

Is Al-Qaeda on the brink of conducting new wave of attacks in the West?

Written by CeifiT

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CeifiT Special Report

Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit Update- Rehabilitating, Functioning, Training and Plotting

During the recent weeks, accumulated reports suggest that **Al-Qaeda's External Operations unit**, responsible for Al-Qaeda's external operations (outside Afghanistan and Pakistan), has been able to maintain, and possibly extend its activity in recruiting operatives, providing designated training and plotting attacks in the international arena. These indications are significantly important in light of different speculations expressed in recent years as to the unit's incompetence and lack of activity.

Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit has traditionally been the sole arm of the organization to conduct terrorist attacks in the international arena.[1] However, the unit has faced different hardships in the recent years. Its last successful attack took place in London on July 2005, and since then all of the unit's attempts to carry out attacks have failed. In addition, many of the unit's senior operatives were killed in recent years. In fact, even the identity of the current chief of the unit is still unclear.

Al-Qaeda's failures to pursue its own external attacks stimulated the organization towards increased operational cooperation and mergers with other Global Jihad organizations. These organizations or "branches", are now subordinated to Al-Qaeda's leadership, and are subject to Al-Qaeda's targeting agenda and directives.

Through this means, Al-Qaeda has been able to extend its capability to recruit activists, receive logistical support and remotely conduct attacks in areas where it traditionally found it hard to operate in. The merging group/"branch", on the other hand, enjoys Al-Qaeda's experience, logistical support, training services and the AQ brand name.

In recent years several different "regional Al-Qaeda organizations" were established based on existing local groups: The Algerian **GSPC** (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) became **AQIM** (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb); **AQAP** (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) was established; and in Iraq **AQI** (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) was formed as an umbrella organization for different "Jihadi" groups.

As for targeting policy, a shift occurred in these groups' operational agenda, diverting some operational efforts from domestic targets towards western targets, probably in accordance with Al-Qaeda's directives.

In addition to these branches, Al-Qaeda seems to be searching for new opportunities to expand its operational and logistical reach by merging with more groups. Among the possible future branches, one can find **Al-Qaeda in Al-Sham** (mainly Syria and Lebanon- AQBS), **Al-Qaeda in Palestine** (AQP) and other Global Jihad organizations in Somalia and South-east Asia.

In parallel to the operational merger with local groups, Al-Qaeda has put effort in recent years into rehabilitating the operational capabilities and performance of its own External Operations Unit. Recent reports provide indications for

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the continuation of the unit's activities, mainly throughout 2006-2008. It is assessed that these activities continue in 2009 as well, though possibly degraded due to Pakistan and US recent crackdown against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in north-west Pakistan.

The case of Aleem Nasir

The case of **Aleem Nasir**, a German citizen of Pakistani origin who joined Al-Qaeda and conducted logistical and possibly operational activity on behalf of the External Operation unit, provides some interesting insights into the unit's activity.[2] Nasir was arrested in Pakistan (June 2007), following several trips to the country, in which he joined hands with the **Lashkar-e-Taibe (LET)** group and later on with Al-Qaeda, providing them with thousands of Euros and paramilitary equipment. During these trips Nasir has undergone training provided by both groups in different locations in Waziristan.

As a citizen of the European Union, Nasir was immediately considered a valuable asset by Al-Qaeda and quickly managed to engage with its top leaders.

Nasir was taken to a special training camp for volunteers from the EU, designated to train them as suicide bombers. Traditionally, Westerners oriented camps are run by Al-Qaeda's External Operations unit. According to one of the trainers, around 280 volunteers from different nationalities were trained as suicide bombers until early 2007, and those with European citizenship received higher priority in training.

Routes to Pakistan, as depicted by Nasir, are diverse and constantly changing. Traditional routes originate at the Western country of residence (Germany, in Nasir's case), from which the activists boards a flight to Turkey (sometimes via other destination in Southern Europe such as Greece and Italy). From Turkey the activist will continue by flight or ground transportation to Iran (main cities on route are Tehran, Mash'had and Zahedan) and using Baluchi smugglers on to Pakistan/Afghanistan.

Nasir has probably served as a ringleader for Al-Qaeda in Germany. Nasir appointed recruiters who worked for him, suggesting new recruits to be sent to Pakistan, which Nasir later picked and sent along with recommendation letters for the External Operations Unit. Nasir's network had raised and sent funds to the unit and provided it with equipment that was not available in Pakistan (night vision goggles, scopes etc).

The case of Bryant Neal Vinas

A different and more recent indication for the continuous activity of the External Operations unit surfaced in interrogation of **Bryant Neal Vinas**. [3] Vinas, an **American** citizen who converted to Islam in 2004, was arrested in Pakistan in late 2008. His more known charge includes the provision of details regarding NY mass transit system to Al-Qaeda.

Radicalized in a Long Island mosque, Vinas arrived in Lahore, Pakistan in September 2007 and immediately joined a local group whose commander he met through another NY friend. There, Vinas was provided with training, participated in terror attacks in Afghanistan and was acquainted with some of Al-Qaeda's highest ranks.

Vinas detailed a relatively surprising order and administrative procedures in the organization, in some ways similar to the formal and well structured organization Al-Qaeda used to be in Afghanistan before September 11th. For example, each recruit had to fill forms and hand in his passport, trainers wrote thorough evaluations of the trainees etc.

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Still, however, Al-Qaeda is now a different organization, and is in a constant learning, rehabilitation and adaptation process. Its operatives in Pakistan, assessed by Vinas to be 300-500 in numbers, hang out in small groups of around 10 operatives, and have a rather decentralized command and control mechanism. Training has changed as well, conducted in small groups and in temporary locations, sometimes inside caves.

The content of the trainings was adapted too, in order to meet the needs of the organization in Afghanistan and abroad. The training courses include explosives course (Construction of IEDs and suicide vests), light weapons course, and RPGs/Mortars launching course. The variety of courses, as well as the different levels for these courses (beginners, advanced etc), suggest that despite Counter Terrorism measures in the region, Al-Qaeda still manages to provide a wide range of "Terror Services".

While the abovementioned courses can be attributed to the general Al-Qaeda training mechanism, conducted by the **Internal Operations Unit** (responsible for operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, headed by the Libyan **Abdullah Said**), Vinas was informed of a special course conducted by the External Operations unit. The course, named "**International Operations**", was led by "**Abu Hafith**" (Possibly Abu Hafeth / Hafiz / Hafs), who was depicted as the "head of the International Operations"

Interestingly, Vinas was told that the International Operations course was focused on kidnapping and assassinations, a modus operandi rarely performed by Al-Qaeda in its attacks on Western soil. While Al-Qaeda uses these tactics in Iraq, Afghanistan, the African Sahel and other places, its attacks against Western targets were traditionally conducted through the use of large explosives devices and/or suicide bombers.

In addition to his training and fighting experience, Vinas was involved and/or aware of plots, which seems to be in very preliminary stages, to attack the New York mass transit system, the Brussels metro, a European football Stadiums and more.

Who is the current chief of External Operations?

While indications for the External Operations unit are accumulating, suggesting it continues to operate despite serious setbacks, the identity of the unit's current chief is still in question. The unit's chief is probably the most important role in Al-Qaeda after **Osama Bin Laden** and **Ayman Al-Zawahiri** and is the main concern for most Western Intelligence services.

After the death of its latest chief in December 2007, **Abu Ubaidah Al-Masri**, there have been many speculations as to his successor. Most of the names suggested- **Abu Sulaiman Al-Jazairi**, **Abu Jihad Al-Masri** and **Abu Zubair al-Masri**- are dead by now, and it is doubted whether they indeed fulfilled that position anyway.

Another speculation that might bear more credence is **Mustafa Abu Al-Yazid**, aka **Sheikh Said Al-Masri**. Sheikh Said is Al-Qaeda's "rising star" in recent years and a veteran operative who served as the head of the **Administration and Finance Unit**. Due to the loss of many Al-Qaeda seniors throughout recent years, Sheikh Said nowadays fulfilled several roles, including the **overall Military chief** of the organization and the **head of the Shura Council**. Indeed, Sheikh Said is Al-Qaeda's 3rd in command and is running much of the organization's "day-to-day" affairs. As such, it is possible that he has filled, at least temporarily, the role of the External Operation unit.[4]

The recent information from the Vinas case suggests, as previously mentioned, that an Al-Qaeda operative named "**Abu Hafith**" is the current chief of External Operations, at least as far as the end of 2008. Abu Hafith's identity has not yet been verified.

All in all, the identity of the current External Operations Chief remains unclear. However, some guidelines can be suggested to better spot the possible successor, based on previous chiefs' background:

v The External Operations chief needs to be an experienced operative with significant military background, preferably

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a veteran of the first Afghan war.

v Commanders from Al-Qaeda's **Internal Operations Unit** and the **Media Committee** are "natural candidates" to fulfill the role.

v Nationality- While traditionally the position was filled by Egyptian operatives (due to the influence of the Egyptian **Ayman Al-Zawahiri**), there has been a recent rise of **Libyan and Somali** operatives, promoted to leadership positions in Al-Qaeda.

v Preference will be given to operatives with background and contacts in Western countries.

Conclusion

Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit is of great interest as it presents the most dangerous and sophisticated terror threat among all "Global Jihad" entities. Contrary to some speculations, the unit seems far from being inactive. The abovementioned indications suggest that during 2006-2008, the unit has maintained and possibly expanded recruiting, training and plotting of attacks "routine", adapting to the new conditions in Pakistan and in the target countries.

An organized and efficient network is facilitating the unit's activities, providing it with a cadre of hundreds of trainees possessing American and European documentation. We assess, with this regards, that at least some of the Al-Qaeda External Operations cells in the west, based upon those 2006-2008 trainees, are about to reach operational maturation. Hence western countries are likely to face the resume and rise of terrorist attempts by Al-Qaeda in the coming future.

It is assessed that Al-Qaeda would attempt, as a high priority, to conduct attacks on American, British and above all Israeli soil, as well as attacking assets of these countries in the international arena. In addition, Al-Qaeda would seek to target western countries involved in the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq (Canada, Germany, Australia, the Netherlands, Poland and the Czech Republic). Other targets include countries that have performed what Al-Qaeda considers as "Humiliation of Islam", such as France ("the veil controversy") and Denmark (the Prophet Mohammed cartoons).

We assess that the recent indications for Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit activities are not rare ones, nor an exception, and that this process of recruiting, training and "planting" of sleeper cells in the West has been continued throughout 2009 as well. Although the current ongoing Pakistani and US-led crackdown against Taliban and Al-Qaeda activity in the tribal areas of Pakistan is likely to slow down its ability to efficiently train and operate,[5] some existing cells of Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit abroad would probably not sustain much damage and might be capable of launching attacks regardless of the situation in Pakistan.

To conclude, Al-Qaeda nowadays maintains two main operational arms:

The first is the small and shaken, yet functioning and sophisticated External Operations Unit that recent indications suggest it has resumed its operational capabilities. According to our assessment, the unit might be on the brink of conducting a new wave of attacks on western soil, first and foremost against Israeli, American and British targets.

The Second arm is composed of Al-Qaeda "branches" in the Maghreb, Iraq and the Arab Peninsula. These branches, widespread yet inexperienced in attacking in the US and Europe, expand Al-Qaeda's operational reach and serve as an important asset for the organization. We believe that these "branches" will be deployed in the coming months to attack western targets within their own vicinity, and possibly outside of it.

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[1] See CeifiT's Special Report on Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit at <http://www.ceifit.com/?categoryId=41103&itemId=40843>

[2] For more information see NEFA foundation report on Aleem Nasir at: http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_AleemNasirNetwork0609.pdf

[3] CNN: **Recruits reveal al Qaeda's sprawling web**
<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/07/30/robertson.al.qaeda.full/index.html>

[4] More about Sheikh Said at CeifiT's report
<http://www.ceifit.com/?categoryId=41102&itemId=47789>

[5] see CeifiT Terror Analysis: "Fighting Terrorism in Pakistan: Risks and Opportunities" at <http://www.ceifit.com/?categoryId=25149&itemId=76132>