through reverence for his actions. One may empirically ask whether Bin Laden exhibits effective leadership. Bolman and Deal (2003) state that the most widely accepted tenets regarding good leaders include leadership qualities such as vision, strength, and commitment, as well as competent abilities in situational settings. Based on these characteristics, it appears Bin Laden is certainly effective in providing global vision to his followers. He and his leadership have further altered their operational activities since September 11, 2001, thereby exhibiting flexibility in the new situation. As such, it appears most would concede that Bin Laden exhibits effective leadership as part of the emerging entity of Al Qaeda.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: DISTANCE RESPONSIBILITY

One must further analyze the organizational structure as it relates to decision making and leadership within the entity. Stojkovic et al. allude to the question of an organization's structure, whether formal or informal. This appears to be a central turning point for Al Qaeda in that the leadership after September 11, 2001, transitioned from a centralized to a decentralized model. Stojkovic et al. further define and describe an entity's "span of control" as a significant factor in an organization (p. 26). Again, this span or sphere of influence enjoyed by Osama Bin Laden and others in leadership appears to have greatly expanded since the 2001 attacks. Corera (2004) talks about this expansion, stating that the puritanical ideology of violent jihad looks to be spreading and adds that many experts now see a global Islamist insurgency as opposed to a single organization like Al Qaeda. Corera (2004) further describes the entity's organizational structure, adding that Bin Laden is now less important as a commander and more important

as an ideologue and propagandist, wherein he sets broad strategic aims and leaves local groups with decisions regarding when and how attacks take place. Furthermore, Stojkovic et al. distinguish between tall hierarchies and flat hierarchies in organizational structure. Flat hierarchies can be described as “organizations with few levels of command and typically exhibit wide spans of control and most level” (p. 27). When ordinarily these types of hierarchies include various departments, Al Qaeda’s structure may be seen more as a relational connection to various dispersed networks only represented by dotted lines. Nevertheless, ties to some subgroups may be more accurately represented by a solid line as opposed to a dotted line, as seen below in the author’s depiction:

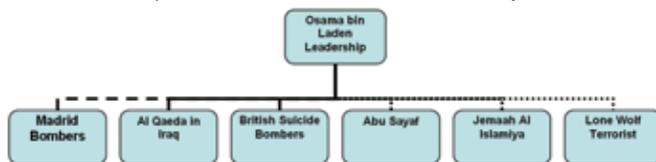


FIGURE 1: Al Qaeda Organization

Some believe that because of this centralization and flat-tened hierarchy there may be more of a “small target” direction from the network. Thornton (2005) alludes to the arrests of a father and son in Lodi, California in June 2005, supposedly connected to Al Qaeda and who reportedly targeted hospitals and food stores. Thornton conveys that the previous mentality of “bigger is better” may have changed, adding, “It is then necessary to conclude that a paradigm shift has occurred within Al Qaeda and that a new phase of the overarching scheme has been undertaken – the small target” (p. 4). This, of course, has yet to be seen and will most likely be confirmed if another attack takes place. Given the clearly emerging picture of an ideological leadership loosely connected to dispersed terrorism subgroups, this may be accurate. The difficulty then lies in a less predictable threat. The counterterrorism and law enforcement communities face additional challenges in this scenario. The combination of an emboldened “lone wolf” terrorist, a puritanical ideology, and a symbolic connection to a sophisticated and well-funded group such as Al Qaeda creates an almost insurmountable challenge for U.S. authorities. The lone individual can purposefully benefit from the absence of contact with the local Muslim community and can plan a terrorist attack with little required contact with a hierarchical leadership. Al Qaeda can successfully fund the lone terrorist’s attack with little or no connection on their part, while subsequently claiming responsibility for the action. Thornton (2005) further points out, “The bombing of a Madrid train by Al Qaeda in March 2004 shows that they are perfectly willing to conduct attacks against targets that are relatively minor in order to achieve their ends. The July 7 London Bombings prove that this is exactly what they are doing” (p. 4). Based on the following, Al Qaeda’s organizational structure has moved to a decentralized model allowing for greater autonomy in subgroup decision making and activities. It is clear that its previous status

as a bureaucratic hierarchy with control of the various levels of activities no longer remains. This potentially begins to unravel the previous labeling of the group as an organization. Hence, other optional definitions may be more appropriate such as that of an ideological enterprise or cartel. These terms may paint a more appropriate and accurate picture of the group as it stands today. Based on the above dismantlement, the group’s flat hierarchy, and sometimes only symbolic connections to those claiming association with the leadership, it appears to fall somewhere between an organization and a movement. Thus, further analysis is required which will now take place in the form of looking at the additional factors of communications and recruitment.

COMMUNICATIONS, RECRUITMENT, AND EXCLUSION

Based on the success of large-scale attacks by Al Qaeda, such as that on September 11, 2001, and the African embassy bombings on August 7, 1998, their secretive communications network was extremely effective. With the previously described dismantlement and the leadership displacement, the group has had to revert to other means. This they have done, and apparently very effectively. As has been demonstrated, Al Qaeda effectively utilizes downward communication to provide direction, encouragement, and clarity of mission to its followers. A closer look, however, reveals an even more important issue. Al Qaeda’s influence has greatly expanded and facilitated horizontal communication amongst the sub networks and individuals. Kreps (1990) states that horizontal communication “among organizational members at the same level can facilitate task coordination, provide a means of sharing information, provide a formal channel of communication for problem solving, and facilitate mutual support for staff involved.” It can be surmised that this horizontal virtual communications network is one of the primary catalysts for the Islamic extremist expansion. Specifically, in looking at the current situation in Iraq, it is clear that communications and sophistication are resulting in exponential increases in terrorist attacks. As seen below the attacks are increasing each year (ROP, 2007).

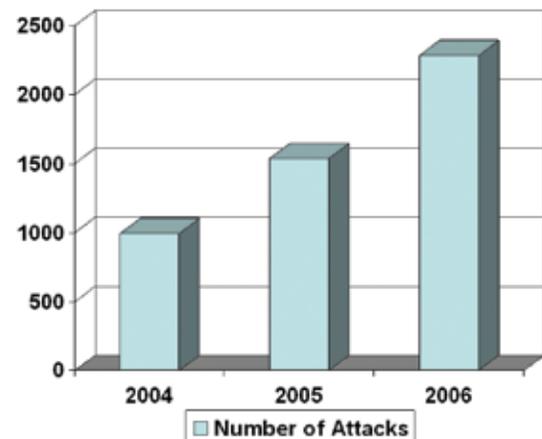


FIGURE 2: Terrorist Attacks in Iraq (by year)

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able to locate intelligence of value among the 4,700 sites in a reasonable time period, the details and time continuum of an attack would still be difficult to thwart given the global reach of such a network. So, overall it appears that Al Qaeda is heavily involved in the virtual Islamic extremist network. It, however, does not control the communications or recruitment efforts completely. Most organizations can't, and furthermore realize the futility of attempting to do so. Nevertheless, there appears to be an established Al Qaeda communications network wherein the leadership issues spiritual encouragement and guidance to followers. They further "close the loop" when they officially take responsibility for global terrorist attacks after the fact. In returning to Stojkovic et al.'s definition of an organization wherein there is the requirement of identifiable boundaries, internal structure, and activities related to sets of goals, these loosely appear present in Al Qaeda. They have some internal structure in their centralized leadership and they are focused on goals and objectives in line with their overall purpose. Nevertheless, their boundaries are questionable given the proliferation of the described Internet activities. Again, in looking at dark networks, it is unclear what secretive groups such as Al Qaeda truly look like underneath their cloak. Potentially it only includes a small group of self-appointed leaders expressing their organizational views, which are obviously sometimes well received. Returning to the question of whether or not Al Qaeda is an actual organization, there would probably be little support based on its virtual communications and recruitment system and lack of control therein. Obviously these are effective processes within Al Qaeda, but the control and integration of such efforts appear tenuous at best.

IJTIHAD: THE GATES ARE OPEN

Part of the reason the leadership may be comfortable with more autonomy amongst the subgroups may be directly attributed to an important Islamic concept. Ijtihad is an Arabic word defined as the process of making independent interpretations of the Islamic holy books, the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The concept becomes important in that it is based on the same root word for Jihad, or to struggle. Ijtihad is sometimes viewed as legal reasoning only fit for those with proper scholarship. Nevertheless, it is also a concept recognized by some movements in Islam wherein they believe any Muslim can perform Ijtihad. Relatively speaking, and given that Bin Laden himself holds no religious credentials, it opens the door for any autonomous group or individual to make decisions regarding terrorist attacks. In the Al Qaeda structure prior to 2001, generally there appeared to be stricter control of target identification and timelines. Now, with Ijtihad, both the leadership and the autonomous followers may embrace the concept as long as it furthers the group's overarching cause.

OPPORTUNITIES, VULNERABILITIES, AND LABELS

Based on the above analysis, a foundation has been built to identify and potentially exploit Al Qaeda in its current state by U.S.

authorities. Is it an organization, in the true sense of the word? Based on Al Qaeda's compartmentalized leadership and tenuous links to autonomous global subgroups, it appears the entity may be better defined as a religious enterprise or cartel. Although both enterprise and cartel conjure up images of commerce-driven or capitalistic entities, Al Qaeda's connections to these dispersed entities appears to fall well short of what one thinks of regarding a hierarchical organization. Nevertheless, it appears to constitute simply more than an ideological movement. As such, the group could more appropriately be defined as a cartel in an ideological sense of the term. Cartel is officially defined three ways: a combination of independent business organizations formed to regulate production, pricing, and marketing of goods by its members; an official agreement between governments at war; and a group of parties, factions, or nations united in a common cause (Dictionary, 2007). In looking at the totality of the definition of cartel, Al Qaeda appears to be a conglomerate of these three definitions. It is rightfully characterized as a group with relations to independent organizations, informal agreements with autonomous entities, and adherence to a common purpose.

As an ideological cartel with an exclusionary religious belief system, Al Qaeda inevitably has vulnerabilities that can be exploited by Western authorities. What becomes salient is the root cause of extremist religious beliefs adhered to by the group. This, above organizational structure, becomes important in targeting vulnerabilities. Below its political, cultural, and legal rhetoric and justification for attacks, the leadership's purported cause almost always returns to its root of extreme Islam. This permeates and enshrines all that they say and do (Centcom, 2007). The author's diagram below helps graphically depict the intertwined relationship.

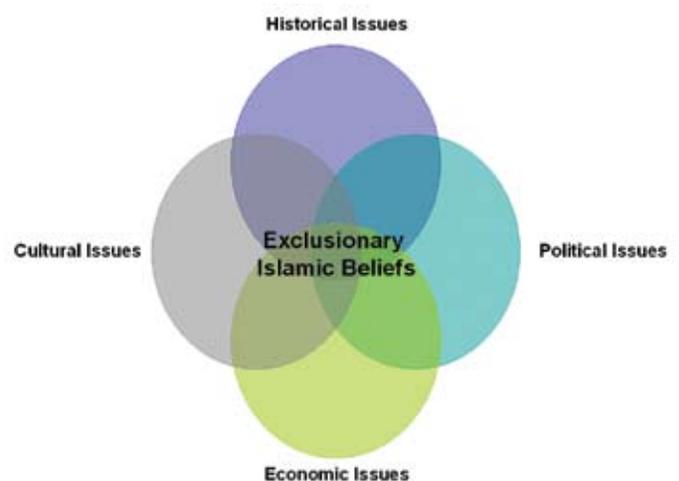


FIGURE 3: Political, Cultural, and Legal Rhetoric and Justification for Attacks

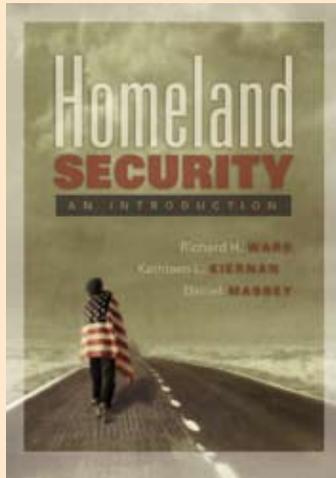
As such, authorities must exploit this issue above all others. Some would refer to it as psychological operations. This is simi-

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ESSENTIAL Homeland Security Resource

Homeland Security: An Introduction

Richard H. Ward
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lar to regular law enforcement efforts during standard suspect interviews. Police can sometimes effectively identify what is extremely important to the interviewee and exploit this area as a metaphorical pressure point.

One particular vulnerability relates to the leadership's strict adherence to a Salafi Jihadi belief system. Salafi Jihadi is a form of Salafiism that can be described as a puritanical fundamentalist movement within Islam. Salafi Jihadi specifically goes one step further by way of their exclusionary acceptance policy, declaring those who don't follow the literal interpretation of a more extreme version of Islam as apostates. Given this dichotomy, Western authorities have potential opportunities in this regard through the use of recruiting assistance from more moderate Muslims. However, this endeavor will only become possible when the authorities themselves have been educated regarding this religious division in its entirety. Once educated and a base level knowledge regarding the issues has been established, authorities can pursue relationships with the moderate Muslim community. This will be further enhanced by education of the moderate community reference the exclusionary practices of the Salafist Al Qaeda leadership. This division in belief practices should be exploited with the view towards gaining intelligence assistance via the Internet and communications network related to Al Qaeda. Practically speaking, the moderate community's allegiance could be swayed through a law enforcement campaign, resulting in an anti-Al Qaeda movement. With assistance from the moderate community also comes the synergistic assistance in Arabic language translation of the extremist websites. All in all, the moderate community's involvement and assistance can only benefit Western authority's efforts.

Another vulnerability is Al Qaeda's Internet activities. This area could be effectively targeted by local law enforcement. Just as local law enforcement has, by self initiative, begun and conducted aggressive and successful investigative efforts towards thwarting the efforts of child pornographers, they can potentially do the same in the terrorist realm. This could include backtracking and dangling undercover personnel for the purpose of identifying extremists involved with the Jihadi websites. As long as local efforts are coordinated with the state and federal level, all levels of jurisdiction will benefit. Again, the success of such endeavors depends greatly on the level of education and training the officers have or can obtain as part of their investigative efforts.

Finally, on the more innovative side, a U.S.-based group of cooperative Islamic spiritual leaders could be helpful in "drawing out" Al Qaeda-linked personnel. This can be achieved through global level confrontation regarding Islamic extremist's ideology and actions. Practically speaking, the cooperative group could question and challenge the leadership of Al Qaeda through global media-based channels with the goal of inciting rebuttal and response. Given the fervor and virulence of the Bin Laden

leadership, they may be inclined to fall prey to the ruse, thus betraying their safe haven both technically and physically. This approach is innovative but challenging. Much orchestration would be required on both the U.S. authority's side as well as of the cooperative group. Overall, the cooperative group could issue false flag fatwas (declarations) calling all Muslims to challenge the Al Qaeda propaganda and rhetoric. This could include both written and media-based products. All in all, this approach would be helpful but would require extensive assistance and guidance throughout the process.



CONCLUSION

In summary, Al Qaeda could more appropriately be defined as a religious and operational cartel with international ties to autonomous terrorist groups. Its leaders are revered but have no spiritual credentials. The hierarchical structure it once knew has been effectively dismantled resulting in a loosely structured conglomerate of independent entities. Its communications and recruitment system as a movement is effective, yet uncontrolled. All in all, the group appears to fall between what one would describe as an organization and that of a social movement. Its purpose appears to be that of a religious crusade led by charismatic papal leadership. Because of its puritanical ideology, it is open to vulnerabilities that can be exploited, yet extensive cooperation and assistance from the moderate Muslim community is required for success. Local law enforcement can also be a significant resource providing extensive intelligence and investigative assistance as has been carried out in other forms of criminal investigations. With concerted efforts at all levels of law enforcement working jointly with the moderate Muslim community, Al Qaeda will face concerted challenges in their attempts to remain secretive and active as an operational entity. 🌐

NOTES

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