

THE THIRD WAY NATIONAL SECURITY PROJECT



**A Growing Threat:
Al Qaeda and its Allies on the Move**

A Third Way Report

by

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This report was first released as part of Beyond Bush: A New Strategy of Constriction to Defeat Al-Qaeda and Its Allies, a report that Third Way released with Assistant Senate Majority Leader Dick Durbin and Senators Evan Bayh and Tom Carper at a Capitol press conference in March 2007.

This version of the report has been updated to reflect the changing landscape in the fight against global terror in the last six months.

A Growing Threat: Al Qaeda and its Allies on the Move

The idea that Americans are safe from al Qaeda because the group has not struck inside the United States since 9/11—a claim repeated just this week by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff¹—is one of the Bush administration’s most dangerous, short-sighted and questionable notions about terrorism. Experience alone suggests otherwise: eight years passed between al Qaeda’s first attempt to destroy the World Trade Center in 1993 and their attack in 2001. Indeed, a more thorough examination of the facts suggests that the threat not only remains—it is growing.

Since 9/11, the United States has won some battles with al Qaeda, most notably in our initial rout of the Taliban in Afghanistan and in shutting down some global financing of terrorist operations. And yet by the most important measures, today America is losing ground:

- Al Qaeda’s network is growing larger, deadlier, and more extensive;²
- The number of al Qaeda-related terrorist attacks worldwide has increased;³
- Al Qaeda’s leadership is still at large and publishing propaganda at an increasing rate, with the latest missive from Osama bin Laden coming just this week;⁴
- Al Qaeda forces and allied Taliban fighters are making a comeback in Eastern and Southern Afghanistan and gaining strength in Western Pakistan;⁵
- Global anti-American sentiment is dramatically higher, especially in the Islamic world;⁶ and
- US military forces are stretched to the breaking point, eroding our ability to constrict al Qaeda.⁷

The fact that we have not had an attack on US soil in six years does not mean al Qaeda is defeated or even contained. In fact, in many ways the terror threat facing America in 2007 is even more dangerous as that which resulted in the 9/11 attacks.⁸

“I don’t know how much better you can do than no attacks for the last five years.”

**Vice President Dick Cheney,
Meet the Press,
September 10, 2006**

There are three principal reasons for this heightened threat:

- **A spreading problem.** As al Qaeda has decentralized, it has metastasized from a localized tumor to a global cancer;
- **Plentiful resources.** Al Qaeda retains access to the physical resources, propaganda and people that constitute its lifeline; and
- **Hardened warriors.** The war in Iraq has provided al Qaeda with a growing cadre of committed and increasingly lethal followers.

Each of these developments can be traced to a failure of the United States to fight terror in a way that is both tough and smart, including the catastrophic failures related to the Iraq War.

The Threat Spreads: Al Qaeda's Metastasis

Throughout the late 1990s and until 2001, al Qaeda had a formal hierarchical structure, operated on an annual budget of thirty million dollars and relied on a force of 10,000-20,000 fighters trained in an extensive network of Afghan camps.⁹ Of course, American-led operations in Afghanistan in 2001-02 seriously damaged this "al Qaeda central" structure—the core group led by Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants—and reduced al Qaeda's ability to conduct top-down operations.¹⁰

But since late 2002, when American attention shifted to Iraq, the group has adapted, with a reinvigorated al Qaeda central now leading and inspiring a far larger and looser global movement. Osama bin Laden has become the ideological figurehead for a conglomerate of foreign fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as for geographically disparate groups of jihadists and self-starting franchises. Some work or train directly with al Qaeda central; others act entirely alone but draw their inspiration from al Qaeda. The result is that there are now an estimated 50,000 al Qaeda affiliated fighters in the world—far more than existed in 2001 and constituting a collective force roughly twice the size of the current US troop presence in Afghanistan.¹¹

Since its inception, al Qaeda central has held a series of ultimate goals: winning the centuries old struggle between Islam and "World Infidelity;" toppling "apostate" regimes in the Islamic world; and purifying the practice of Islam itself in the process.¹² Reflecting the success of the al Qaeda brand, however, nationalist-religious groups around the world, most with different main goals than those of al Qaeda central, have affiliated themselves with al Qaeda in order to benefit from its prestige in their home countries.¹³

These regional groups have grown in size, capability and popular support in the years since 9/11, and they represent a major force gain for al Qaeda. Although initially motivated by the desire to settle local scores, many of these regional affiliates of al

Qaeda are now willing to target the US, often as a “far enemy” that supports the “near enemy.”¹⁴ And though largely disparate, some of these groups have already begun to work together: North African insurgent groups have apparently joined forces to mount recent attacks in Algiers and Tunis and export suicide bombers to Iraq.¹⁵

Additionally, a growing number of independent, “do-it-yourself” terrorists now pledge adherence to al Qaeda’s goals, despite a lack of direct or sustained contact with al Qaeda central or its leaders. Fueled by al Qaeda propaganda and fundamentalist ideology, these independent terrorists tend to be homegrown and are often well-educated. They can be particularly dangerous because they need few resources to thrive and are difficult to detect.¹⁶ Perpetrators of the 2004 train bombings in Madrid, mostly longtime residents of that city, used proceeds from the sale of drugs and bootlegged CDs to mount an attack that killed almost 200 people and wounded more than 1,700. The 2005 London subway attack that killed 52 people, carried out mostly by native-born Englishmen with some al Qaeda contacts, cost only about \$2,000.¹⁷ More recently, a cell of British-based physicians with few sophisticated resources attacked Glasgow International Airport and nearly succeeded in attacking downtown London.¹⁸

While those attacks by decentralized followers of al Qaeda targeted Europeans, other independent al Qaeda members evince a vicious hatred for America and its citizens and seriously threaten Americans at home and abroad. Just this week, German authorities foiled a plot by two German citizens and a legal German resident to bomb US interests in that country.¹⁹ Domestically, in December 2006 the FBI arrested a US-born and raised individual who planned to blow up a shopping mall in Illinois.²⁰

**The United States
“unequivocally” is
safer from terrorist
attacks than it was
six years ago.**

**Secretary of Homeland Security
Michael Chertoff,
September 5, 2007**

Times of Plenty: Al Qaeda Retools and Rebuilds

In March of this year, Third Way issued a report along with leaders in Congress that called on the President to immediately adopt a new strategy aimed at “constricting” the al Qaeda network’s access to the raw materials it needs to survive: physical resources (weapons, safe havens, and targets), propaganda (their “virtual jihad”), and people (recruits and leaders).²¹

So far, that call has fallen on deaf ears. Indeed, the Bush administration has almost entirely failed to constrict the essential resources of al Qaeda central, its affiliate terror groups or its “do-it-yourself” followers.

First, physical resources remain available to the network. For example, the German plotters mentioned above had gathered more explosives than were used in the

Madrid bombings.²² And al Qaeda central still has access to the things it needs, in particular a safe place to live and plot. In the years since the Iraq War began, anti-terror efforts in the Waziristan region of Pakistan have been insufficient to prevent al Qaeda central from gaining a limited safe-haven among sympathetic tribal leaders in western Pakistan. In September 2006, the Pakistani government—which depends on the US government for major military assistance—signed peace accords with militant tribesman in the region, effectively ending all military operations against an extensive network of al Qaeda and Taliban operatives in Pakistan.²³ The results of this capitulation have been as dangerous as they have been predictable—bin Laden’s al Qaeda central now operates freely amidst a de-facto mini-state in Pakistan, enabling it to regroup unobstructed.²⁴ In other words, one of the two major achievements of the US war in Afghanistan already has nearly been reversed. The other, the routing of the Taliban, also seems to be eroding quickly.

Second, al Qaeda propaganda has flourished in recent years. Today there are more than 4,800 known terrorist websites, which provide would-be attackers with inspiration—and also instruction.²⁵ For example, guidelines for building the explosives used in the Madrid and London bombings can be found online,²⁶ while the would-be Illinois bomber learned about the principles of “jihad” from a website.²⁷ As of the publication of this paper, news services are reporting that a terrorist website has pledged to deliver a video message from Osama bin-Laden on the sixth anniversary of 9/11.

Third, as noted above, people are still flocking to al Qaeda. As the International Institute for Strategic Studies found, “the war in Iraq has probably inflamed radical passions among Muslims and thus increased al Qaeda’s recruiting power.” The war, the study noted, has had the effect on al Qaeda of “swelling its ranks and galvanizing its will.”²⁸

Hardened Warriors: Iraq Funnels Trained Terrorists to al Qaeda

The Iraq War is doing more than sending angry young Europeans into the arms of the jihadists. The war is also providing thousands of committed al Qaeda members with extensive training in terrorist warfare and jihadist ideology. This not only constitutes an ongoing danger to US troops abroad, but it adds significantly to the long-term threat of terrorism against American civilians and our allies. Like bin Laden, who cut his teeth as an Islamist insurgent during the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980’s, jihadist combatants in Iraq are developing tactics and leadership skills that are highly transferable to other settings. In Afghanistan, for example, roadside bombs and suicide attacks, which were rare before the Iraq War started in 2003, are now common.²⁹

Moreover, insurgents schooled in Iraq have already spread al Qaeda-style jihadism in areas where it previously did not exist. An al Qaeda affiliate based in Palestinian refugee camps now wages war on the Lebanese Army, while in the Gaza Strip, al Qaeda is gaining a foothold in the shadow of the nationalist-fundamentalist group Hamas.³⁰ Other Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia, fret openly about the destabilizing effect that experienced jihadists are likely to have on their own countries.³¹

The fundamental conclusion is clear: six years after 9/11, al Qaeda and its affiliates are an urgent threat to America, and they are growing stronger. Al Qaeda has metastasized and multiplied; its central structure operates almost openly, and its decentralized units have access to key supply lines; and skilled insurgents schooled in Iraq are exporting jihadist techniques and ideology elsewhere in the world. Each of these problems can be traced to failures of the Bush administration's misguided approach to fighting terror, and particularly the colossal failures of the American misadventure in Iraq. This nation's national security depends on an urgent change in US strategy to reduce this growing terrorist threat.

Endnotes

¹ William Brannigan, "Chertoff: US 'Unequivocally' Safer Now from Attacks," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 2007.

² US Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism and Patterns of Global Terrorism 2006," released April 30, 2007.

³ *Id.*

³ Dan Murphy and Jill Carroll, "Al Qaeda Ramps up its Propaganda," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 16, 2007.

⁵ "Report: Global Terrorism up more than 25 percent," *CNN.com*, April 30, 2007.

⁶ Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Global Unease with Major World Powers," June 27, 2007.

⁷ Third Way, "Our Military Stretched Thin: US Troops at the Breaking Point," July 2007 (<http://third-way.com/products/99>).

⁸ The Intelligence Community itself refutes the Bush administration's claims. The classified National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on "Trends in Global Terrorism," partially released to the public in April 2006, concludes that "al Qaeda will continue to pose the greatest threat to the homeland and US interests abroad by a single terrorist organization."

⁹ Eben Kaplan, "The Rise of Al Qaedaism," Council on Foreign Relations, June 30, 2006 (<http://www.cfr.org/publication/11033/>).

¹⁰ RAND Terror expert Bruce Hoffman argues that al Qaeda's weakening has been exaggerated. He argues that senior-level AQ managers, operating in or around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, continue to exert actual coordination of attacks, and would be the only ones trusted with high value, "spectacular" attacks—in other words, the central planning level of al Qaeda still exists, but with somewhat different personnel.

¹¹ US Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism and Patterns of Global Terrorism 2006, released April 30, 2007.

¹² Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and a Strategy for Getting it Right*, Times Books, New York, 2005.

¹³ Richard Clarke, "Defeating the Jihadists," Century Foundation, p. 4.

¹⁴ See Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, Knopf, New York, August 2006.

¹⁵ Craig Whitlock, "Terrorist Networks Lure Young Moroccans to War in Far-Off Iraq," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2007.

¹⁶ Stephen Fidler, "Al Qaeda yields to the elusive cells of the chatroom," *Financial Times*, September 10, 2006.

¹⁷ Tariq Panya, "Analysts say London Bombings Inexpensive," *ABC News*, January 3, 2006 (<http://abcnews.go.com/International/Terrorism/wireStory?id=1466463>).

¹⁸ "More Suspects held in UK Terror Attacks," *CNN.com*, June 30, 2007.

¹⁹ Craig Whitlock, "Germany says it foiled Bomb Plot," *The Washington Post*, September 6, 2007.

²⁰ Mike Robinson, "Feds: Man Planned to Blow up Illinois Mall," *Associated Press*, December 8, 2006.

²¹ Third Way, *Beyond Bush: A New Strategy of Constriction to Defeat Al Qaeda and Its Allies*, March 2007 (<http://third-way.com/products/72>).

²² Craig Whitlock, "German Authorities Search for Additional Bomb Plot Suspects," *The Washington Post*, September 6, 2007.

²³ Arthur Bright, "Pakistan signs Peace Deal with Pro-Taliban Militants," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 6, 2006.

²⁴ Mark Mazzetti and David Rohde, "Terror Officials See Al Qaeda Chiefs Regaining Power," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2007.

²⁵ Gabriel Weimann, as quoted in Dan Benjamin and Julie Smith, "Currents and Crosscurrents of Radical Islamism," CSIS, p.17 (http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,3005/).

²⁶ Id at p. 5.

²⁷ Mike Robinson, "Feds: Man Planned to Blow up Illinois Mall," Associated Press, December 8, 2006.

²⁸ Paul Reynolds, "Iraq War 'helped al Qaeda recruit'", *BBC News Online*, October 2004.

²⁹ Shawn Brimley, "Tentacles of Jihad: Targeting Transnational Support Networks," *Parameters*, Summer 2006, p. 37.

³⁰ Steve Erlanger and Hassan Fatah, "Jihadist Groups fill a Palestinian Power Vacuum," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2007.

³¹ David Ignatius, "Lessons from the Saudis," *The Washington Post*, November 22, 2006, p. A21.



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