

The Jihadist Mutation

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03/29/2004 - By Scott Atran

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The coordinated train bombings in Madrid that killed 200 and injured roughly 1,600 have already had a greater impact on the world than any terrorist attack since 9/11, altering Europe's political structure, shaking global financial markets and unsettling the U.S. coalition in Iraq. While the only groups to have claimed responsibility say they represent al-Qaeda, and the attacks are clearly consistent with jihadist doctrine and aims, operating in al-Qaeda's name does not mean that Osama bin Laden commands or controls.

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For the last year, jihadist writings about Spain have focused on the outgoing Spanish government's participation in the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, particularly among Moroccan Islamists who felt the brunt of Spanish judge Garzon Belthazar's investigative zeal. In December 2003, a document published by The Information Center for the Support of the Iraqi People (Al-hai'ah al-i`lamiyyah li-naSrah ash-sha`ab al-`Iraqi) under the Center of Services for the Mujahedeen [1] appeared on jihadist websites.

Presumably written by elements of Qa`idat al-Jihad and entitled "Iraqi Jihad, Hopes and Risks: Analysis of the Reality and Visions for the Future, and Actual Steps in the Path of the Blessed Jihad," the fifty-page manuscript dedicates some eight pages to assessing the situation in Spain. "Iraqi Jihad" provides a detailed analysis of Spanish politics, the personal ambitions of outgoing Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, and the political balance between the right and left regarding the coming parliamentary elections of March 14, 2004.

As for the subject of the war with Iraq, there was nearly a complete split between the stance of the people and that of the government represented by the ruling party... Therefore, we say that in order to force the Spanish government to withdraw from Iraq, the resistance should hit with painful attacks against its forces. This will be accompanied by an information campaign, which would present the reality of the situation inside Iraq. It is a must to exploit the coming general elections in Spain in March 2004.

We think that the Spanish government could not afford more than two or three attacks at the

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most, after which it will have to withdraw, as a result of the popular pressures. If its troops would remain in Iraq despite the attacks the victory of the Socialist Party is almost secured, and the withdrawal of the Spanish forces will be on its elections' agenda.

Lastly, we are certain that the withdrawal of the Spanish or Italian forces from Iraq would serve as a huge pressure on the British presence [in Iraq], which Tony Blair would not be able to overcome. Hence, the domino tiles would fall quickly. Yet, the basic problem of how to drop the first tile is still there. [2]

The paper, which sets a general agenda and provides useful analysis for those looking to upset coalition plans in Iraq, calls upon mujahideen anywhere and everywhere to take matters into their own hands.

The Madrid bombings are only the most recent and deadly example of a new modus operandi for al-Qaeda, its affiliates and its sympathizers. Suicide attacks in Baghdad, Karbala and Quetta on the Shi'ite holy day of Ashura suggest that the transnational jihadist terrorist network is mutating into an acephalous structure. Regional groups like Iraq's Ansar al-Islam and Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jaish-e-Muhammed (which recently also tried to kill Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf) seem to be coordinating strategic and perhaps tactical operations. Following al-Qaeda's example, but not its policy of non-discrimination against Shi'ites [3], these groups are now "swarming" on their own initiative--homing in from scattered locations on multiple targets then dispersing, only to form new swarms.

Although these groups share motivations and methods with al-Qaeda, they have had only distant relations with Osama bin Laden and the few score of Sunni salafists around him who formed al-Qaeda's core. Ansar al-Islam's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, for example, led a disparate network of terrorists and sympathizers in the Middle East and Europe, following an agenda similar to bin Laden's but acting independently and sometimes in rivalry with al-Qaeda. Bin Laden and the Qaeda hardcore may be reverting back to their pre-9/11 status as just one hub in a loosely-knit transnational network of mujahedeen leaders left over from the Soviet-Afghan war.

Only after the FBI began investigating the 1998 American embassy bombings in Africa did U.S. prosecutors in the Southern District Court of New York--and the rest of the world--begin referring to al-Qaeda as "a worldwide terrorist organization led by bin Laden." The subsequent interconnection of regional jihadist groups into an "al-Qaeda network" may be, in part, the result of the United States over-attributing to bin Laden and al-Qaeda a global concentration of power and organization. The November 2003 suicide bombings in Istanbul appear to be a case in point. Turkish officials, as well as many others in the West, immediately attributed the bombings to al-Qaeda--although the bombs were probably made and detonated by local Turkish groups claiming to represent al-Qaeda's aims.

Empowered with al-Qaeda's name, regional groups are now better able to coordinate among themselves and to strike out on their own. They have also learned key al-Qaeda lessons: recruit relatively high-level operatives whose above average educational and economic status correlates with higher-levels of commitment; cooperate with diverse groups over long distances; directly attack U.S. and allied interests as strategic targets rather than concentrating tactically only on local rulers and interests; hit soft civilian targets rather than hard military targets; and use readily available civilian technology for unconventional weapons instead of harder-to-get conventional military technology. Finally, they have learned the value of suicide attacks as perhaps the most cost effective means of modern irregular warfare for maximizing impact over the widest horizon.

Whatever chance there was for quick destruction of the hydra-headed jihadist network has

passed, despite renewed investment--after a year's hiatus--in getting Pakistan to help U.S. special forces track down bin Laden. The war in Iraq has energized so many disparate groups that global terrorism as a whole is better prepared than ever to withstand bin Laden's demise. As the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies has found, the Iraq war has increased recruitment for anti-American jihad and "perversely impelled an already decentralized and evasive transnational terrorist network to become more 'virtual' and protean and, therefore, harder to identify and neutralize."

Last year witnessed ninety-eight suicide attacks, more than any year in contemporary history, the overwhelming majority for religious reasons. Thirty-three occurred in Iraq, now plagued with suicide terror for the first time since the 13th century hashasheen (assassins) slaughter to purify Islam. From February 1 to March 2 of this year, ten suicide bombers killed over 400 people in Iraq, more than in any country for any thirty-one-day period since 9/11. The bulk of these attacks appear to have been religiously motivated. Even a casual glance at media outlets and websites sympathetic to al-Qaeda reveals a proliferating jihadist fraternity that is not deterred by Saddam's capture, but takes heart from the fall of Iraq's secularist tyrant. A distinct pattern that has emerged is an increasing interest in well-planned attacks designed to net the highest numbers of civilian casualties--a pattern into which the Madrid bombings, on commuter train stations at the morning rush, fits neatly. Charting data from the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Robert Axelrod, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, observes that a very few terrorist attacks account for a very large percentage of all casualties.

Jihadists appear to obey a devotional logic immune to compromise or games of classical deterrence. "God has ordered us to build nuclear weapons," proclaimed Fazlur Rahman Khalil of Pakistan's Harkat ul-Mujahedeen on the CBS television news show 60 Minutes II. A subsequent suicide attack on India's Parliament by Jaish-e-Muhammed, a Pakistani offshoot of the al-Qaeda affiliate that Khalil heads, probably brought nuclear war closer than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. According to Pakistani nuclear physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy, Pakistan possesses small, 600kg nuclear weapons that could be delivered by pickup truck. Such a device delivered by truck or train and detonated in a densely populated area could kill more people by radiation than in the case of Hiroshima [4].

"Strategic" bombardment, invasion, occupation and other massive forms of coercion will not eliminate tactically innovative and elusive jihadist swarms or do away with their popular support. Nearly half of all Pakistanis and substantial majorities of people in "moderate" Muslim countries, such as Morocco and Jordan, support suicide bombings as a way of countering the application of military might by the United States in Iraq and by Israel in Palestine [5].

Surprisingly, pinpoint responses may not be an answer either. Carnegie Mellon Professor Kathleen Carley has monitored and modeled changes in jihadist networks, such as those following the break up of the cell responsible for the suicide bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Tanzania. She found that eliminating leaders with the most ties to other cell members and to other cells can produce more adaptive responses in the overall network "healing" process than elimination of less central actors. This indicates that targeted assassinations of known leaders (a favorite Israeli tactic) also may be counterproductive, in addition to causing public revulsion.

Destroying terrorist networks requires our own military's ability to operate in swarms of small and rapid mobile units, informed by culturally astute street intelligence and connected by wireless networks to powerful radar and satellite images [6]. Combating terrorism also demands a new strategic form of "spider webbing" powered by multilateral, interfaith alliances of transnational, national and local groups. Only this type of cooperative structure

could have the broad collective intelligence and resourcefulness needed to stop terrorist swarms and prevent attacks such as what we saw in Madrid.

NOTES

1. The name is a paraphrase of the original meaning of al-Qaeda, "the Base," as a processing center for Arab volunteers joining the Soviet-Afghan War.
2. Also published by the same organization was "A Letter to the Spanish People," dated from December 2003. In it, the authors appeal to Spanish citizens to confront their government and demand a Spanish withdrawal from Iraq. "We consider anyone who supports the American occupation our enemy, and we hold the Spanish government responsible for any deaths among their elements inside Iraq."
3. The transnational jihadist terrorist network no longer appears willing or able to control anti-Shi'ite elements within regional groups, despite the fact that Bin Laden praised the Shi'ite extremist group Saudi Hizbollah for the 1996 suicide attack on U.S. military housing at Khobar Towers.
4. According to Physicist Richard Garwin of the Council of Foreign Relations in New York.
5. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center released in March, 2004.
6. See David Ronfeldt RAND Inc., on "netwar."

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