Is the Far Enemy Still First?

An Analysis of al-Qaeda’s Targeting Strategy
Briefing Outline

• Origins of the project
• Methodology
• Analysis of al-Qa’ida’s targeting strategy
  – Intent
  – Capabilities
• Implications
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Origins of the capstone project

• What is a capstone?
  - Integrative, team-based, applied graduate student research project
  - Supervised by a faculty member on behalf of a client agency

• Why the National Counterterrorism Center?
  - Study issues of critical importance to US national security
  - NCTC can use analysis to challenge existing assumptions about the terrorist threat to the Homeland

• Process and timeframe
  - Client provides key questions and topics of focus last fall
  - Interviews with experts/data collection
  - Deliver briefing and final written product in April/May
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Has al-Qa‘ida’s grand targeting strategy shifted from the United States to attacking US allies, especially in Europe?

- Primary assumption: Al-Qa‘ida is still focused on the US as its primary target

We examined the question from two key perspectives:

- Al-Qa‘ida’s intent
- Al-Qa‘ida’s capability
Multiple sources were used to verify information and determine credibility

- Our conclusions were reached only after information from numerous sources was collected and thoroughly analyzed.

- Sources occasionally provided contradicting information:
  - Government documents, expert interviews and various research publications were more heavily weighted than other sources.
  - News articles only used for factual data and not analysis.
  - Statements from al-Qa’ida leadership helped determine intent.

Research constraints limit the depth and scope of the analysis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Al-Qa’ida Dimension</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Primary Objectives</th>
<th>Recent Plots &amp; Attacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al-Qa’ida Strategic Leadership (AQSL)</td>
<td>Core al-Qa’ida leadership centered in Pakistan</td>
<td>Establish a global Caliphate; harm the US and drive the West out of Middle East</td>
<td>September 11 and foiled 2006 airliner plot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Qa’ida Affiliates</td>
<td>Independent terrorist groups with ties to AQSL, such as AQIM</td>
<td>Undermine regional governments; regional objectives</td>
<td>IED attacks in Algeria against local and Western targets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Qa’ida Cells</td>
<td>Small groups of individuals with ties to AQSL</td>
<td>Local objectives w/ guidance from AQSL for larger attacks</td>
<td>3/11 train bombing in Madrid and 7/7 bombing in London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homegrown Cells</td>
<td>Cells that develop independent of direct guidance from AQSL</td>
<td>Local objectives inspired by al-Qa’ida’s ideology</td>
<td>Foiled plot to attack Fort Dix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Findings

- The United States remains the focus of al-Qa’ida’s grand targeting strategy
  - However, al-Qa’ida currently lacks the capability to conduct a spectacular attack against the Homeland
- Al-Qa’ida will continue to target US allies, such as Europe, and other regions to further its regional objectives and increase its capabilities
  - An increase in capabilities will further al-Qa’ida’s objectives of striking the US and ultimately establishing a global Caliphate
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Al-Qaeda wants to carry out an attack in the US more “spectacular” than 9/11

- What would a spectacular attack look like?

- Did al-Qaeda leaders put themselves “in a box” by stating the next attack would be more spectacular than 9/11?

- Has al-Qaeda altered its rhetoric to reflect lowered expectations?

- Does timing matter?
What is a “spectacular attack”? 

• What are the elements of a spectacular attack?
  – High casualty counts
  – Damage to critical infrastructure
  – Intense media attention
  – Widespread psychological trauma
  – “Ripple effect” on the US economy
Has al-Qa’ida put itself “in a box”?

• “In a box” implies containment, restriction, or limitation
• Two types of “boxes”:
  – Few options/scenarios for an attack
  – Time constraints

Choice of attacks

Time for attack to occur
Al-Qa’ida’s attack options are limited, but it is not quite “in a box”

- **Choice of attacks:**
  - High level attack options limited but al-Qa’ida is still changing
  - Statements still show focus on damaging the US but other opportunities are available
  - Targeting US interests elsewhere (Iraq, Afghanistan) and desire to bleed US of its resources however possible

- **Timing:**
  - Major disparity in importance (between US and al-Qa’ida) with regard to the next attack
  - Al-Qa’ida emphasizes patience and outcome
Al-Qa’ida seeks to target US allies, particularly Europe, for participating in Afghanistan and Iraq

- Has al-Qa’ida shifted its targeting strategy from the U.S. to Europe to punish allies for participating in Afghanistan and Iraq?

- Has al-Qa’ida targeted Europe because it lacks the capability to successfully attack the United States?

- How might the changing security environment in Afghanistan and Iraq influence al-Qa’ida’s targeting strategy?

- Have European responses to previous attacks encouraged al-Qa’ida to target Europe over the United States?
Al-Qa’ida intends to target European allies

- But, the US remains the primary target
- If the US is the primary target, why does al-Qa’ida attack Europe?
  - Lack of capability to strike the US
  - Europe is a target of convenience
  - Punishment for participation in Iraq and Afghanistan
  - Europe is a US ally and symbol of the West
  - Al-Qa’ida’s ideology to expel the West from Muslim lands
Europe is more accessible than the US

- Relative to the US, Europe remains an easier target
  - Europe confronts more security challenges than the US
    - Proximity to the Middle East
    - Large Muslim populations
  - Europe perceived as an accessible target, not necessarily a weaker target
    - Enhanced counterterrorism measures have deterred some attacks
    - But still an increased risk of radicalization
Europe will remain a target

- Al-Qa’ida likely to continue attacking Europe as a means of harming the West
- In the short run, al-Qa’ida’s intent to strike both Europe and US likely to remain unaltered
- In the long run, a gain in capabilities can prompt al-Qa’ida to shift its targeting priorities to other regions
Al-Qa’ida is shifting its strategic focus from the US to other significant regions

- Has al-Qa’ida shifted its focus from the US to other regions?

- What strategic benefits, either political or ideological, does it gain from operating in these regions?
Al-Qa’ida pursues significant secondary objectives in other regions

- Al-Qa’ida maintains a presence in other key regions to achieve important strategic objectives:
  - Remain visible around the globe
  - Expand its base of support
  - Maintain safe havens
Al-Qa’ida expends significant effort on its secondary objectives

- **South Asia**
  - Maintain and secure safe haven and base of operations

- **Maghreb**
  - Spread ideology and increased influence
  - Develop future manpower

- **Arabian Peninsula**
  - Spread ideology and maintain presence
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Al-Qa’ida lacks the capability to conduct attacks inside the United States

- Does al-Qa’ida lack the capability to attack the US?
- Has al-Qa’ida shifted its focus away from the US because it lacks a safe haven and recruits?
- How have al-Qa’ida’s failed attacks against the US influenced its targeting strategy?
- Is al-Qa’ida focusing on regions where it already has capabilities?
Several key factors are responsible for al-Qa’ida’s lack of capability in the US:

- Lacks established networks and a safe haven in the US
- Difficulty inserting operatives in the US from abroad
- Scarce operational resources (weapons, money, recruits, and training facilities)
- Lacks a radicalized Muslim population to exploit
Homegrown terrorists have a distinct advantage

- Al-Qa’ida lacks the capability to direct a successful attack and has difficulty inspiring homegrown terrorism
- It is easier for potential homegrown terrorists to carry out an attack on US soil than foreign al-Qa’ida cells
- Advantages of homegrown terrorism:
  - Citizenship
  - Open society
  - Access to US territory and resources
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Acquired Capabilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>South Asia</strong></td>
<td>- Safe haven and base of operations in FATA and NWFP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Large recruitment pool in Pakistan</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Maghreb</strong></td>
<td>- Gains resources for operations in North Africa and Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arabian Peninsula</strong></td>
<td>- Lawlessness in southern Yemen</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>- Charities and financial assistance</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
But these capabilities are insufficient for an attack on US

- South Asia
  - Still focusing on building base of operations

- Maghreb
  - Lack sophistication for a spectacular attack outside the region

- Arabian Peninsula
  - Multiple crackdowns have reduced recruitment pool
Al-Qaeda lacks the capability to attack the US specifically because the homeland has been sufficiently hardened since 9/11

- Did al-Qaeda deliberately shift its targeting away from the homeland because it lacked the capability to attack inside the US in the face of increased security measures following 9/11?
- Or was this less of a strategic decision, but more of a perceived reality?
  - Was al-Qaeda dissuaded from attacking in the US because it perceived that the cost was too high?
  - Is the public too aware?
  - Is the government on a high state of alert?
What is “hardening”?  
US policies have focused on four main areas  
- Finance  
- Access  
- Information  
- Critical Infrastructure
Interdependencies increase vulnerabilities to al-Qa’ida attack
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Several elements factor into al-Qa’ida’s perception of US policies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Awareness</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Time</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feeling of entitlement</strong></td>
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Al-Qa‘ida has focused its attacks on Europe because the complex security environment hinders counterterrorism measures

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<td>Has al-Qa‘ida focused its attacks on Europe because of the complex security environment?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How robust are the “disaffected Muslim communities” in Europe?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have the Europeans responded with countermeasures rigid enough to dissuade potential terrorist recruits from operating on European soil?</td>
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</table>
Europe has large Muslim communities and the potential for radicalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Muslim Population (% of total population)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>5-6 million (8-9.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>3 million (3.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>1.6 million (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>945,000 (5.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>270,000 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1 million (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BBC News 2005
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4385768.stm
European counterterrorism efforts face striking challenges

- Some European nations have stringent anti-terrorism policies
- Others rely more heavily on policies designed to counter radicalization within their large Muslim communities
- Individual European nations have had counterterrorism successes, but as a whole, there remain gaps in Europe’s defenses:
  - Lack of uniform anti- and counterterrorism efforts
  - Freedom of movement across EU countries’ borders
  - Extremely large recruiting pools
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Al-Qa’ida’s capabilities heavily influence its choice of targets

- Intent will remain focused on US allies, including Europe
- Needs more capabilities to directly strike its primary target, the US
- Factors that influence al-Qa’ida’s ability to target both the US and its allies:
  - Blowback from Afghanistan and Iraq
  - Training camps in Pakistan
  - Global economic downturn
  - Vulnerability of economic and business targets
  - US administration’s approach of combating terrorism
  - Al-Qa’ida’s ability to interact with regional affiliates, communicate effectively, and fund terror operations
Al-Qa’ida’s targeting strategy

Intent

Capabilities Required

- South Asia
- Arabian Peninsula
- Maghreb
- Horn of Africa
- Levant

United States

Europe
What we learned

• Difficult to determine credibility of open source material
• There are many ways to structure a paper when given a complex question
• Flexibility, patience and adaptability are crucial
• Constructive criticism received at school briefing helped improve our overall product
Questions?
Europe remains fertile recruiting ground

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Muslim Population</th>
<th>Suspected No. of Islamist Terrorists</th>
<th>Integration Policies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>5+ million</td>
<td>100 camp-trained</td>
<td>Assimilation and Secularism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>3.4 million</td>
<td>Up to 3,000 (100 camp-trained)</td>
<td>Between Assimilation and Multiculturalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>2+ million</td>
<td>Up to 10,000 (3,000 camp-trained)</td>
<td>Multiculturalism and Cultural Autonomy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Counterterrorism successes limited and vulnerabilities remain

- **The European Response**
  - **France**
    - Extremely tough anti-terrorism laws
    - French Council of the Muslim Faith
  - **Germany**
    - Islamkonferenz
    - Anti-Terrorism Act of 2002
  - **United Kingdom**
    - Finsbury Park Mosque
    - Citizenship tests

- **Gaps in Europe’s Defenses**
  - Freedom of movement across EU countries’ borders
  - Extremely large recruiting pools
  - Lack of uniformity in anti-terrorism laws/efforts (France vs. UK)
Capabilities required to carry out a “spectacular attack” in the US

- Simultaneous attacks on multiple locations
- Exploitation of economic vulnerabilities especially energy sector
- WMDs