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AN ANALYSIS OF THE NEW AL-QAEDA: TACTICS, THREATS AND THE INTEL CHALLENGES AHEAD

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Introduction

Would it be wrong to say that the al Qaeda that we used to know is no longer that al Qaeda? Well, most probably not as it is quite possible to see a change in the tactics of the organization. The once upon a time suicide bombers are no longer on the stage. Instead, what can be called as small units or small bombers have become more popular and the most striking examples of this can be seen in Boston, London and Paris attacks. These attacks were not carried out by huge bombs or cars or trucks by a large group of professionals. On the contrary, “young men allegedly carried out attacks with little help, using inexpensive, widely available knives and explosives from everyday ingredients.”¹ In fact, they even used pressure cookers which anyone can buy from any store just

to cook food more quickly. Moreover, as for the recent Charlie Hebdo attack the terrorists did not even resort to bombs. They used rifles and carried out such a large scale attack by killing 12 people at once that it has caught the attention of the whole world.

So, how come has the al Qaeda shifted from multiple or massive suicide bombers to pressure cooker bombs? The crucial point that needs to be taken into consideration is the death of Osama bin Laden. Without such an influential leader, it is inevitable that the organization would go under a change. The new leader/preacher, Aymen al Zawahiri, is applying various strategies which are mostly connected with the current situation in Middle East. Moreover, the Syria case is another point of concern since al Qaeda is also benefiting from

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this and as Bill Gertz points out Syria is becoming a new terrorist training ground² where foreign terrorists are also educated in order to operate in their own countries. Furthermore, al Qaeda is also adopting a teacher-training approach where a select few operatives are taught the skill of bomb making and are instructed to return back to their countries in the West (i.e. most probably the US) to teach this knowledge to a group of Islamist extremists who will then use these skills to launch attacks.³ This is also true for Europe as well which can also be observed in Charlie Hebdo attack since the terrorists, Said and Cherif Kouachi brothers, have been trained in Europe.

Of course, this change definitely brings about some challenges for the intelligence community as well. Especially after the National Security Agency (NSA) leaks, al Qaeda avoided programs that would be monitored by the NSA and shifted to other electronic sources in order to communicate with the like-minded activists. As a result, the intelligence community had to start all over again to track the targets.⁴ The highlighted and summarized points above and the concerns of the intelligence community constitute the very core of this paper. In other words, the writer will try to examine the changes in the al Qaeda tactics and how they can or may pose new threats. The intelligence challenges will also be analyzed as the writer believes that whatever the al Qaeda does has to be scrutinized and to be under close surveillance as much as it was in the past so that what can be called as the new age al Qaeda attacks whose examples can be seen in Boston, Paris, London or Nairobi will not be repeated again.

As a result, the paper will mainly con-

sist of two parts: the first part will analyze why and how the al Qaeda has adopted a change of strategy and tactics by giving examples of such and the second part will explore what challenges this can or may pose to the intelligence community and what the intel agencies are currently doing or need to do in order to overcome these challenges.

1. Change! But Why?

It is known to everyone that change is inevitable in life and it is not possible to escape from this hard core truth. For the al Qaeda, what brought about that change was the death of Osama Bin Laden. The organization lost its leader who was the most influential character, the inspiration and the money source of it and for some time it was left like an orphan who needed to be taken care of, which actually was the reason why it remained silent for some time after Bin Laden's death. During this time, although its center has been hollowed⁵, al Qaeda became more decentralized and the periphery groups started to take the stage and what can be named as little/smaller al Qaedas started to operate. This as Jenkins points out could be defined as the degradation of the organization, which was even made worse by counterterrorist intelligence as well as cooperation efforts made at the international level.⁶

However, at this stage it would definitely be wrong to claim that the al Qaeda died out. Of course, without such an influential leader, the organization could have looked like a ship sailing without a compass, but the new leader/preacher Aymen al Zawahiri started to employ various strategies and tactics where the smaller al Qaedas would be more active than the past. In other words, "under him

Al Qaeda has ‘successfully evolved into a franchise organization’ where various affiliates throughout numerous countries help carry out the terror group’s mission.⁷⁷ Moreover, the Arab Spring forced the organization to change its tactics since it did not produce the desired results which in a way prevented the jihadists movement to further on as what the Arab Spring focused on was more freedom than more authority. Consequently, it could not improve itself in the region and had to become less active, yet there was one exception, which was the case of Syria.

Although the winds of the Arab Spring hit Syria in 2011 as well, it did not yield the desired results. On the contrary, what it produced was a civil war where tens or hundreds or thousands of innocent people die. As the Bashar Al-Assad continued its strong resistance against the desires of the public, what could be seen in the country was the boom of various organizations trying to overthrow him. The Al Nusra Front, created on January 23, 2012, can be considered as one of the most deadly organizations. Led by Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, the organization aims at overthrowing the Assad government and creating a Pan-Islamic state under the rule of Sharia. In this respect, the Al Nusra Front could be thought as one of those terrorist groups resembling Al Qaeda; however; the Al Nusra has more than resemblance to it. In other words, it is now operating as the branch of the Al Qaeda in Syria.

In order to be able to understand, how the Al Nusra is the Al Qaeda in Syria, one way can be just taking a look at its leader’s statements. In April 2013, Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani announced its allegiance to Al Qaeda by stating “the sons of

al-Nusra Front pledge allegiance to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri⁷⁸ in a recording. Moreover, he added that “we reassure our brothers in Syria that al-Nusra Front’s behavior will remain faithful to the image you have come to know, and that our allegiance (to al-Qaeda) will not affect our politics in any way.”⁷⁹ Consequently, what Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani has explicitly pointed out was that he and his organization would serve and operate in Syria in line with al Zawahiri’s politics and they would follow the jihadist movement in Syria as well, which also has meant that the Al Qaeda could use the facilities of the group and make use of them to train other terrorists as well.

In addition to al-Jawlani, al-Zawahiri also made another statement just recently in November that “the al-Nusra Front will carry the group’s banner in the Syria conflict, ordering the Iraqi faction of al-Qaeda to stop interfering in Syria.”¹⁰ As a result, the organization definitely became the al Qaeda in Syria, but what actually was going on was that the al Qaeda was taking advantage of the situation in Syria as with such an unstable government, it would be much more possible to spread out the jihadists ideas and work for a common aim by training more and more terrorists on the Syrian soil.

In conclusion, all these developments have shown that the Al Qaeda has become more decentralized which, in fact, certainly required a strategy change. That is, although the former tactics can still be observed especially in Syria with the al Nusra Front, new tactics need to come to forefront so that the organization can still voice out its demands and this is what the next section of the paper will deal with.

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However, it would not be totally wrong to say that the new days of Al Qaeda are not passing as active as the old days of its glamour since every group is also operating on its own even though the orders are coming from Al Zawahiri.

2. What are the New Tactics of the Al Qaeda?¹¹

As mentioned above, with the death of Osama bin Laden, the Al Qaeda refrained from doing large scale attacks most of the time and preferred various tactics, which have been used earlier as well but which are preferred more now and the writer will elaborate on these tactics respectively.

2.1. Smaller is bigger, less is more!

Just as pointed out by the writer in this article earlier, one of the new strategies or the tactics of the Al Qaeda is operating on a decentralized basis. This stems mainly from the fact that the group has lost its influential leader and Al Zawahiri has not been able to provide such an effective leadership as Laden, which in fact had made the Al Qaeda shrink. Therefore, what has been observed was smaller Al Qaedas such as the Al Qaeda in Iraq or the Al Qaeda in Yemen.

Actually, all these groups have formerly been established as other organizations with the same jihadist aims. For instance, the Al Qaeda in Iraq had been established as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant but just like the Al Nusra Front mentioned above, it pledged allegiance to the Al Qaeda in 2004 and started to operate as the al Qaeda in Iraq. Another example can be the Al Shabaab which is actually operating in Somalia. The Al Shabaab had formerly been established as an off shoot of the Islamic Courts Union following the aim of establishing the rule of Sharia and waging war against the enemies of Islam. However, on February 9, 2012 its leader, Mukhtar Abu al-Zubair, also announced in a fifteen-minute video that it would join Al Qaeda and serve under the leadership of al Zawahiri.

In addition to these groups, it is quite important to note the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as well which can be considered as the most active Al Qaeda branch in Yemen and Saudi Arabia especially after it has transformed itself to a decentralized structure because, for instance, it has later been found out that the Charlie Hebdo attackers have been trained by Al Qaeda Yemen militants, which indicates that it plays quite a significant role in the current activities of the organization.

As a result, what can be observed from this decentralization process is that apart from the main Al Qaeda operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the organization has needed to create more branches so that it would be much easier to follow its aims and carry out attacks to those ends. However, it would not be totally wrong to say that the new days of Al Qaeda are not passing as active as the old days of its glamour since every group is also operating on its own even though the orders are coming from Al Zawahiri.

2.2. Teacher training

Just like the decentralized approach and tactic of the Al Qaeda, the teacher training tactic can be considered as one of the most important changes within the organization. Due to the growing number of drone strikes taking place in Pakistan diminishing the organization's ability to orchestrate the attacks from there, the Al Qaeda has adopted a new approach where "a select few Western operatives are taught bomb making and other aspects of terrorist tradecraft in the tribal areas of Pakistan and are then instructed to return back to the West to "spread the knowledge" to a larger body of Islamist extremists keen on launching attacks."¹²

This new approach, which is called teacher training by Cruickshank¹³ has come out to the surface with the trial of three men from Birmingham in February 2013 who were then plotting to carry out a catastrophic attack in the United Kingdom (UK). During the trial, it was found out that the three men took a 40-day course in tribal Pakistan and then came back to teach what they have learnt there to more and more people so that the number of attackers would rise. Similarly, the Kouachi brothers have been trained on European soil by AQAP militants and they have carried out the second largest terrorist attack in France which hit the country as a huge bombshell.

2.3. From suicide bombers to pressure cooker bombers

It is very well known that the Al Qaeda has mostly been associated with its suicide bombings attacks where mostly the West has been targeted in order to reach the jihadists aim and the 9/11 attacks can be considered as the most unforgettable ones in this respect. However, it is possible to observe a change in this phenomenon where the organization diverged from using so large scale events especially with the Boston Marathon bombing. In the Boston Marathon, Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev used two pressure cooker bombs and exploded them respectively near the finish line. The two bombers, who were later found out to believe in defending the Islam from the United States (US), used bomb making instructions prepared by the Inspire, which is the publication of the AQAP. Although the number of casualties was a lot less than the suicide bombings (3 killed and an estimated 264 injured), the

Boston Bombing has created the effect that Al Qaeda is still alive in the US, which also recreated the fear in the public as well. Likewise, the latest Paris attack to the Charlie Hebdo newspaper has been carried out by pistols and shotguns and it is these weapons that created such large scale massacre rather than a suicide bomber. Similar to the Boston attack, this massacre has given the message to the Europeans that Al Qaeda is also still active on the European continent and is definitely far from becoming extinct. As a result, what could be interpreted from these two significant attacks is that though suicide bombings still exist as a tactic and are rarely used now, smaller bombs, shotguns and rifles are also useful in creating the desired effect.

2.4. Teletubbies: A new technique for winning hearts and winning minds

Though it may seem quite strange and quite a soft strategy at first look, it is actually true that the Al Qaeda is using teletubbies in Syria. That is, in an effort to win the support of the local people Al Qaeda fighters started to handout teletubbies to the children of the local public. Although handing out toys may not look as a tactic, it is such an effective one as the main aim of the organization is to make the local people sympathize with them and make them feel that their fate is tied to theirs and they try to win them through the conveniences of modern life¹⁴, which is a tactic that started to be applied after the failures in Iraq since they have realized that it is not enough to win a territory and they need to learn how to govern it if they want to hold it.¹⁵ Therefore, Al Qaeda has started to work more on the winning hearts and minds strategy which, ironically, belonged to the US.

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2.5. Spare the Muslims

Sparing the Muslims from the attacks and killing the so-called infidels is a new tactic of the Al Qaeda branch in Somalia, i.e. Al Shabaab. In the Westgate shopping mall attacks which took place in Nairobi, Kenya from September 21, 2013 to September 24, 2013, the attackers who turned out to be the members of Al Shabaab quizzed the people in the mall with a set of questions related to the Prophet Mohammed and shot those who were unable to give the correct answers and were then considered as infidels and deserved to be treated as such.

The rationale behind this type of tactic is actually the lessons learnt from Iraq. In Iraq, Al Qaeda killed many Muslims as well and this created a huge opposition to them from the local public. Therefore, what this new tactic is trying to show is al-Qaida's acknowledgment that the huge masses of Muslims they have killed is an enormous PR problem within the audience they are trying to reach and it has started to be seen as a problem Al Qaeda groups are really taking efforts to address it.¹⁶

2.6. Prison breaks

Attacking prisons and freeing inmates can also be considered as a new tactic of the Al Qaeda and the reason behind it is quite simple. According to Abu Bakr Al Ansari, "the leaders of the terrorist organization who possess an ability to formulate ideas and articulate elaborate plans have been confined to prisons, whether in Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, or Mali, leaving the organization confused and leaderless"¹⁷ and due to this Al Qaeda militants attack those prisons and try to create confusion within the governments since they are able to reach inside despite the close surveillance.

The Al Qaeda is now refraining from such large scale attacks as 9/11 though it has the desire to do so and instead is applying small ones.

3. The Intel Challenges Ahead

As mentioned above by the writer, the Al Qaeda has started to give up its old tactics and started to embrace new ones listed and explained above in order to reach the aims. However, these tactics also create challenges for the intelligence community as well since they need to adopt new approaches to eliminate the threats coming from the organization. What follows in the following parts of the paper are these challenges.

3.1. Decentralized structure

The new decentralized structure of the Al Qaeda, where it is possible to see smaller Al Qaedas operating everywhere, can be considered as one of the most crucial challenges that needs to be addressed. This stems from the fact that it needs further cooperation, further surveillance as well as further preparedness. Furthermore, it should also be taken into account that the affiliates of the Al Qaeda are not a local issue any more. On the contrary, they have started posing worldwide threats as well. As a result, what the intelligence community can do at this point can be increasing electronic intel sources (SIGINT) and putting more human intelligence (HUMINT) at work. Yet, one also needs to bear in mind that this is a difficult task to achieve especially in terms of HUMINT. Consequently, this still remains a challenge.

3.2. Smaller attacks

It is an undeniable fact that the 9/11 attacks took place because of the failure of the US intelligence community. Similarly, the Boston and the recent Paris attacks also pointed out a failure in terms of analyzing the scale of at-

tacks. The Al Qaeda is now refraining from such large scale attacks as 9/11 though it has the desire to do so and instead is applying small ones. This surely creates a concern within the intel community. As Rep. Mike Rogers has stated, the intel community now has to worry about such knock-off events¹⁸ as the Boston case because it is not possible to eliminate the home-grown extremists like the Tsarnaev brothers as they are now gathering online which is another challenge that will be explained below. Therefore, what needs to be done is definitely to work on SIGINT more as the Internet has become such an efficient medium of communication for these extremists.

3.3. Communication tactics

Though the NSA leaks have been a blow-out for the US intelligence community, they have proven to be effective for the Al Qaeda as they have resorted to changing their communication tactics as well with the Al Qaeda in Yemen being the first of them and as Venzke has claimed “overall, for terrorist organizations and other hostile actors, leaks of this nature serve as a wake-up call to look more closely at how they’re operating and improve their security.”¹⁹ This, of course, has turned out to be such a frustrating experience for the intel community since they had to start all over again to track the targets. Thus, the NSA analysts started to focus “their attention on the terrorists, watching their electronic communications and logging all changes, including following which Internet sites the terrorist suspects visit, trying to determine what system they might choose to avoid future detection.”²⁰ On the other hand, this may take some time and may even lead to some failures.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to analyze the shift in the tactics of the Al Qaeda over the last two years. It can be said that the Al Qaeda that we used to know is not that Al Qaeda and it has undergone quite an important change. Though these changes may not be observable at an initial look, they constitute a crucial part of the organization’s strategy. Hence, these tactics have started to pose new threats for security because they are not really observable and they have not actually been studied before which can also be seen from the limited number of references in this study. The Al Qaeda have been resorting to such tactics as using teletubbies or pressure cooker bombs just recently and the security officials as well as the intelligence community are not quite ready to confront them. Moreover, these also create challenges for the intel community especially after the NSA leaks since the Internet is the invaluable source for the organization to recruit more terrorists and gather more like-minded activists.

In conclusion, the Al Qaeda is applying a new series of step-by-step tactics which, in fact, pose bit-by-bit threats. However, one should not be so certain about the fact that these bit-by-bit threats will not be as devastating as the 9/11 attacks. On the contrary, just as seen in Paris attacks, they may do so but what is crucial at this stage is to increase surveillance and intel cooperation especially on the European continent as well so that another series of catastrophic yet small attacks will not be experienced again

The Al Qaeda have been resorting to such tactics as using teletubbies or pressure cooker bombs just recently and the security officials as well as the intelligence community are not quite ready to confront them.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Boston, London, Paris attacks highlight al-Qaeda shift in tactics". Available at <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/05/31/boston-london-paris-attacks-highlight-intelligence-dilemma-as-al-qaida-shifts/> accessed 15 August 2013.
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- 9 Naharnet Newsdesk, 2013.
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- 11 In this section, the writer does not give any reference to and personally refrains from giving any reference to the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) because it has been rejected as an affiliate by al Zawahiri due to the issues of leadership and control. As ISIS has claimed to have formed an Islamic emirate, it has put itself above the core Al Qaeda.
- 12 Cruickshank, 2013.
- 13 Cruickshank, 2013.
- 14 Nasser al-Wahishi quoted in Jones, Brian and Ingersoll, Geoffrey. "In Powerful New Tactic, Al Qaeda Is Handing Out Teletubbies." *Business Insider*, August, 2013. Available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/teletubbies-show-al-qaeda-learned-from-iraq-2013-8> accessed 30 November 2013.
- 15 Jones and Ingersoll, 2013.
- 16 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross quoted in Callimachi, Rukmini. "Al Qaeda's New Tactic: Spare Muslims." *Huffington Post*, 29.09.2013. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/29/al-qaeda-sparing-muslims_n_4012994.html accessed 1 December 2013.
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