

Al-Qaeda and the success of US intelligence

Written by Maciej Osowski

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MACIEJ OSOWSKI, FEB 13 2011

How well has the US intelligence community performed against Al-Qaeda since the latter was founded in 1989?

The year 1989 will remain in a global history as direct beginning of Soviet Union's collapse which was finalized in the 1991. This year will also stay in world remembrance as a founding date of probably best known terrorist organization – Al-Qaeda. End of the “Empire of Evil” and devolution of Western world's dangers into global terrorists' networks had crucial importance for world's intelligence community and especially for American intelligence. The biggest and the best funded intelligence network had to start new era in its existence. Unfortunately for America and whole Western civilization, it failed in this task.

In this paper it will be argued that, although Al-Qaeda successes around the world had been effects of series of failures of American policy, US intelligence community performance was one of them as it did not execute good enough against Al-Qaeda since it foundation in 1989. At first There will be an attempt to show that reason for that was unsuccessful transition from one main (USSR) to several small enemies' actors (state and non state actors). This happened because after collapse of communist threat there was no serious discussion amongst community members about reform of its structure or way of working. Secondly it will be shown that American intelligence has had and still has not got enough impact on administration in promoting their findings on possible threats. This happens mainly because of lack of information and hesitance of taking responsibility US intelligence does not support straightforward reports about dangers threatening US. Last but not least US intelligence community because of legal solutions is extensively dependant on government administration demands which often leads to sacrifice whole long lasting intelligence projects for sake of current policy aims.

Lack of reforms

According to Richard A. Clarke “Little noticed by most Americans, including in its own government, a new international movement (Al-Qaeda) began growing during the last two decades”[1] what was probably effect of not enough information support from intelligence community. Of course it would not represent the truth to say that CIA and other US intelligence services did not know about existence, behaviour and aims of Al-Qaeda. To large extent CIA, which was responsible for controlling Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Ladin, knew about this organization from the very beginning of its existence. Tenet claimed during 9/11 commission hearings that “Bin Ladin came to the attention of the CIA as an emerging terrorist threat during his stay in Sudan from 1991 to 1996”[2]. But that was not the first moment CIA gained information about his existence “While we had heard of Bin Ladin from others with whom we were in contact in Afghanistan, we had no direct contact with him and his profile was low enough to avoid any particular attention”[3]. Additionally trough last decade CIA gained enough information about plans, supporters and philosophy of Al-Qaeda to help administration in making decisions of stopping transactions with similar organizations[4]. Unfortunately Intelligence services were not controlling enough the new threat rising in Middle East which in deliberate way was admitted even by former DCI “There have been thousands of actions taken in this war over the past decade by CIA managers, operatives, and analysts. Not every action we took was executed flawlessly”[5]

All this failures of intelligence community in performance against Al-Qaeda can have one main reason. During

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transition from concentration on one major enemy (USSR) to many more smaller threats, intelligence community did not perform any reform preceded by deep analysis[6]. Of course on the one hand it can be claimed that governmental administration is the one responsible for putting through reforms in dependant agencies what includes whole intelligence community, but on the other hand these were intelligence agencies, which claimed no need for reform, beside need for bigger budget proportional to larger amount of possible threats. In this situation every upcoming treat was viewed through perspective of USSR. That meant that upcoming very dangerous organization “during the early 1990s(...)competed for intelligence resources with other dangerous targets such as Hizballah, then considered more threatening to US interests”[7]. Routine way of concentrating on biggest threat as it was during Cold War was one of the reasons that Al-Qaeda and its supporters was not dangerous enough for intelligence analytic’s through early 90’s.

Additionally there was another problem, with spying on terrorist organizations including Al-Qaeda, which roots goes deep in Cold War. Intelligence community, especially NSA was used to obtain highly valuable signal intelligence and imaginary intelligence through times of Cold War. With new threat coming from Middle East this highly advanced technology was useless against terrorist who used basic methods of communications. Although this clear new challenge intelligence community failed to transit their power from sigint to humint which as it is now claimed, is much more adequate against terrorists’ organizations like Al-Qaeda[8]. Whole intelligence community was not interested in performing new way of spying concentrating mostly on human intelligence. Of course it can be argued that American intelligence agencies have already relied on humint performance and this source of intelligence was not discovered just yesterday.

Despite this claim it is known for scholars that during Cold War it was USSR the one, which relied more on human sources than US did[9]. This unfortunately was followed when new threat in form of Al-Qaeda came on stage. It took ten years and tragic events of 9/11 for CIA, NSA, FBI and others to understand that new threat needs more human intelligence than sophisticated technology resources.

Lack of information and persuasion

Second major possible reason of US intelligence community weak performance against Al-Qaeda was intelligence failure in persuading their opinion to governmental officials including US President himself. There may be several reasons of this . Whole US intelligence community is one and only case in the world of cooperative federation of 16 separate United States government agencies that work separately. Although this situation can be profitable in data collecting by its competitiveness, it can also be disadvantage if it comes to report community findings to executive body of US. Till 9/11 attacks and caused by them reform taken 21 th April 2005 Director of Central Intelligence was served as de-facto Director of the Central Intelligence Agency what obviously leaded to CIA biggest impact on reports for administration. This was of course known for administration which might tend to underestimate DCI reports. This could happen when Tenet reported to Condoleezza Rice and Senate commissions about possible Al-Qaeda attacks on US territory ” In hearings on terrorism in spring 2001, I told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate Appropriations Committee that the threat from Al-Qa’ida was “an immediate and pressing concern”[10].

On the other hand DCI admitted that” Despite [our] successes, there are limits to what we can do. We will generally not have specific time and place warning of terrorist attacks”. In this circumstances intelligence community failure in persuading governmental officials can have two reasons. Firstly agencies had no knowledge when and how will be attacks perform therefore it couldn’t influence governmental actions. Secondly agencies did not support possible steps to be taken by executive other than general precautions against possible attacks. This is probably why Condoleezza Rice denied to 9/11 commission if she were receiving any warnings from George Tenet about possible attacks on US territory.

Another important factor causing US IC lack of impact on governmental policy is size and fallowed by that bureaucracy in intelligence agencies. If community is to slow in its reports and warnings its sound obvious that administration will rely less and less on its reports. Bureaucracy and defeatism were reasons why FBI agent Harry Samit was unable to share his knowledge about possible use of hijacked planes “The FBI had no capabilities to link

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his agents collective knowledge"[11]. Additionally" (...)closer examination of the FBI suggests that organizational weaknesses are the root cause of poor agency performance."[12].

In service of ad hoc governmental policies

Third major cause of US IC poor performance against Al-Qaeda lies in its service for tentatively made governmental policies. First but not last CIA was used to link War on Terror and Al-Qaeda with Saddam Hussein

"His (G.W. Bush) ignoring intelligence about al-Qaeda demonstrated not only that there were other interests at work in Afghanistan which only the suicide hijackings could change, but also that for the Bush administration the war on Iraq existed before the war on terrorism."[13]

Unfortunately not only CIA under pressure from Bush administration took part in connecting Al-Qaeda with Saddam Hussain support, what was denied as a fact by 9/11 commission[14], but also in claiming that Saddam Hussein is in possession of weapon of mass destruction, what after invasion on Iraq also showed up to be intelligence failure[15]. The reasons which stay behind this failure look pretty obvious when American IC and president's relations are compared with organization of British intelligence and prime minister. According to Mark Phythian, US IC is under bigger influence from executive than British intelligence community because of law solutions[16]. Although both intelligence communities failed to support correct information it was American IC who claimed Iraq is in possession of WMD when it has no reliable source confirming this information. Analysing WMD presence in Iraq can look quite off subject in this paper, but it helps to understand how American IC can be manoeuvred into ad hoc policies of government administration. That sheds a light on its poor performance against Al-Qaeda especially when bearing in mind artificial connection between WMD, Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda which IC supported in reports.

Additionally, US IC serving tentatively constructed governmental aims often has to change their long-term ally and spying project what also has impact on its bad performance and also applies in the case of Al-Qaeda. In the situation when US IC has to spy on former allies and change its plans, it is impossible to gain reliable human intelligence resources, because these need long lasting relationship between agency and possible spy. Knowing situation in Afghanistan, when during Soviet invasion CIA supported Talibs mujahedins and Osama Bin Ladin, then in War on Terror supported war lords and mujahidins against Talibs and Osama Bin Ladin and now with new president administration probably will support Pasztuns against drug trading North Alliance, it is easy to see that there is no chance to obtain reliable and faithful human intelligence. And this as it is known from previous paragraphs is necessary step in winning GWOT.

In this paper it was argued that US intelligence community performance against Al-Qaeda was poor and full of failures. It was all the way the same starting with Al-Qaeda foundation, through US Embassy Bombings in Kenya, Tanzania and Yemen up to 9/11 attacks and beyond. It was claimed in this paper that this poor intelligence performance had main three reasons which because of size of this essay were the only to be described amongst many others affecting failures against Al-Qaeda. Firstly US intelligence community did not undergo necessary reforms during transition into spying on new possible enemies after USSR collapse. This was reason which affected not enough concentration on Al-Qaeda in 90 s and lack of proper humit in later years. Secondly US IC had and still have not enough, comparing with its size and funding, impact on decisions taken in Washington. It is because either its lack of necessary information or hesitance in taking responsibility for reports and what follows is undecided views for certain security threats. Last but not least government manipulation of US intelligence community in the name of ad hoc policies leads to community performance failure against Al-Qaeda because that affects long term intelligence tasks which are crucial for overall performance.

Stated above reasons standing behind US IC low performance against Al-Qaeda are as some scholars argue " failure of both intelligence and policy"[17], especially when "(...)political leaders(...)are, after all, in charge of Intelligence community - of the ultimate responsibility"[18]. That leads to conclusion that ultimate responsibility for intelligence failure against Al-Qaeda lies on the government side and that is direction which should take scholars in future research in this matter.

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