# Al Qaeda in 2012

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LEE JARVIS, FEB 18 2012

The threat posed to international security by al Qaeda is often linked to a number of interconnected factors.[i] First, an ambition to target violence against the 'far enemy' of the United States and its allies that distinguishes this movement from other 'jihadist' groups.[ii] Second, a particular reading of jihad as an individual commitment, permanent condition, and offensive rather than defensive duty.[iii] Third, an organisational fluidity that is characteristic, for many, of 'new terrorism'.[iv] And, fourth, the considerable financial, propagandistic and other resources at its disposal. This combination of intent and capability arguably made possible the spate of attacks for which al Qaeda achieved notoriety. Attacks that included the 1998 bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; a suicide attack on the USS Cole in 2000; and the downing of four aircraft in Washington, New York and Pennsylvania on 11 September 2001 which killed almost 3,000 people. In the years since 9/11, we have also witnessed a series of further violences either attributed to, or claimed by, the organisation in a wide spread of countries includingIndonesia,Iraq,Jordan,Tunisia,Turkey, and theUnited Kingdom.

Given this history, it might seem counter-intuitive to argue al Qaeda no longer poses a serious international threat. In this article, however, I will do precisely this by pointing to key developments in the strategic, political and public realms after 9/11 which have severely limited its capacity to conduct international terrorism. My task is complicated a little, however, by two factors. The first relates to the difficulties of calculating threat or risk: an inherently subjective process that involves predicting future events.[v] The second, to a lack of consensus over what precisely al Qaeda now is. To address these difficulties, I will argue that whether we approach al Qaeda narrowly – as a 'hardcore' inner circle of bin Laden's former associates – or expansively – as a now-dispersed social movement – the international threat it poses is far less profound than often assumed.

## Al Qaeda Central

The emergence of al Qaeda as a political force occurred in the aftermath of the 1979-1989 Afghanistan conflict. The attacks that followed this war, leading up to and including 9/11, may all be linked to this organisation's inner circle; one led by bin Laden and his then deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri. Yet, the events of 11 September 2001 represented both the climax *and* the beginning of the end for this core, described by Marc Sageman as 'al Qaeda Central'.[vi] The threat that it poses has been severely weakened by at least five developments in the years since those attacks.

First, the attacks of 11 September 2001 were met by a US-led global counter-terrorism campaign of comparable scope to the Cold War.[vii] In contrast to earlier limited counter-terrorism activities, this global 'war on terrorism' mobilised a vast range of military, diplomatic and legal resources to confront what was widely viewed as a new, exceptional threat to the security of the US and its allies. Central to this confrontation was a military assault on Afghanistan – al Qaeda's then base – which commenced in October 2001. Successes in that initial military conflict ended the Taliban's control of much of Afghanistan, and proved even more destructive to their client al Qaeda. A substantial number of the organisation's most active and capable individuals were captured or killed in the invasion and ensuing war, with similar losses inflicted more recently on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al Qaeda in Iraq.[viii] This loss of expertise and experience provided a major setback for an organisation that, "…numbered fewer than 5,000 fighters at its zenith in 2001".[ix] More important still, however, was the removal of Afghanistan as a sanctuary from

which to recruit and train militants for future attacks. This loss of state support – and in particular a space from which to operate – greatly reduced the group's organisational and logistical capabilities.[x] And, with the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, the military dimension of this war on terrorism saw arguably its most dramatic moment to date.

Second, other activities associated with the war on terrorism have also drastically reduced al Qaeda's threat. Since 9/11, we have witnessed the pursuit and capture of thousands of alleged al Qaeda operatives and sympathisers by intelligence agencies in countries including Malaysia, Thailand, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, even Iran.[xi] Pakistan alone, for example, had apprehended over six hundred individuals believed to be members of al Qaeda by 2006.[xii] Importantly, these states and their leaderships have a genuine interest in reducing the capacities of al Qaeda and related organizations, either because they are themselves potential targets of attacks, or because of a desire to ally with the US for financial or political reasons.[xiii]

A third factor limiting al Qaeda's threat has been its inability to recruit new members to replace those killed or captured after 9/11. Where the Soviet campaign in Afghanistanof 1979 prompted an influx of foreign Muslims seeking to fight alongside the Afghan population, no such swelling of numbers occurred in the aftermath of the 2001 invasion. This lack of global assistance was likely a product of the Taliban's global unpopularity. The regime was tainted by a notoriously poor human rights record, and lacked international credibility. It also reflected a broader opposition to al Qaeda amongst potential recruits from other jihadist groups. Indeed, many other organisations sharing a broadly Islamist ideology have – even publicly – criticised bin Laden and his war against the 'far enemy': on pragmatic, moral, and religious grounds.[xiv]

Fourth, there has also been a widespread lack of support amongst Muslims around the world for al Qaeda's strategies, perhaps even its ambitions. This rejection of al Qaeda is pervasive amongst individuals living in states most directly – and devastatingly – affected by the aftermath of 9/11; a 2007 poll in Iraq, for example, revealed 100 percent opposition to al Qaeda attacks on civilians there.[xv] Similar public backlashes have occurred in other predominantly Muslim countries including Pakistan and Indonesia. This aversion toward al Qaeda amongst potential constituents is crucial given that successful engagement in terrorism relies heavily on public support: whether active or passive.[xvi]

A final factor concerns a series of internal fractures and weaknesses within al Qaeda itself. As with most organisations, al Qaeda has never been immune from disagreement and rivalries, with endogenous tensions dogging the organization from its establishment. These have included, *inter alia*, arguments over finances and pay received by its members;[xvii] internal tensions along national and other fault-lines;[xviii] and areas of strategic disagreement, such as the condemnation of Abu Masab al Zarqawi's brutalities against Muslims in Iraq.[xix] With Ayman al-Zawahiri as bin Laden's successor, the movement's future will depend on his ability, first, to contain such internal power struggles, and, second, to prevent its further fracturing into a series of smaller organisations with their own local ambitions.[xx]

## '**Al Qaeda 2.0**'**[xxi]**

As a coherent and centralised terrorist organisation, al Qaeda has therefore been drastically weakened. For many scholars, however, this does not necessarily mean al Qaeda no longer exists as a potent force. Rather, they argue it has evolved into something quite different from the 1996-2001 period, with the threat it poses having similarly changed. In this argument, al Qaeda Version 2.0[xxii] functions more as an ideology, a social movement,[xxiii] or even a 'brand'.[xxiv] It is a nebulous phenomenon in which operational control no longer resides in the hands of those such as al-Zawahiri. Attacks attributed to it, in this argument, are conducted frequently by small cells of individuals with very limited connection to the inner circle (for example the 7/7 bombings in London). Or, by those simply inspired by al Qaeda and wishing to associate with the movement, for example, the Madrid bombings of March 2004. Although proponents of this argument frequently view this dispersed, decentralised network as a continuing and serious security threat, there are important reasons, again, to maintain a sense of perspective here.

First, a large number of the plots associated with al Qaeda in recent years have actually been the conduct of amateur 'wannabe' terrorists lacking the training, knowledge and resources required to carry out violence successfully.[xxv] Despite occasional limited successes, many attempted attacks are intercepted either before or during their initiation because of their protagonists' ineptitude. These attempts range from semi-credible efforts to the frankly ludicrous. Recent examples include Colleen LaRose – the self-proclaimed 'Jihad Jane' – a middle-aged American woman arrested after allegedly meeting plotters planning to kill cartoonist Lars Vilks; the 2010 bombings in Stockholm that succeeded in killing only the attempted attacker; and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's effort to blow up an airplane over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009 which left him severely burned and the aircraft intact.

Second, the amateurism within al Qaeda 2.0 poses another, broader, set of challenges to the long term threat it poses. For individuals to remain attracted to a movement such as this a number of conditions must continue to be met.[xxvi] These include, the continuing resonance of al Qaeda's struggle and ambitions; a continuation of the movement's political grievances; and a continuing belief in the efficacy of violence as a tool for social, political and cultural change. Many, if not all, of these conditions will change over time, and, as the public opinion figures above suggest, this may already be happening. What is more, this is also likely to have a greater impact upon individuals inspired by, yet not integrated within, an organisation conducting terrorism. The history of terrorism is replete with examples of even well-organised, active, organisations later renouncing the use of violence, such as the Irish Republican Army and al-Jama'a al-Islamiya (the Egyptian Islamic Group).[xxvii]

Finally, and extending a point made above, the vastly enhanced range of counter-terrorism powers introduced after 9/11 have made it increasingly difficult for amateur 'wannabes' to engage in al Qaeda-inspired attacks. States such as the UK and US have invested huge amounts of money and resources in confronting the apparent threat of terrorism both at home and abroad, with international cooperation over intelligence, policing and border control increasing significantly in recent years. Although many of these measures are accompanied by deleterious side effects, the chances of 'wannabe terrorists' evading suspicion and capture are now even slimmer. Thus, while the pull factors attracting individuals to al Qaeda have declined, the push factors prompting potential recruits away from terrorism have also increased.

**Conclusion**

In absolute terms – and certainly relative to other causes of harm – the threat posed al Qaeda (and terrorism more generally) is minimal. As John Mueller notes, even if we include the outlier that was 9/11, the number of Americans killed by international terrorism since the 1960s is about the same as those killed by allergic reactions to peanuts.[xxviii]

While it is possible that future years will witness further attacks or attempts by individuals inspired by Al Qaeda, these will not constitute anything akin to a serious international threat: individually, or even collectively. And, let us not forget that efforts to counter the perceived threat of al Qaeda and related terrorist movements have themselves been extremely costly, in economic and civil liberties terms.[xxix]

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[i] This discussion draws on material presented in Jarvis, L. (2012) Al-Qaeda: A diminishing threat', in R. Jackson and S. Sinclair (eds.) *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 97-103.

[ii] Gerges, F. (2009) *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (2nd ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[iii] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*.

[iv] For an overview, see Neumann, P. (2009) *Old and New Terrorism: Late Modernity, Globalization and the Transformation of Political Violence*. Cambridge: Polity.

[v] Jackson, R., Jarvis, L., Gunning, J., & Breen Smyth, M. (2011) *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, p.128.

[vi] Sageman, M. (2008) *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Press, p.31.

[vii] Jackson *et al*, *Terrorism*, pp.249-256.

[viii] Bergen, P., Hoffman, B., & Tiedemann, K. (2011) 'Assessing the Jihadist Terrorist Threat to America and American Interests', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34(2): 65-101, p.74.

[ix] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p.294

[x] Byman, D. (2003) 'Al-Qaeda as an Adversary: Do We Understand Our Enemy?', *World Politics* 56(1): 139-163, p.159; Byman, D. (2005) *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.217; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, p.126.

[xi] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p.232; also Bergen *et al*, Al Qaeda as an Adversary, p.83.

[xii] Mueller, J. (2006) *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats*. New York: Free Press, p.183.

[xiii] Byman, *Deadly Connections*, p.216; Mueller, J. (2005) 'Six Rather Unusual Propositions About Terrorism', Terrorism & Political Violence 17(4): pp.487-505, p.501-502.

[xiv] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*.

[xv] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p.301.

[xvi] Cronin, A. (2006) 'How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups', International Security 31(1): 7-48, p.27.

[xvii] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, pp.103-107.

[xviii] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, pp.102-104; Byman, Al-Qaeda, p.159.

[xix] Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*, p.57.

[xx] See Cronin, A. (2009) *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[xxi] Post, J. (2007) *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to Al-Qaeda*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, p.221.

[xxii] Post, *The Mind of the* Terrorist, p.221.

[xxiii] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, p.31.

[xxiv] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p.40.

[xxv] Jackson *et al*, *Terrorism*, p.135.

[xxvi] See Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.

[xxvii] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, pp.200-210.

[xxviii] Mueller, Six Rather Unusual Propositions, p.488.

[xxix] Cole, D. (2003) *Enemy Aliens: Double Standards and Constitutional Freedoms in the War on Terrorism*. New York: The New Press; Mueller, *Overblown*, p.181.

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