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Al Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment

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Summary

There is no consensus among experts in and outside the U.S. government about the magnitude of the threat to U.S. national interests posed by the Al Qaeda organization. Virtually all experts agree that Al Qaeda and its sympathizers retain the intention to conduct major attacks in the United States, against U.S. interests abroad, and against Western countries.

In assessing capabilities, many believe that the Al Qaeda organization and its leadership are no longer as relevant to assessing the global Islamic terrorist threat as they were on September 11, 2001. Some believe U.S. and allied counter efforts have weakened Al Qaeda's central leadership structure and capabilities to the point where Al Qaeda serves more as inspiration than as an actual terrorism planning and execution hub. According to this view, the threat from Al Qaeda has been replaced by a threat from a number of loosely affiliated cells and groups that subscribe to Al Qaeda's ideology but have little, if any, contact with remaining Al Qaeda leaders. Those who take this view believe that catastrophic attacks similar to those on September 11, 2001 are unlikely because terrorist operations on that scale require a high degree of coordination.

An alternate view is that the remaining Al Qaeda leadership remains in contact with, and possibly even in control of numerous Islamic militant cells and groups that continue to commit acts of terrorism, such as the July 7, 2005 bombings of the London underground transportation system. According to those who subscribe to this view, Al Qaeda as an organization has not been weakened to the degree that some Administration officials assert, and the global effort against Islamic terrorism would benefit significantly from finding and capturing Al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden and his top associate, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Subscribers to this view believe that a coordinated attack on the scale of September 11 should not be ruled out because the remaining Al Qaeda structure is sufficiently well-organized to conduct an effort of that magnitude.

This paper will focus on the Al Qaeda organization and its major affiliates, but not the full spectrum of like-minded Islamist cells or groups that might exist. This report will be updated as warranted by developments. See also CRS Report RL32759, *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology*.

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Al Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment

This report analyzes the threat to U.S. security posed by the Al Qaeda organization. The State Department's report on international terrorism for 2004 deems the organization as "the most prominent component" of a global movement of Islamic militants that has "adopted the ideology and targeting strategies of [Al Qaeda founder Osama] bin Laden and other senior Al Qaeda leaders."¹ This report will not analyze all Al Qaeda-inspired movements worldwide, but it will address Al Qaeda's relationship with some of its known affiliates.

Origins of Al Qaeda

The primary founder of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, was born in July 1957, the seventeenth of twenty sons of a Saudi construction magnate of Yemeni origin. Many Saudis are conservative Sunni Muslims, and bin Laden appears to have adopted militant Islamist views while studying at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. There he studied Islam under Muhammad Qutb, brother of Sayyid Qutb, the key ideologue of a major Sunni Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood.² Another of bin Laden's instructors was Dr. Abdullah al-Azzam, a major figure in the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Azzam is identified by some experts as the intellectual architect of the *jihad* against the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and ultimately of Al Qaeda itself; he cast the Soviet invasion as an attempted conquest by a non-Muslim power of sacred Muslim territory and people.³

Bin Laden went to Afghanistan shortly after the December 1979 Soviet invasion, joining Azzam there. He reportedly used some of his personal funds⁴ to establish himself as a donor to the Afghan *mujahedin* and a recruiter of Arab and

¹ U.S. Department of State. *Country Reports on Terrorism: 2004*. April 2005. pp. 7-8.

² The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 in Egypt, and it has since spawned numerous Islamist movements throughout the region, some as branches of the Brotherhood, others with new names. For example, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas traces its roots to the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1966, Sayyid Qutb was tried and executed for treason for his opposition to the government of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser.

³ Gunaratna, Rohan. *Inside Al Qaeda*. Columbia University Press, 2002.

⁴ The September 11 Commission report says that U.S. officials obtained information in 2000 indicating that bin Laden received \$1 million per year from his family from 1970 (two years after his father's death) until 1994, when his citizenship was revoked by the Saudi government. *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*. July 22, 2004. p. 170.

other Islamic volunteers for the war. In 1984, Azzam and bin Laden structured this assistance by establishing a network of recruiting and fund-raising offices in the Arab world, Europe, and the United States. That network was called the *Maktab al-Khidamat* (Services Office), also known as *Al Khifah*; many experts consider the *Maktab* to be the organizational forerunner of Al Qaeda. Another major figure who utilized the *Maktab* network to recruit for the anti-Soviet *jihād* was Umar Abd al-Rahman (also known as “the blind shaykh”), the spiritual leader of radical Egyptian Islamist group Al Jihad. Bin Laden apparently also fought in the anti-Soviet war, participating in a 1986 battle in Jalalabad and, more notably, a 1987 frontal assault by foreign volunteers against Soviet armor. Bin Laden has said he was exposed to a Soviet chemical attack and slightly injured in that battle.⁵

During this period, most U.S. officials perceived the volunteers as positive contributors to the effort to expel Soviet forces from Afghanistan, and U.S. officials made no apparent effort to stop the recruitment of the non-Afghan volunteers for the war. U.S. officials have repeatedly denied that the United States directly supported the volunteers.⁶ The United States did covertly finance (about \$3 billion during 1981-1991) and arm (via Pakistan) the Afghan *mujahedin* factions, particularly the Islamic fundamentalist Afghan factions, fighting Soviet forces. By almost all accounts, it was the Afghan *mujahedin* factions, not the Arab volunteer fighters, that were decisive in persuading the Soviet Union to pull out of Afghanistan. During this period, neither bin Laden, Azzam, nor Abd al-Rahman was known to have openly advocated, undertaken, or planned any direct attacks against the United States, although they all were critical of U.S. support for Israel in the Middle East.

In 1988, toward the end of the Soviet occupation, bin Laden, Azzam, and other associates began contemplating how, and to what end, to utilize the Islamist volunteer network they had organized. U.S. intelligence estimates of the size of that network was about 10,000 - 20,000; however, not all of these necessarily supported or participated in Al Qaeda terrorist activities.⁷ Azzam apparently wanted this “Al Qaeda” (Arabic for “the base”) organization — as they began terming the organization in 1988 — to become an Islamic “rapid reaction force,” available to intervene wherever Muslims were perceived to be threatened. Bin Laden differed with Azzam, hoping instead to dispatch the Al Qaeda activists to their home countries to try to topple secular, pro-Western Arab leaders, such as President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Saudi Arabia’s royal family.

Some attribute the bin Laden-Azzam differences to the growing influence on bin Laden of the Egyptians in his inner circle, such as Abd al-Rahman, who wanted to use Al Qaeda’s resources to install an Islamic state in Egypt. Another close Egyptian confidant was Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, operational leader of Al Jihad in Egypt. Like Abd al-Rahman, Zawahiri had been imprisoned but ultimately acquitted for the October 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and he permanently

⁵ Gunaratna, p. 21.

⁶ Author conversations with officials in the public affairs office of the Central Intelligence Agency. 1993.

⁷ *Report of the 9/11 Commission*. p. 67.

left Egypt for Afghanistan in 1985. There, he used his medical training to tend to wounded fighters in the anti-Soviet war. In November 1989, Azzam was assassinated, and some allege that bin Laden might have been responsible for the killing to resolve this power struggle. Following Azzam's death, bin Laden gained control of the *Maktab*'s funds and organizational mechanisms. Abd al-Rahman came to the United States in 1990 from Sudan and was convicted in October 1995 for terrorist plots related to the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. Zawahiri stayed with bin Laden and remains bin Laden's main strategist today.

The Threat Unfolds

The August 2, 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait apparently turned bin Laden from a de-facto U.S. ally against the Soviet Union into one of its most active adversaries. Bin Laden had returned home to Saudi Arabia in 1989, after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan that February. While back home, he lobbied Saudi officials not to host U.S. combat troops to defend Saudi Arabia against an Iraqi invasion, arguing instead for the raising of a "*mujahedin*" army to oust Iraq from Kuwait. His idea was rebuffed by the Saudi leadership as impractical, causing bin Laden's falling out with the royal family, and 500,000 U.S. troops deployed to Saudi Arabia to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait in "Operation Desert Storm" (January 16 - February 28, 1991). About 6,000 U.S. forces, mainly Air Force, remained in the Kingdom during 1991-2003 to conduct operations to contain Iraq. Although the post-1991 U.S. force in Saudi Arabia was relatively small and confined to Saudi military facilities, bin Laden and his followers painted the U.S. forces as occupiers of sacred Islamic ground and the Saudi royal family as facilitator of that "occupation."

In 1991, after his rift with the Saudi leadership, bin Laden relocated to Sudan, buying property there which he used to host and train Al Qaeda militants — this time, for use against the United States and its interests, as well as for *jihād* operations in the Balkans, Chechnya, Kashmir, and the Philippines. During the early 1990s, he also reportedly funded Saudi Islamist dissidents in London, including Saad Faqih, organized as the "Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA)."⁸ Bin Laden himself remained in Sudan until the Sudanese government, under U.S. and Egyptian pressure, expelled him in May 1996; he then returned to Afghanistan and helped the Taliban gain and maintain control of Afghanistan. (The Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996.)

Bin Laden and Zawahiri apparently believed that the only way to bring Islamic regimes to power was to oust from the region the perceived backer of secular regional regimes, the United States. During the 1990s, bin Laden and Zawahiri transformed Al Qaeda into a global threat to U.S. national security, culminating in the September 11, 2001 attacks. By this time, Al Qaeda had become a coalition of factions of radical Islamic groups operating throughout the Muslim world, mostly groups

⁸ On December 21, 2004, the Treasury Department designated Faqih as a provider of material support to Al Qaeda and bin Laden, under Executive Order 13324.

opposing their governments. Cells and associates have been located in over 70 countries, according to U.S. officials.

The pre-September 11 roster of attacks against the United States that are widely attributed to Al Qaeda included the following:

- In 1992, Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for bombing a hotel in Yemen where 100 U.S. military personnel were awaiting deployment to Somalia for Operation Restore Hope. No one was killed.
- A growing body of information about central figures in the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, particularly the reputed key bomb maker Ramzi Ahmad Yusuf, suggests possible Al Qaeda involvement. As noted above, Abd al-Rahman was convicted for plots related to this attack.
- Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for arming Somali factions who battled U.S. forces there in October 1993, and who killed 18 U.S. special operations forces in Mogadishu in October 1993.
- In June 1995, in Ethiopia, members of Al Qaeda allegedly aided the Egyptian militant Islamic Group in a nearly successful assassination attempt against the visiting Mubarak.
- The four Saudi nationals who confessed to a November 1995 bombing of a U.S. military advisory facility in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia claimed on Saudi television to have been inspired by bin Laden and other radical Islamist leaders. Five Americans were killed in that attack.
- The September 11 Commission report indicated that Al Qaeda might have had a hand in the June 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers complex near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. However, then director of the FBI Louis Freeh previously attributed that attack primarily to Saudi Shiite dissidents working with Iranian agents. Nineteen U.S. airmen were killed.
- Al Qaeda allegedly was responsible for the August 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed about 300. On August 20, 1998, the United States launched a cruise missile strike against bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan, reportedly missing him by a few hours.
- In December 1999, U.S. and Jordanian authorities separately thwarted related Al Qaeda plots against religious sites in Jordan and apparently against the Los Angeles international airport.

- In October 2000, Al Qaeda activists attacked the U.S.S. Cole in a ship-borne suicide bombing while the Cole was docked the harbor of Aden, Yemen. The ship was damaged and 17 sailors were killed.

Al Qaeda's Evolution Post-September 11

After the 1998 embassy bombings, the Clinton Administration began to exert pressure on Al Qaeda's host, the Taliban regime of Afghanistan. On August 20, 1998, two weeks after those attacks, the United States launched cruise missile strikes against an Al Qaeda camp in an attempt to hit bin Laden, but the strike apparently missed him by a few hours.⁹ In July 1999, President Clinton imposed a ban on U.S. trade with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and froze Taliban assets in the United States. On December 19, 2000, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1333 banned any arms shipments or provision of military advice to the Taliban. The Clinton Administration also pursued a number of covert operations against bin Laden during 1999-2000, and the Bush Administration considered some new options prior to September 11, including arming anti-Taliban opposition groups.¹⁰

The September 11 attacks instilled greater urgency in the U.S. effort against Al Qaeda. Although U.S. officials say that the post-September 11 struggle against Al Qaeda uses all aspects of U.S. national power (legal, economic, diplomatic, as well as military), a cornerstone of the post-September 11 U.S. effort has been the military effort in Afghanistan. The U.S.-led war succeeded in ousting the Taliban regime there (December 2001) and replacing it with a pro-U.S., moderate government. Approximately 18,000 U.S. troops remain in and around Afghanistan, searching for remaining Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders and fighters. However, bin Laden and Zawahiri are not widely believed to be in Afghanistan proper; they reportedly escaped from their redoubt in the Tora Bora mountains (near the city of Khost) during the war and, according to most assessments, fled into Pakistan. Central Intelligence Agency paramilitary officers and other U.S. personnel (some as contractors) in Pakistan are dedicated to this search,¹¹ assisting Pakistani forces and agents. Acting on the assumption that bin Laden and Zawahiri are in remote areas of Pakistan rather than in or around urban areas, in March 2004, Pakistan deployed about 70,000 troops against suspected Al Qaeda hiding places in the South Waziristan region, but failed to find the two, or any other major Al Qaeda figures. Current Pakistani military operations are centered around North Waziristan. There are very few indications of their whereabouts, but, in *Time Magazine's* June 27, 2005 issue, Director of Central Intelligence Porter Goss said that the United States had an "excellent idea" where bin Laden was, but he did not specify any exact location.

⁹ September 11 Commission Report. p. 117.

¹⁰ September 11 Commission Report, p. 139, pp. 203-214.

¹¹ CRS conversations with journalists and experts in Washington, D.C. December 2004-January 2005; Risen, James and David Rohde. "A Hostile Land Foils the Quest for Bin Laden." *New York Times*, December 13, 2004.

White House spokesman Scott McLellan subsequently clarified the Goss comment to reflect less certainty than Goss indicated.¹²

Some experts believe the two might be in settled areas, perhaps even a large Pakistani city. The videotaped statements by the two, released over the past six months, appear to demonstrate that they have access to technology and physical infrastructure. Many of the 15 top Al Qaeda operatives captured or killed since September 11 — of the 37 such operatives identified after September 11 — have been found in urban areas. These include number three leader Mohammad Atef, killed in Kabul, Afghanistan by U.S. Predator; September 11 planner Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, arrested by Pakistani agents near Rawalpindi; key recruiter and planner Abu Zubaydah, arrested by Pakistani agents in Faisalabad; September 11 plotter Ramzi bin al-Shibh, arrested by Pakistani agents in Karachi; and Abu Faraj al-Libbi, arrested by Pakistani forces near Peshawar in May 2005. Al Libbi is perceived as an operative who has risen in the organization since September 11, but some question al-Libbi's seniority and importance to recent Al Qaeda plotting.¹³

Other senior Al Qaeda leaders have been found outside Pakistan or Afghanistan. Hanbali (Riduan Isammudin), a key operative of Al Qaeda-affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah was arrested in Thailand. Abdul Ali al-Harithi, a key plotter, was killed by a U.S. Predator strike in Yemen. In the aggregate, since the September 11 attacks, about 3,000 suspected Al Qaeda members have been detained or arrested by about 90 countries, of which 650 are under U.S. control.

Some other senior figures are apparently beyond U.S. reach. Al Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Ghaith, operations planner Sayf al-Adl, and bin Laden's son Saad are believed to be in Iran. Iran has acknowledged publicly that it has some senior Al Qaeda figures "in custody" — without naming them specifically — but Iran has refused to transfer them to their countries of origin for interrogation and trial.¹⁴ Many doubt the degree of constraint, if any, that Iran has placed on them, and the Bush Administration has publicly alleged that the three were responsible for planning the May 2003 suicide attacks on a housing complex in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. If true, this would suggest that the three are in contact with Al Qaeda operatives outside Iran. Some might argue that, if these three senior figures are able to communicate with bin Laden and Zawahiri, a major portion of the core of the Al Qaeda leadership as it existed on September 11, 2001 is still operating and possibly in control of ongoing operations.¹⁵ Those who take this view tend to believe that the United States should exert greater efforts to capture bin Laden and Zawahiri on the grounds that they remain pivotal leadership figures and that their capture would greatly deflate the organization.

¹² "White House: Bin Laden's Exact Location Isn't Known." *Dow Jones Newswire*, June 22, 2005.

¹³ Lamb, Christina and Mohammad Shehzad. "Captured Al Qaeda Kingpin Is Case of 'Mistaken Identity.'" *London Sunday Times*, May 8, 2005.

¹⁴ *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2003*, p. 88.

¹⁵ Whitlock, Craig. "Al Qaeda Leaders Seen In Control." *Washington Post*, July 24, 2005.

Another view is that the Al Qaeda organization, as it still exists, is less central to the overall Islamic terrorist threat faced by the United States than it was at the time of the September 11 attacks. Reflecting this view, the State Department report on terrorism for 2004 (p. 7) says, as do many experts, that:

... the core of al-Qa'ida has suffered damage to its leadership, organization, and capabilities...At the same time, al-Qa'ida has spread its anti-U.S., anti-Western ideology to other groups and geographical areas. It is therefore no longer only al-Qa'ida itself but increasingly groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida, or independent ones adhering to al-Qa'ida's ideology, that present the greatest threat of terrorist attacks against U.S. and allied interests globally.

Al Qaeda's evolution since September 11 could change the nature of the threat posed by the organization. Many believe that the weakening of central direction renders Al Qaeda less able to conduct catastrophic attacks inside the United States because its diffusion limits its ability to orchestrate complicated, coordinated plots similar to the September 11, 2001 attacks. The Bush Administration asserts that the absence of attacks inside the United States since September 11 demonstrates that the main thrust of Administration policy is succeeding. However, it could be argued that more autonomous affiliates might be better able to adapt attacks to local conditions and goals, making them a major collective threat. Younger Al Qaeda figures, some of whom fled the Afghanistan battlefield, are said to be emerging as major planners, and these activists apparently see Al Qaeda as inspiration rather than as a structured organization. According to this view, bin Laden and Zawahiri are far less operationally relevant than they were at the time of September 11 and U.S. and allied counter-terrorist efforts might be better spent on countering the ideology that is promoted by Al Qaeda. Experts have advanced some ideas for doing so, including enhanced U.S. public diplomacy and stepped up efforts to engage moderate Islamic clerics in the Islamic world to enlist them in an effort to de-legitimize Al Qaeda's tactics.

Al Qaeda's Partners and Supporters

Some experts believe that Al Qaeda is not significantly more diffuse than it was prior to the September 11 attacks. Al Qaeda has always been more a coalition of different groups than a unified structure, many argue, and it has been this diversity that gives Al Qaeda global reach — the ability to act in many different places and to pose a multiplicity of hard-to-predict threats. In most cases, the degree of involvement, if any, by bin Laden, Zawahiri, or other known Al Qaeda leaders in the operations of these diverse groups has never been precisely known. Some major groups were part of the Al Qaeda coalition before September 11,¹⁶ and most remain active and still associated with Al Qaeda today, to varying degrees, are as follows:

- the Islamic Group and Al Jihad (Egypt). Zawahiri was the operational and political leader of Al Jihad before he “merged” it with Al Qaeda in 1998;

¹⁶ The groups listed are all named by the State Department as Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

- the Armed Islamic Group and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (Algeria);
- the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). This group has been less active since its military commander, Juma Namangani, was killed by a U.S. airstrike on fighters at Konduz, Afghanistan in November 2001;
- the Jemaah Islamiyah (Indonesia).¹⁷ This group allegedly was responsible for the attack on a Bali nightclub in October 2002 that killed 180 persons;
- the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (Libyan opposition);
- and Harakat ul-Mujahedin, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Kashmiri militant groups based in Pakistan);¹⁸ and
- Asbat al-Ansar (Lebanon).

Emerging Al Qaeda Affiliates: Iraq. Since the September 11 attacks, some other Al Qaeda affiliates have been established or publicly identified, and they have been active. One notable example is the Al Qaeda Jihad Organization in Mesopotamia, headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a 38-year-old Jordanian Arab who reportedly fought in Afghanistan. The group, which is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), consists of foreign volunteers fighting alongside Iraqi insurgents against U.S.-led and Iraqi forces. It is an offshoot of another group called Ansar al-Islam, which is named as an FTO, and was based in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq prior to the U.S.-led war to oust Saddam Hussein. Ansar al-Islam, which consists of both Islamist Kurds and Arabs, is said to be continuing to operate in Iraq under the banner of a group called Ansar al-Sunna, although some see this as a distinct group.

Although Zarqawi reputedly sees himself as a potential leader of Islamic forces in his own right, in 2004 he formally swore fealty to bin Laden and affiliated with Al Qaeda.¹⁹ Some maintain that Zarqawi is successfully stoking Muslim opposition to the U.S. intervention in Iraq to recruit Muslim fighters not only for combat in Iraq, but possibly also for terrorist operations in other Western countries and in other Middle Eastern countries, including his native Jordan.²⁰ In this view, which reportedly is shared by the Central Intelligence Agency in a recent assessment, the

¹⁷ For more information on this and related groups operating in Southeast Asia, see CRS Report RL31672, *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*.

¹⁸ For more information on these groups, see CRS Report RL32259, *Terrorism in South Asia*.

¹⁹ Murphy, Dan. In Iraq, A Clear Cut Bin Laden-Zarqawi Alliance. *Christian Science Monitor*, December 30, 2004.

²⁰ "Jordan Uncovers Al Qaeda Plot to Attack U.S. Troops." *Reuters*, August 4, 2005.

U.S. involvement in Iraq has strengthened rather than weakened groups connected to or influenced by Al Qaeda. The reputed CIA assessment says that Iraq is now playing a role similar to that of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation - a training ground for Islamic militants who might travel elsewhere after the Iraq conflict winds down.²¹ Zarqawi's formal affiliation with bin Laden gives some support to the view that the remaining Al Qaeda leaders might be trying to rebuild the organizational structure of Al Qaeda before its leadership was ousted from Afghanistan in late 2001.

Other Affiliates. A range of other terrorist groups that have not been formally named as Foreign Terrorist Organizations are associated with Al Qaeda, according to the State Department. These groups, either in partnership with Al Qaeda or on their own, are attempting to destabilize established regimes in the region. These include the Islamic Army of Aden (Yemen), and Hizb-e-Islam/Gulbuddin), named after radical Afghan faction leader Gulbuddin Hikmatyar. The latter group is fighting against the government of President Hamid Karzai, the leader of post-Taliban Afghanistan. Another such pro-Al Qaeda organization is the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, which allegedly was responsible for a suicide bomb attack against five sites in Casablanca killing about 40 people in May 2003. According to the State Department report for 2004 (p.52), Spanish authorities are also investigating the possibility that members of the group were behind the March 11, 2004 bombings of commuter trains in Madrid, which killed 191 persons.²²

Another group, "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," is believed to consist of Al Qaeda or pro-Al Qaeda fighters seeking to overthrow the ruling Al Saud family in Saudi Arabia. The faction has claimed responsibility for the December 6, 2004 attack on the U.S. consulate in Jeddah. It also was allegedly responsible for two car bombs that exploded outside the Interior Ministry in Riyadh on December 29, 2004. Saudi counter-efforts have generally been effective, reducing the frequency of attacks in Saudi Arabia in recent months. In 2004, Saudi security forces capture or killed all but seven of its 26 most-wanted terrorists, including the leader of the faction, Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, who was killed in a raid in June 2004. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is not named as an FTO and is not analyzed separately in the 2004 State Department report on international terrorism.

Emerging Al Qaeda Presence in Africa and Europe. Depending on the outcome of investigations, some of the bombings and attempted bombings of the London transportation system in July 2005 might support the belief in the Administration and among some outside experts that there is a growing Al Qaeda presence in East Africa. Two of the suspects arrested in the failed July 21 bombings were of East African origin, and there had been longstanding fears among Western intelligence agencies that Al Qaeda might be recruiting or controlling cells consisting

²¹ Jehl, Douglas. "Iraq May Be Prime Place for Training of Militants, C.I.A. Report Concludes." *New York Times*, June 22, 2005.

²² Another group, the Abu Hafs Masri Brigades, claimed responsibility for the Madrid bombings on behalf of Al Qaeda. Abu Hafs Masri was the operational name of Mohammad Atef, the third most senior Al Qaeda leader who was killed by a U.S. strike in Afghanistan in November 2001, as discussed previously.

of East Africans for operations in Europe or elsewhere.²³ Al Qaeda was allegedly responsible for the bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel and the related firing (and near miss) of shoulder-fired missiles at an Israeli passenger aircraft, both in Mombasa, Kenya in November 2002. Reflecting Administration fears about Al Qaeda's expansion in Africa, the U.S. military has begun a program to train the militaries of nine African nations to prevent infiltration by terrorist groups, particularly Al Qaeda.²⁴

It is not yet known to what extent, if any, the July 21 bombers might have had links to the bombers who set off the July 7 explosions in London that killed 52 persons. Some of those alleged perpetrators (who died in the bombings) were British-born but of South Asian origin, but some press reports indicate that the July 7 and the July 21 bombers might have visited Pakistan simultaneously, suggesting a possible tie between them and perhaps to the Al Qaeda leadership that is thought to be in Pakistan. A claim of responsibility for the July 7 attacks came from a previously little known group called "The Secret Organization of Al Qaeda in Europe," a name that suggest some linkage to or affinity with Al Qaeda. Two days after the failed July 21 London attacks, suicide bombers in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt killed 88 in attacks on a hotel district; an investigation is under way to determine linkages, if any, of those attacks to Al Qaeda, to radical Islamist groups in Egypt, or to October 2004 bombings in Taba, Egypt that killed 34 persons.

²³ Martin, Paul. "Failed Hit in London Tied to East Africans." *Washington Times*, July 27, 2005.

²⁴ Tyson, Ann Scott. "U.S. Pushes Anti-Terrorism in Africa." *Washington Post*, July 26, 2005. The nine nations are: Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Nigeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. This press report adds that Libya might be brought into the program if U.S.-Libya relations improve.

Conclusion

The assessment of the degree and character of the threat posed by the Al Qaeda organization might suggest strategies for combating it. Those who believe that Al Qaeda as an organization is marginal to the overall global Islamist threat might focus on such policy objectives as addressing regional conflicts, promoting democracy in the Arab world, cooperating with regional governments to prevent terrorism financing and terrorist infiltration, and improving public diplomacy to better explain U.S. policies in the Middle East. On the other hand, some who believe that Al Qaeda remains central to the Islamist terrorism threat might tend to recommend policies that focus on finding, combating, and arresting Al Qaeda leaders and operatives that are still at large. Many believe that, no matter the structure and capabilities of Al Qaeda, stabilizing Iraq will likely be crucial to reducing the recruitment of militants willing to conduct acts of terrorism against the United States and its allies.

Others believe that the Al Qaeda and global Islamic terrorist threat is difficult to assess, no matter how much intelligence is shared and gathered, and that combating Al Qaeda and its affiliates abroad could have only partial success. Those who take this view tend to believe that U.S. counter-efforts should focus more intently on homeland security, stressing such measures as improving airline security, establishing enhanced security measures for passenger train travel, and expanding security of U.S. ports. Some tend to favor additional powers for law enforcement to investigate potential Islamist cells in the United States. The latter suggestions often trigger debate from civil liberties and American Muslim organizations who believe that such measures will inevitably impinge on the civil liberties of Arab and Muslim Americans through profiling and other investigative techniques.