

September 11, Two Years Later

Yoram Schweitzer

Like other historical milestones, the second anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in the United States provides a good opportunity for critical evaluation. It invites an interim assessment of the successes and failures of the offensive launched by the US-led international coalition against terrorism and terrorist organizations, first and foremost al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Examining the unique characteristics of Bin Laden's terrorist network and the manner in which it wages its battle may clarify the apparent disparity between the military defeat inflicted by the United States on the Taliban's Islamic regime and on al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and the common feeling both inside and outside the US that al-Qaeda and its brand of international terrorism is far from defeated.

The two years that have passed since the September 11 attack were perhaps the stormiest years in the history of international terrorism. Although the period was not exceptional in terms of the number of attacks carried out, it was characterized by a rise in the number and frequency of showcase attacks, some of which resulted in dozens and even

hundreds of casualties. If other large-scale attacks planned by terrorist groups had not been thwarted, the number of casualties would undoubtedly have been much higher.

Al-Qaeda and organizations affiliated with it are clearly the primary party responsible for the wave and intensity of international terrorism over the past two years. Moreover, in addition to "conventional" terrorist attacks, the terrorist networks linked to al-Qaeda, under the leadership of the "Afghan alumni," have started to demonstrate an inclination towards using non-conventional warfare materials. The arrest in Europe of a number of terrorist cells plotting to use toxins such as ricin and cyanide¹ was an indication of this tendency, which, it can be assumed, may spread to other terrorist organizations and possibly expand to include the use of non-conventional warfare materials with even greater harmful potential.²

Al-Qaeda's Operating Channels

Before assessing the battle against al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda's ability to withstand the coalition offensive, it is important to describe al-Qaeda and its

channels of operation. Indeed, it is its flexible and multi-faceted structure that endows the organization with an impressive ability to survive and continue to cause damage effectively through a variety of operative venues.

Al-Qaeda has evolved considerably since it was founded by Bin Laden in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. The group that started out as an organizational headquarters of sorts for selecting and directing volunteers who came to Afghanistan to fight alongside the local Mujahidin was transformed over the years into a full-fledged terrorist organization in its own right. The operative leadership of the transformed al-Qaeda is made up of "Afghan alumni," including veterans of the war against the Soviet Union and promising newer recruits, trained in Sudan and Afghanistan from the early 1990s onward, who chose to remain with Bin Laden and serve under his command. Since June 2001, al-Qaeda has also been part of a partnership called al-Qaidat al-Jihad, which is the formalized union of a preexisting alliance between al-Qaeda and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, led by Dr. Ayman Zawahiri.

Bin Laden and al-Qaeda operate through additional channels as well.

Al-Qaeda is the central and dominant organization in the international Islamic umbrella organization established in 1998 known as the “Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders.” The Islamic Front consolidates partnerships among independent terrorist networks and organizations linked by the common ideological aim of imposing theocratic regimes on Muslim countries throughout the world. Some act as ad hoc terrorist networks and coordinate their activities with al-Qaeda in varying degrees. Others are independent organizations that carry out attacks on their own, without specific instructions from al-Qaeda, yet are ideologically identified with it. Indeed, all the organizations work “according to the orders of God and in his path” (“*fi sabil Allah*”) in order to have the laws of the *shari’a* (Islamic religious law) binding in their home countries.

These parallel and at times intertwining channels endow al-Qaeda not only with immense operative capability, but with flexibility and the capability to adapt modes of activity to changing circumstances and variable environments.

Al-Qaeda vs. the West

The nature of the battle of the United States and its allies against al-Qaeda and its affiliates is that of a zero-sum game. This stems primarily from the worldview and extremist methods of Bin Laden and his associates, which leave no room for political negotiation or any type of compromise. The West

vs. al-Qaeda is a fight far different from the battle, relentless in its own right, between the coalition against terrorism and the states that sponsor terrorism and their protégés. That offensive aims to bring about a change in the behavior of “rogue states” and groups under their protection, and force them to stop or at the very least significantly moderate their use of terrorism to promote political interests. As a result, the means

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employed are primarily in the political, diplomatic, and economic arenas, with recourse to the military arena in extreme cases only.

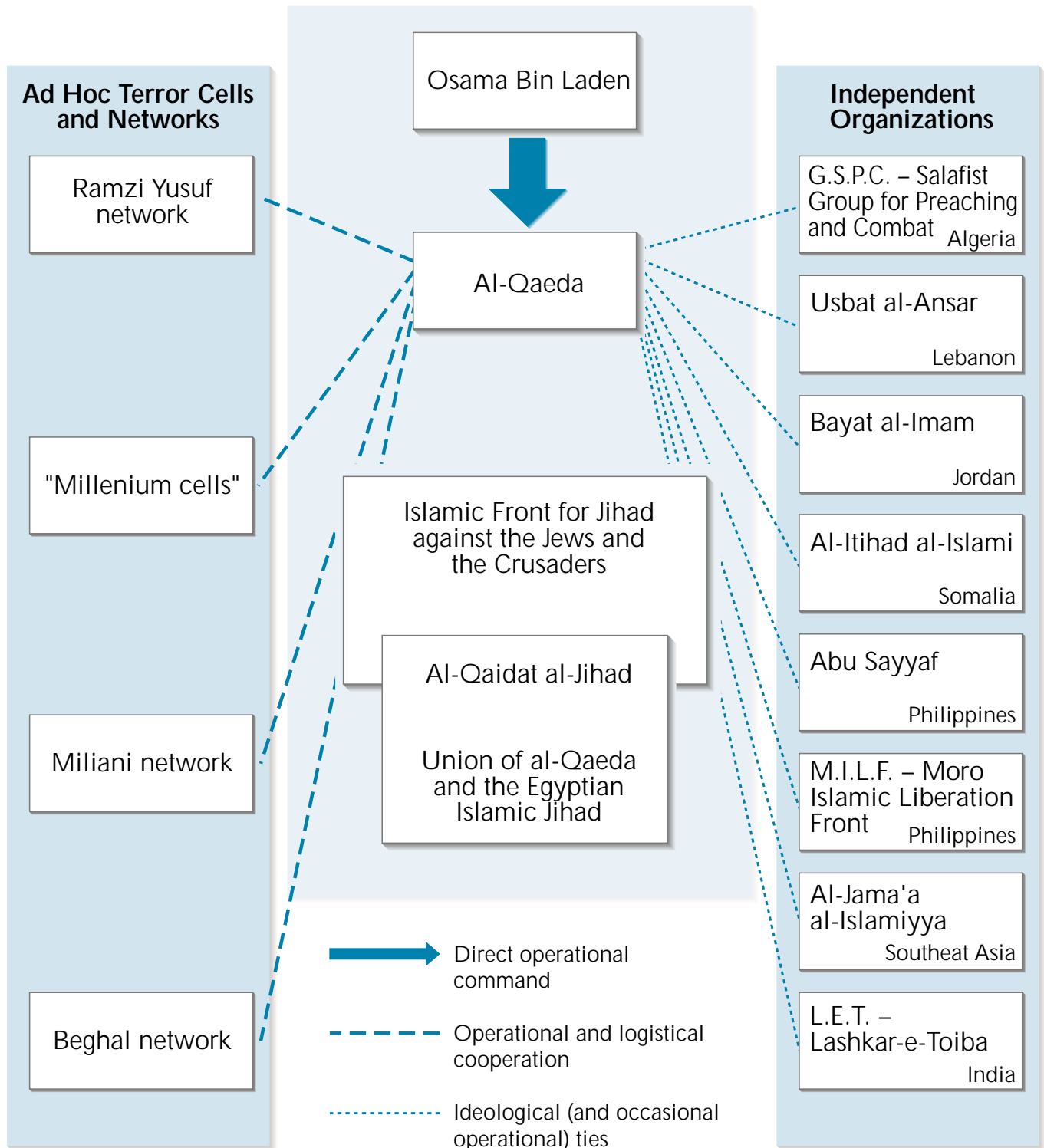
The struggle against al-Qaeda and its affiliates is fundamentally asymmetrical in terms of the power and the capabilities of the adversaries. The United States and its allies boast a major advantage in power, resources, and the means they can mobilize in order to win the battle. However, Bin Laden and those he supports stand before them armed with extremist ideology, “maximizing the strength of their weakness” with skill and practical terrorist experience.

They make deft use of the advantages at their disposal, maneuvering with impressive coordination and periodically succeeding in striking at their adversaries’ weak points. The no-holds-barred rules by which they are governed are adapted to suit their capabilities and beliefs, and involve exploiting the freedoms of the liberal societies they penetrate and within which they operate.

In contrast, the West has not consistently made use of its relative strength, either because it ignores the clearly stated aim of al-Qaeda and its affiliates to use violence to change its way of life, or because it fails to appreciate the urgency of the threat that confronts it. Financial constraints or differing sets of priorities often circumscribe inter-state cooperation. In addition, the power and influence of public opinion in many Western countries further compounds the already existing difficulties in trying to develop a unified Western policy against terrorism that is effective, consistent, coordinated, and binding. The inherent nature of democratic systems that sustain and even foster opposing ideas constitutes a major obstacle to the ability to coordinate a uniform policy, be it on an intra or inter-state level.

There is also a fundamental difference between the two parties’ concept of the terms “defeat” and “victory” in the battle between them. For instance, voices can be heard in the United States today arguing that al-Qaeda is losing its power and approaching defeat.³ However, other refrains emanate from Bin Laden and

International Jihad Network



his associates, claiming that the organization's present situation, which appears as defeat, is in fact nothing more than a temporary and necessary lull during the current battle, on the way to certain victory in the war as a whole.⁴ More than a war of public relations, these contrasting projections represent a fundamental divide in perception over progress of the offensive. In this context, it is also important to note that even the concepts of time and space are understood differently by Bin Laden and his affiliates from his adversaries in the West. Against the Western desire for quick results and a battle defined by territorial borders, al-Qaeda ideology understands its struggle as a long-term effort that transcends ready spatial and temporal contours.⁵

The al-Qaeda Scorecard

The offensive launched by the US-led international coalition against terrorism that began in October 2001 and has continued in various forms has not succeeded in destroying al-Qaeda and its operational potential. However, without a doubt it has leveled a series of painful blows that resulted in the loss of al-Qaeda's main patron - the Taliban, removed from power in Afghanistan - and the loss of its "home turf," from which al-Qaeda had operated unhindered since 1996. The organization suffered severe upsets to its physical infrastructure, including the loss of training camps, equipment, and other resources. Many of the organization's documents were captured, providing a

great deal of information about al-Qaeda's operating methods. Some of this material even resulted in the thwarting of attacks throughout the world that were already planned.

Al-Qaeda lost a considerable portion of its cadres and fighters, who were killed or captured in Afghanistan. In addition, over the past two years, many senior operatives involved in activating terrorist networks have been arrested around

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the world, with the organization's leadership now the top priority of intelligence services of different countries. Examples of successful pursuits include the killing of al-Qaeda's military commander Abu Hafez al-Masri in Afghanistan and the arrests of Khaled Sheikh Mohammad (the al-Qaeda commander of the September 11 attacks), Abdul Rahman al-Nashiri and Walid ("Khaled") Bin Atash (commanders of the attack on the destroyer *U.S.S. Cole*), Abu Zubeida (the primary liaison officer between al-Qaeda and terrorist networks in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East), and the heads

of terrorist networks in Africa and Asia, such as recently-captured "Hambali."⁶ At the same time, the financial system of al-Qaeda and its affiliates was placed under international restrictions, as were its efforts to purchase and produce non-conventional warfare materials.

In addition, al-Qaeda sustained a blow to its prestige as the "defeater of empires" due to its own heavy losses and those of the Taliban in the extremely short American campaign in Afghanistan, especially given its bombastic prediction that the United States would find itself all too soon mired in another Vietnam, along the lines of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. However, its unique structure, its partnership with Islamic terrorist organizations and networks around the world, and its view of the struggle as vital, extended, and religiously sanctioned, especially after the events of September and October 2001, enabled al-Qaeda to take advantage of its small, flexible, and dispersed nature and regroup itself for the confrontation ahead. The struggle is led by its senior officials under the tutelage of Bin Laden and his deputy Zawahiri, who remain alive, free, and threatening, and who continue to direct the organization and symbolically represent the organization's endurance, if not its so-called invincibility. Its members have found shelter in scattered countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and remote and non-governed regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Through its partners, al-Qaeda was able to plan and execute a series of showcase

terrorist attacks in regions around the world while focusing on “soft targets.” Al-Qaeda continues to run an intensive campaign of propaganda and psychological warfare using manifests and video and audio cassettes, broadcast primarily by the Qatari television station al-Jazeera, and using the internet websites of Islamic groups identifying with the global jihad to disseminate Bin Laden’s ideas. Finally, the organization has continued recruiting new cadres by capitalizing both on its own operative successes and on violent conflicts involving Muslims (in Iraq, Chechnya, the Israeli-Palestinian arena, and Kashmir), a stance that strengthened its claim that theirs is a war of defense of Islam.

The United States Scorecard

American public opinion estimates the successes and failures in the battle against al-Qaeda primarily through the number of tangible achievements that are of high symbolic value, and according to the media coverage of showcase terrorist attacks around the world attributed to the large, threatening, and seemingly homogenous entity known as al-Qaeda. In this context, the most prominent fact is that the United States and its allies have failed to capture the al-Qaeda leadership, notably Bin Laden and Zawahiri, within what seems to an impatient Western public as a reasonable period of time. The fact that the world’s number one fugitive, the target of an international manhunt unprecedented in scale, still manages

to defy the world’s sophisticated intelligence agencies is perceived as a sign of the weakness of the West. The coalition’s failure to apprehend Bin Laden also continues to strengthen Bin Laden’s demonic image.

Bin Laden himself encourages this dynamic as he conducts, virtually unhindered, a sophisticated war of propaganda against the United States and its allies. He continues to employ

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various media to call publicly on his supporters to kill “the enemy of Islam,” as he terms his adversaries, whose ranks increase in an ever-expanding circle. The success of his supporters in carrying out a long series of mass-casualty suicide attacks has also been seen as a sign of the weakness of the West in general, and the United States in particular, and has called into doubt their ability to deal effectively with Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

Under its “achievements” column, the United States can note that no additional terrorist attacks have been carried out within US borders *thus far*, despite the fact that people are aware

of the possible temporary nature of this success. Moreover, the arrest of prominent terrorists from the senior operational level of al-Qaeda has received a high profile in the media and has encouraged a feeling of great satisfaction, primarily because those arrested were directly involved in especially painful attacks on American targets.

American government and intelligence officials are satisfied with the handling of the campaign against al-Qaeda and its affiliates, as well as with the close cooperation with allied security services throughout the world which has resulted in the thwarting of attacks and the arrest of many operatives. However, beyond the understandable sense of achievement generated by particular intelligence feats, attitudes towards the successes and failures in the battle have been sober and low-key, due to the awareness of the campaign’s length and complexity, and the fact that there is no other choice but to continue conducting this war until al-Qaeda and its affiliates are defeated. The battle is perceived as a serious and acute challenge to the national security of the United States and the strategic interests of America as a global superpower. The confrontation with al-Qaeda and its affiliates is understood as part of the overall efforts by the United States and its allies to deal with international terrorism, including the necessary confrontation with “failed states,” states that support terrorism, and additional terrorist organizations outside the circle of “Afghan alumni.”



Imperatives of the Ongoing Battle against al-Qaeda

The West responded to al-Qaeda's harsh challenge, which reached new heights in the September 11 attack and has continued in the two years since, with a major military offensive in Afghanistan, the main country that sheltered al-Qaeda. This offensive toppled the Taliban's terrorism-supporting regime and came as a harsh blow to al-Qaeda's personnel and infrastructure in the country. However, it is clear that the terrorism industry that Bin Laden established and deployed in various locations around the world over the years still provides him with alternative modes of operation. Al-Qaeda and affiliated terrorist networks constitute Bin Laden's long arm with which he is able to strike at his adversaries and continue his efforts to achieve his goals.

The words of Bin Laden and his associates in the media reveal no evidence of weakening in his ranks and no intention whatsoever of shying away from the violent battle; to the contrary. Moreover, despite feeble criticism of al-Qaeda's indiscriminate violence voiced periodically by religious scholars and political leaders in Muslim echelons, it appears that Bin Laden still enjoys support throughout the world for his extremist aims and methods, including the backing of religious leaders and the approval of Islamic religious law. In fact, a Saudi cleric recently issued a ruling allowing the use of non-conventional weapons in

the war against infidels.⁷ Clearly, al-Qaeda and those it supports are far from being discouraged in terms of morale and capability, despite the blows they have sustained.

From Bin Laden's perspective, an overall assessment of the gains and losses of the past two years would be favorable and even optimistic. Furthermore, the United States and its allies have been forced to understand (or at least they should understand)

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that they must achieve a decisive victory in this asymmetrical battle, especially when considering the totality of the approach undertaken by al-Qaeda on its way to realizing its objectives. Such victory would entail arresting or killing the leaders and operatives of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, as well as deterring or punishing those who shelter them. It should be emphasized that killing or arresting the leaders of the organization, first and foremost Bin Laden, is a necessary prerequisite for victory, but will not be decisive in and of itself.

One of the lessons learned from an interim assessment of the period since

September 11, 2001 is that the United States and its allies must immediately intensify their level of operations against al-Qaeda and its affiliates around the world. In other words, they should adopt now a policy that would in any case be implemented in the event of another mega-terrorist attack in the United States or elsewhere similar in scale to the attack of September 11, 2001, to include the following components:

- On the national level – thwarting of attacks; arrest of operatives; modification of the legal systems of Western countries to meet the Islamic fundamentalist challenge; effective punishment; supervision of those who recruit activists.

- On the international level – close pursuit of terrorists; closer intelligence cooperation than exists today, including intelligence-sharing that is more “intimate” than the level that is currently standard among intelligence agencies around the world; comprehensive handling of the issue of money used to fund operations; prohibition of propaganda, incitement, and encouragement of attacks in general and of suicide attacks in particular; supervision of membership recruiters; modification of international legal systems in order to better address the threat of terrorism; a greater willingness to extradite operatives or to prosecute them in the countries where they are staying.

- Taking measures for countering the danger of non-conventional terrorism by tightening the restrictions on the sale of

components that may be used to produce such materials, and by preventing the purchase of non-conventional warfare materials. Anyone involved with disseminating non-conventional weapons or providing them to terrorist organizations or networks should be severely punished. The spread of this phenomenon must be stopped while it is still in its initial stages.

■ Pressuring states like Iran and Syria that support terrorism, and “failed states” such as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kenya, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, and other states in Africa and Asia, which provide assistance to terrorists either knowingly, out of weakness, or out of an inability to control areas under their sovereignty (even though it is often a case of lack of political desire to meet the challenge rather than an inability to do so). In the event that some of the “failed states” are unable to address the phenomenon on their own, the required actions can be taken with their agreement and cooperation, possibly under the auspices of the United Nations.

■ Finally, addressing in a highly focused, large-scale international effort the basic factors that enable al-Qaeda and its affiliates to recruit young people into its ranks. This step was succinctly expressed by the head of the French Intelligence Service (D.S.T.) in an interview with *Le Figaro*, when he listed “ignorance, arrogance, and poverty” as a tripolar axis of evil lying at the root of terrorism.⁸

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The serious, ongoing challenge posed to the world by the “Afghan alumni” demands a highly focused response. Only a sustained effort of

this nature can augur a victory against the high levels of international terrorism.

Notes

1. Ronen Bergman, interview with the French investigative judge Jean-Louis Brugière, *Yediot Aharonot*, July 11, 2003, pp. 20-21.
2. Yoram Schweitzer, “The Age of Non-Conventional Terrorism,” *Strategic Assessment* 6, no. 1 (2003): 26-31.
3. Bruce Hoffman, *Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism, and Future Potentialities: An Assessment*, Washington, D.C.: Rand Corporation, 2003.
4. See, for example, in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 18, 2002, and www.alneda.com, October 14, 2002.
5. The nomadic concept is elaborated in Yoram Schweitzer and Shaul Shay, *The Globalization of Terror: The Challenge of Al-Qaida and the Response of the International Community*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers of Rutgers University Press, pp. 46-52.
6. Yoram Schweitzer, “State Sponsors of Terror Remain Key,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 18, 2003.
7. Reuven Paz, “YES to WMD: The First Islamist *Fatwah* on the Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in *Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM)*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2003).
8. From an interview with Pierre de Bousquet de Florian, head of the D.S.T., *Le Figaro*, June 20, 2003.