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OCCASIONAL
P A P E R



Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade

Irreversible Decline
or Imminent Victory?

Brian Michael Jenkins



RAND INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE AND IDEAS

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Summary

In the minds of most Americans, al Qaeda descended from the heavens in Wagnerian-opera fashion, on September 11, 2001, putting the organization today at the beginning of its second decade. But al Qaeda was formally established in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1988. It claims connection with assaults on American forces in Somalia and Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s, declared war on the United States in 1996, and launched its terrorist campaign in earnest in 1998. By 2001, the struggle was already in its second decade.

Whether al Qaeda is in its third decade or third century matters little to its leaders, who see the current conflict as the continuation of centuries of armed struggle between believers and infidels, and who expect it to transcend their lifetimes.

This is unnerving to Americans, who seek precision in dating their wars. The American Revolutionary War began when the Minutemen opened fire on advancing British troops on April 19, 1775. The Civil War began when Confederate forces began shelling Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. World War II began with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Americans seek equal precision in ending conflict.

The almost continuous bloodshed between white settlers and Native Americans on America's frontier does not lend itself to this kind of bracketing. There were identifiable campaigns, varying levels of violence, but the unequal conflict continued for centuries. Without implying any insulting comparison, it was, in fact, America's only experience with continuous warfare.

Given that wars must have precise beginnings and endings, Americans want to know precisely where they are in the contest with al Qaeda. Who is winning? What's the score? When will what has become America's officially longest war be over?

Ten years after 9/11, there is still remarkable lack of consensus among analysts' assessments of al Qaeda's current condition. Almost every issue is debated: Whether America has won the operational battle but lost the ideological contest; whether homegrown terrorism is a growing threat; whether the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq is dangerous; whether maintaining American troops in Afghanistan is essential; whether the United States ought to declare on its own an end to the war on al Qaeda. Part of the debate is driven by political agendas, but the arguments derive from the fact that al Qaeda is many things at once and must be viewed in all of its various dimensions.

This essay examines a number of these issues in light of recent developments—the death of Osama bin Laden, the Arab Spring, the American withdrawal from Iraq. In each case, it drives toward a bottom line. In the final analysis, it is a personal view.

Is Al Qaeda on the Ropes or Still a Serious Threat?

While al Qaeda, especially its central leadership, has been pummeled, and its capabilities to mount large-scale attacks have been reduced, claims of its imminent defeat are hyperbole. Al Qaeda is more decentralized, more dependent on its affiliates, its allies, and its ability to radicalize and recruit distant recruits to carry out attacks on its behalf. Its peripheral commands remain strong. Its allies have bought into its ideology of global terrorism. Its communications network continues to function. It is resilient and opportunistic.

How Has Bin Laden's Death Affected the Organization?

It was a serious blow that weakens the movement. Although not essential to al Qaeda's ongoing terrorist operations, bin Laden provided inspiration, brought in money, provided organizational advice, and imposed a unanimity of focus on the organization. No successor can speak with his authority.

What Is the Effect of the Arab Spring?

Al Qaeda's goals of waging unending warfare on the West and restoring the caliphate did not motivate the protestors, who instead demanded greater political freedom and economic opportunity. Nonetheless, the continuing turmoil in the region gives al Qaeda some immediate tactical opportunities, while its leaders have positioned it to exploit the disappointment and disillusion that inevitably will come.

How Much of a Threat Do Homegrown Terrorists Pose?

Despite a significant change in strategy to one embracing individual jihad and do-it-yourself terrorism, and an intense campaign to sell it online, the turnout thus far is tiny. America's would-be jihadist warriors are few, for the most part of limited determination, and, fortunately, not very competent. American Muslims have overwhelmingly rejected al Qaeda's ideology, while intelligence efforts have uncovered and foiled almost every domestic terrorist plot.

My overall conclusion is that al Qaeda is in decline, although not finished. Its campaign of terrorism provoked no global uprising, while its slaughter of far more Muslims than infidels further reduced its potential constituency. The elimination of its initial sanctuary in Afghanistan, the dispersal of its training camps, the decimation of its leadership have degraded its operational capabilities. The most important factor, however, has been the tremendous improvement in counterterrorist intelligence at the national level, combined with unprecedented cooperation at the international level.

Why Do Al Qaeda's Leaders Think Victory Is Imminent?

Al Qaeda's ideologues see the situation not simply from the other side of the contest, but in completely different terms from its Western foes. In their view, war is perpetual—this conflict began centuries ago and will last beyond their lives. Fighting is mandatory—a religious obligation. Participation in the struggle will demonstrate their commitment, save them from corruption, make them worthy of God. With God on their side, ultimate victory is guaranteed, as long as they continue to fight.

They have survived the infidels' mightiest blows. They have checked what they imagine to be the West's determination to destroy Islam. America has suffered defeat after defeat: 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the loss of America's puppet governments to the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring. Americans are overextended, weary, and in economic crisis—God's punishment for their materialism. Only continued small blows are needed to panic America's citizens, further weaken their resolve. Al Qaeda's victory is imminent.

What Will Happen in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is not essential to al Qaeda, which has field commands in Yemen, Iraq, and North Africa and allies in Somalia and Pakistan. Al Qaeda has few fighters in Afghanistan and does most of its training in Pakistan, proving that it can function without a presence in Afghanistan. But al Qaeda's leaders attribute great importance to Afghanistan. Al Qaeda would benefit from a Taliban victory. Even if a victorious Taliban prevented al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a launch pad for terrorist operations, a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would guarantee al Qaeda's survival.

The degree to which America's determination to destroy al Qaeda depends on being in Afghanistan is a topic of debate. Regardless of what happens, America's counterterrorist operations will continue, but its difficulties will greatly increase. Maintaining 100,000 American troops in Afghanistan is not sustainable. The security burden must be shifted to local Afghan forces, but are they up to the task? Some seek a solution in political negotiations with the Taliban, but interest on the other side remains uncertain. With an American withdrawal in progress, albeit gradual, the Taliban can afford to wait. They might see negotiations as merely a parallel path to hasten the withdrawal of foreign forces. Withdrawal entails unavoidable risks. It will not immediately reverse al Qaeda's decline, and it could benefit al Qaeda in the long run.

How Will We Know When to Stop?

Every war must end, or so we would like to think. Terrorist campaigns end in victory by the terrorists, their suppression by the authorities, or some form of political negotiations. None of these seems likely in the current contest with al Qaeda. It is easier to see how the conflict could persist for decades. This has persuaded some to argue for unilaterally declaring an end to the "war" against a severely weakened terrorist foe. It would not end all U.S. counterterrorist efforts, but it would alter perceptions at home and signal a reduction in the military component of the effort abroad, while preventing the expansion of a military role in domestic security. At the same time, such a declaration would raise questions about the status of the enemy

combatants who remain in U.S. custody and the use of lethal force against enemy commanders and militants abroad.

What Americans may really be seeking is an end to fear—the official termination of terror. This cannot be delivered by counterterrorist operations. It is a mission of all Americans and their leaders.