

# How has the US Intelligence Community Performed against Al-Qaeda since 1988?

Written by Lucie Parker

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LUCIE PARKER, JUN 1 2015

### How has the American Intelligence Community Performed against Al-Qaeda, in its Various Manifestations, Since the Organisation's Creation?

This paper will begin by defining al-Qaeda as a tripartite entity consisting of a hard-core, a network, and an ideology. In three chronological sections, this reality will be compared with the American intelligence community's perception of, and performance against, al-Qaeda during each timeframe, so as to evaluate the success of American intelligence in the war on terror. Section one will demonstrate America to be blind to the horizontal nature of al-Qaeda, arguing that the intelligence community's outdated Cold War structure limited its performance against the perceived enemy. As a result, the intelligence community was unable to both fulfil President Bill Clinton's counter-terror policy, as well as engage with al-Qaeda successfully during this time. Section two will highlight the positive impact 9/11 had upon waking America up to the reality of al-Qaeda, unleashing the resources needed by the intelligence community to fulfil President George W. Bush's objectives. Yet despite this epiphany, the intelligence cycle was still geared towards a vertical threat and thus was unable to perform successfully against the three facets of al-Qaeda. Finally, section three will acknowledge the intelligence community's success against the al-Qaeda hard-core, due to the improvement in intelligence cycle tactics, yet show that the neglect of al-Qaeda's ideology in Obama's strategy means that America still faces the threat of Islamic extremist ideology today.

### A New National Security Threat

President Obama's recent declaration that 'al-Qaeda is on its heels' (2014) reinvigorated debate over the prominence of arguably the gravest threat the United States has faced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This debate stems from the complexity of al-Qaeda; gone are the Cold War days of a monolithic Soviet Union versus America, rather a multifaceted Islamic extremist militancy poses the biggest challenge to US national security today. In order to evaluate the success of America's response to this threat, we must scrutinise the performance of 'Uncle Sam's lifeblood in the campaign against terrorism' (Cilluffo et al., 2002: 61): American intelligence. The issue at stake here is not only our understanding of the battle between the world's greatest intelligence power and al-Qaeda; we must also seek to comprehend whether the intelligence cycle has been effectively handled to fight al-Qaeda in line with policy requirements. This analysis is thus twofold. The first strand will confront how successful the intelligence community was in helping 'policymakers overcome insurmountable obstacles' (Tenet, 2000: 134) against al-Qaeda, using how well it informed American policy as a benchmark against which to measure performance. The second will measure the impact this performance had on eliminating al-Qaeda. Analysing a community which is by its very nature clandestine does engender limitations; the restriction to classified information does problematize an open-source appraisal like this one. Yet using government policy as a benchmark opens a wealth of open-source material that provides a realm of relevant intelligence, such as the 9/11 commission report.

Before commencing this investigation, defining 'al-Qaeda' is crucial. Whilst the breadth of this paper is not wide enough to do justice to the thorny debate surrounding al-Qaeda's existence, Burke captures the characterisation of this entity well. He argues that al-Qaeda consists of 'three elements: a hard-core, a network of co-opted groups, and an ideology' (2003: 8). He disregards the popular media perception of 'al-Qaeda as an "evil empire" with an evil

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mastermind at its head' (2003, XXV), demonstrating that al-Qaeda is a de-centralised, horizontal network that comprises one of many Islamic militant groups. The hard-core is comprised of Osama bin Laden and his close associates, whilst the network is formed of ever-changing groups who have 'multiple associations and multiple lines of logistic support' (2003: 11)—the former Egyptian al-Jihad is but one example. The ideology is the 'al-Qaeda worldview': the aim to fundamentally establish a 'caliphate' based on an extreme, Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam. Burke's explanation of the fluidity of al-Qaeda is an invaluable element of the definition; the changed reality of al-Qaeda is outlined in each section to provide a clear understanding of the threat that the American intelligence community is being judged against *at that point in time*.

## 1988–2001

America here faced a 'networked organisation of small dispersed units' characterised by 'doctrine, configuration, strategy and technology in sync with the information age'. A 'child of 1990's globalisation', al-Qaeda was a sprawling web of the informal connections that had solidified in 1988 between a 'new generation of Sunni Islamic terrorists' (Coll, 2004: 278). Access to Afghanistan from 1996 gave the al-Qaeda hard-core its base, from which bin Laden established 'an unknown number of "sleeper" cells awaiting orders to launch future attacks' (Shultz, 2003: 8-15). The *Encyclopaedia of Jihad* provided the formula of unconventional warfare; the internet cultivated the coordination required for the planning of these attacks. The result was 'a campaign of episodic attacks by various nodes of his network' (Shultz, 2003: 21), e.g. the 2000 USS Cole bombing in Yemen. Bin Laden's 1998 fatwa ordering Muslims to 'kill Americans – including civilians – anywhere in the world' (Shultz, 2003: 22) made America the central target of this campaign. Yet America's understanding of this new enemy was inaccurate. 'By the middle of the decade, America discovered that 'UBL was the head of a worldwide terrorist organisation with a board of directors...and that he wanted to strike the U.S. on our soil' (Tenet, 2007: 100-102), however al-Qaeda was still treated as a 'traditionally structured terrorist organisation' (Burke, 2003:6). The responses American intelligence thus formulated against this enemy were inevitably unsuitable and largely ineffective.

The CIA provides a useful illustration of America's ill-suited response. During the 1990's it was near rock bottom. Constant budgetary cuts hindered a restructuring overhaul, keeping it institutionally geared towards a SIGINT strategy that focused on a monolithic enemy. Although SIGINT provided some valuable intelligence on al-Qaeda, e.g. the NSA tapped bin Laden's phone, the fact that HUMINT declined by 25% during the 1990's (Diamond, 2008: 242) was palpable, especially when bin Laden changed his communication method. The fact that there was 'no CIA station in Afghanistan from which to collect intelligence' (Coll, 2004: 5) meant that the Langley-based Alec Station failed to collect 'high-quality intelligence coming from sources within al-Qaeda' (Diamond, 2008: 243). Accordingly, the intelligence community failed to understand al-Qaeda. Wright highlights that these 'radical extremists came from places few agents had ever been to' (2006: 208); the necessity of getting agents into these places to gain an understanding of them was paramount.

These structural problems hindered analysis. The lack of intelligence collected on al-Qaeda meant that America still was blind to the 'jungle of poisonous snakes' (Woolsey, cited in Ciluffo et al., 2002: 62) that were mobilising against them. As intelligence analysis was solely focused on bin Laden (epitomised in the fact there was a 'bin Laden' station, not an 'al-Qaeda' station), any valuable intelligence that stemmed from one of the 'snakes' in the expansive al-Qaeda jungle was not given the necessary attention: the East African al-Qaeda cell was picked up years before the embassy bombings, yet lack of analysis due to the misunderstanding of al-Qaeda's structure resulted in a fatal failure. Zegart outlines the intelligence community's failure to piece together the evidence:

'Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hamzi had attended an al-Qaeda meeting in Malaysia with a major bin Laden figure; that al-Mihdhar held a U.S. visa; and that al-Hazmi had already travelled to the United States; that KSM, one of bin Laden's most trusted operatives was recruiting terrorists to travel to, and plan terrorist activities in, the United States, that dramatic spikes in intelligence chatter suggested an imminent catastrophic terrorist attack against American targets somewhere in the world; and that a star FBI agent believed that bin Laden might be sending operatives to the U.S. for flight training' (2007: 28-9)

The intelligence community's focus upon bin Laden as the figurehead of a criminal organisation bound them rigidly to

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a vertical analytical focus. Although the 'Manson group' had the right idea with holistically mapping out Islamist networks (Coll, 2004), they were ignored by those out in the field because this holistic intelligence was not operational against the *perceived* threat. The CIA had been tasked with bin Laden's capture; this analysis was of no use to something that required operational real-time intelligence.

The failure to collect HUMINT from inside al-Qaeda, as well as to analyse its holistic horizontalness, resulted in poor dissemination of intelligence to both Clinton and Bush, which then led to an uninformed counter-terror policy. The major criticism here was that the 'CIA was giving Clinton too much unfiltered intelligence' (Coll, 2004: 418). The lack of actionable intelligence from human sources was problematic, as seen with the Bush administration: the infamous August 6<sup>th</sup> 2001 Presidential Daily Briefing simply reported that 'bin Ladin since 1997 has wanted to conduct terrorist attacks in the US' (PDB, 2001); a phenomenon that was not new to America in 2001. Rather than disseminating concise intelligence to inform policy, the intelligence community 'generated volumes of fragmented hearsay' (Coll, 2004: 526) that lacked utility.

The intelligence cycle thus failed to support policy. Through Presidential directive-39, Clinton's 'intent regarding covert action against bin Laden was clear: he wanted him dead' (Zelikow et al., 2004: 133). However the failures of the Tarnak Farm, Desert Camp and Kandahar plans to even materialise demonstrates that the CIA did not fulfil this role, with Tenet admitting that 'as much as we all wanted bin Laden dead, we didn't have enough information to give policymakers the confidence they required to pull the trigger' (Tenet, 2007: 112). Under the Bush administration, Clinton's bin Laden-centric counter-terrorist policy took a backseat: the Principals Committee had its first meeting on al Qaeda on September 4<sup>th</sup> 2001 (Zelikow et al., 2004: 212). As the intelligence community had no clear direction assigned to them by Bush against al-Qaeda pre-9/11, it is impossible to criticise them against a non-existent benchmark. Holistically, the intelligence community also performed badly in their fight against al-Qaeda's network. A vertically stale CIA hindered an accurate understanding of this horizontal enemy, preventing the adoption of successful counter-terror tactics. Intelligence thus failed within the microcosm of American counter-terror policy, as well as failed to effectively disrupt al-Qaeda, as was tragically reflected by the 9/11 attacks.

## 2001–2003

9/11 provoked the Bush doctrine's two objectives: 'to break the network of terrorist states' (Wolfowitz, 2001) responsible for 9/11, and 'to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America' (Bush, 2002). The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan scattered the hard-core, eliminating two thirds in the process. Meanwhile, the networks were 'disrupted by new campaigns by security forces all over the world'. Yet rather than destroying al-Qaeda, the networks simply 'dispersed and caused significant radicalisation wherever they ended up', for example in Pakistan. Consequently the reality of 2001 was a 'new phase of Islamic militancy', with a new style of attacks 'executed by men who were committed to the al-Qaeda agenda but in no way connected with the group itself' (Burke, 2003: 260-266), e.g. the 2002 Bali bombings. Although the hard-core was diminishing, the network of networks and their *ideology* enshrined al-Qaeda's existence. America's understanding of al-Qaeda at this point was epitomised in Bush's hit list of the 'hardest of the "al-Qaeda hard-core"' kept in his desk (Burke, 2003: 259). Although Bush acknowledged this 'new kind of war fought by a new kind of enemy' (2002), the black and white hunt for bin Laden and his associates suggests that his focus upon this vertical elite was the priority. Thus although 2001–2003 was a pivotal moment for the American understanding of the nature of al-Qaeda, their intelligence tactics did not match their 9/11-induced epiphany.

Tenet's long-cherished ambition of getting HUMINT from Afghanistan was fulfilled *via* the invasion, giving the intelligence community 'access to people and documents that laid bare the future plans and intentions of al-Qa'ida': the capture of KSM is one example. Furthermore, Tenet's introduction of 'a daily meeting' to 'cut short the time it took for information to flow from the people in the field to me' (2007: 229-31) collected a greater volume of information to be coordinated horizontally with the CIA, FBI, NSA, and military. 9/11 also sanctioned unprecedented intelligence community powers: the NSA 'terrorist surveillance program' and the 2001 Memorandum of Understanding assigning covert action authorities to the CIA. Yet the set-up of 'black sites' to interrogate and torture captured al-Qaeda members, e.g. Abu Zubaydah, as a result of the latter authority, demonstrated that despite their fundamental reassessment of the reality of al-Qaeda, America still misunderstood their enemy. The hatred of the West generated

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by al-Qaeda's ideology was vindicated through America's use of these techniques upon their 'brothers'. Rather than providing strong intelligence to aid America successfully against al-Qaeda, torture added fuel to the long-burning ideological hatred towards the West, indirectly sustaining the al-Qaeda franchise that was mobilising against them.

Analysis and dissemination were vastly improved due to 9/11. This is seen with the creation of the 'threat matrix': a daily document given to Bush that detailed 'the newest threats that had emerged over the past twenty-four hours'. It was 'an unprecedented mechanism for systematically...debunking the voluminous amount of threat data flowing into the intelligence community', ensuring that only the intelligence 'with the necessary weight and quality' consumed the President's attention. The establishment of an 'imagination' group by Tenet, assigned to brainstorm ideas outside of the box further unbound intelligence analysis from its Cold War strait jacket, allowing analysts to uncover the reality of al-Qaeda. The fact that Bush 'was in the trenches with us' meant that intelligence was rapidly communicated: 'if you told him about an imminent operation on Monday, you could be certain after a few days he would ask about it' (Tenet, 2007: 232-36).

The shock of 9/11 unleashed the resources needed for the intelligence community to break free from their Cold War structure and execute a strong intelligence cycle geared towards al-Qaeda's defeat. Consequently they were better equipped to deal with the increased demands of the Bush administration's counter-terror doctrine. Although they were unable to capture bin Laden or al-Zawahiri during this period, their success is seen in the capture of KSM, amongst others (Tenet, 2007: 240). This intelligence community action thus fulfilled Bush's cry 'to find [terrorists] before they strike' (2001). The increased understanding America held of al-Qaeda's nature, combined with the intelligence community's unprecedented authority and structural mobilisation, could have resulted in phenomenal results. However it is obvious here that the intelligence community was still adapting to this threat. America acknowledged al-Qaeda as a global network of cells, yet set out *only* to destroy the hard-core by 'mapping the organisation in a traditional military structure, with tiers and rows' (McChrystal, 2011). Although their perception of al-Qaeda was more accurate to its reality, their maintenance of old tactics hindered their performance.

## 2003–Present

Al-Qaeda's remarkably 'flexible organisation that exercises both top-down and bottom-up planning and operational capabilities' (Hoffman, cited in Jordan, 2014: 4) has ensured its survival today, with 'much of its hierarchical structure operational in Pakistan, thus enabling it to carry out new attacks in the West' (Jordan, 2014: 4), e.g. Madrid 2004 and London 2005. Survival is continued through its franchise of networks, with its brand 'spreading like wildfire' (Kagan, 2014), as seen with groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Yet America argues that they are 'within reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda' (Panetta, cited in Katulis and Juul, 2011), with Bin Laden's death hailed as a poignant milestone. The gap between the reality and the U.S. policymaker's understanding of al-Qaeda is apparent again here. The Obama administration 'considers al-Qaeda primarily to be the group of individuals comprising its leadership during, and having involvement in, the September 11 attacks' (Jan, 2014). Although 2001-2003 unveiled to America the tripartite identity of their enemy, Obama's limited definition neglects this identity. It continues to frame al-Qaeda vertically, thus stifling the intelligence community's capacity to perform successfully against it.

Using the al-Qaeda in Iraq insurgency as a case study, McChrystal demonstrates that the tactics used by the intelligence community caught up with their new understanding of al-Qaeda. The realisation that 'to defeat a networked enemy we had to become a network ourselves' created 'F3EA: find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyse'. Intelligence was collected through raids, such as cell phones, and sent straight to analysts, who 'turned this raw information into usable knowledge'. This knowledge was disseminated to people 'from multiple units and agencies'. Intelligence was shared horizontally, and 'decisions were decentralised and cut laterally across the organisation' (2011). This new intelligence cycle informed the CIA's primary covert action tactic against al-Qaeda: targeted killings of the al-Qaeda leadership through drone strikes, such as Anwar al-Awlaki. A classified CIA paper from 2007 concluded that 'al-Qaeda was at its most dangerous since 2001 because of the base of operations that militants had established in North Waziristan' (cited in Jordan, 2014), thus 'CIA attacks have struck Pakistan's tribal areas on average once every five days during Obama's first term' (Ross et al., 2012). These aggressive attacks on the al-Qaeda network have been successful: the killing of bin Laden through 'spot-on intelligence by the CIA' (O'Neill, 2014) is one example. There is a strong argument here that the intelligence community's actions have pushed al-

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Qaeda onto the defensive, with 'those who remain...just trying to survive' (Hanif cited in Yousafzai, 2012); al-Qaeda members have been forced 'to devote substantial attention and energy to self-protection', rather than to executing attacks. This is empirically substantiated; during 2001-2006 there were three major success operations (9/11, Madrid and London), whereas during 2007-2012 *thirteen* operations did not result in a single successful attack (Jordan, 2014).

Subsequently, the intelligence community's re-mobilisation of the intelligence cycle in line with an evolved understanding of al-Qaeda, culminating in the successful elimination of bin Laden and others, sufficiently fulfilled Obama's policy. He 'directed [Panetta] to make the killing or capture of Osama bin Laden the top priority in [America's] war to defeat al Qaeda', and this resulted in 'one of the greatest intelligence successes in American history' (Obama, 2011). Yet although the intelligence community was successful within the confines of Obama's counter-terror strategy, their overall performance against al-Qaeda was lacking. The CIA's use of covert action outlined that the U.S. still misunderstood a key element of the al-Qaeda identity: ideology. Obama's narrow definition of al-Qaeda meant that the intelligence community excluded 'large portions of the al-Qaeda network from consideration' (Zimmerman, 2014), failing to fully engage with the entirety of their enemy. Furthermore, their new tactics actually strengthened al-Qaeda's ideology; the killing of innocent Muslims as collateral damage from drones has increased radicalisation globally. Thus the intelligence community has performed unsuccessfully against 'al-Qaedaism', demonstrating their ignorance of it through the use of controversial tactics. This reinforces the stark gap between America's *perception* of their performance and the *reality* of their performance against al-Qaeda.

The American intelligence community has failed so far to perform to the extent of their capabilities against al-Qaeda. The pre-9/11 misjudgement of al-Qaeda's tripartite threat failed both to fulfil Clinton's political objectives, as well as succeed against the strong al-Qaeda core from 1996-2001. A stale CIA structure froze this misconception at the heart of the intelligence community, melting only with the impact of 9/11. Despite the September 11 attacks revealing al-Qaeda's horizontal identity, the Bush and Obama administrations continued to treat it as a vertical problem. Although the intelligence community here achieved what policy required of it under both Presidents, the tactics used from 2001-2003 were inappropriate for fighting their multilateral enemy. It was not until the 2003 invasion of Iraq that these tactics evolved in line with the U.S.'s newly born comprehension of al-Qaeda's structure. Yet Obama's strategy mired the evolution that was needed to fully confront al-Qaeda with this reformed intelligence cycle. Furthermore, the controversial tactics adopted from 2001 serve only to reinforce the pervasive gap between the reality of al-Qaeda, and the intelligence community's perception of it. This neglect of al-Qaeda's ideology has only made the world more dangerous, with the rise of the Islamic State proving that the intelligence community, although successful against the al-Qaeda hard-core, has failed to fight every facet of Islamic militancy effectively.

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