



CeifiT Special Report

Is Al-Qaeda on the brink of conducting new wave of attacks in the West?

Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit Update- Rehabilitating, Functioning, Training and Plotting

During the recent weeks, accumulated reports suggest that **Al-Qaeda's Special Operations unit**, responsible for Al-Qaeda's external operations (Outside Afghanistan and Pakistan, aka **External operation unit**), has been able to maintain, and perhaps even extend its activity in recruiting new operatives, providing designated training for terrorist operations and plotting attacks in the international arena. These indications are significantly important in light of different speculations expressed in recent years as to the unit's incompetence and lack of activity.

Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit has traditionally been the sole arm of the organization to conduct terrorist attacks in the international arena. In fact, the vast majority of “Global Jihad “ spectacular attacks, first and foremost the September 11th attacks, were initiated, planned and executed by members of the unit.¹

Since the elimination of the unit's chief, the Egyptian **Hamza Rabia** (December 05), the External Operations unit has faced different hardships. Its last successful attack took place in London on July 2005, and since then all of the unit's attempts, including an attempt to blow up 15-20 American and British commercial jets (summer 2006) and the attempt to hit London's center and Glasgow international airport (July 2007), have failed.

¹ See CeifiT's Special Report on Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit at <http://www.ceifit.com/?categoryId=41103&itemId=40843>

In addition, many of the unit's senior operatives were killed in recent years. Like Al-Qaeda in general, the External Operations Unit suffers from lack of veteran and trusted operational activists who can fill its ranks. As will be discussed later on, even the identity of the current chief of the unit is still unclear, as its former chief, **Abu Ubaidah Al-Masri** died of hepatitis (December 2007).

Al-Qaeda's failures to pursue its own external attacks in recent years stimulated the organization towards increased operational cooperation and even mergers with other Global Jihad organizations around the world. Even if this phenomenon of joining hands for operational purposes is not new,² the current cooperation is more formal and is a declared policy by Al-Qaeda's leadership. These organizations or "branches", are now subordinated to Al-Qaeda's leadership, and are subject to Al-Qaeda's targeting agenda and directives.

Through this means, Al-Qaeda has been able to extend its capability to recruit activists, receive logistical support and remotely conduct attacks in areas where it traditionally found it hard to operate in. The merging group/"branch", on the other hand, enjoys Al-Qaeda's experience, logistical support and training services. Not less important, the merging group is able to operate under the brand name of "Al-Qaeda", which by itself holds different operational and financial benefits.

In recent years several different "regional Al-Qaeda organizations" were established based on existing local groups. The Algerian **GSPC** (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) became **AQIM** (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb); **AQAP** (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and **AQIY** (Al Qaeda in Yemen) were established; and in Iraq **AQI** (Al-Qaeda In Iraq) was formed as an umbrella organization for different "Jihadi"

² In the past, Al-Qaeda used to have operational cooperation with other groups such as the South East Asia **Jemaah Islamiyah** (the Bali attack), the Philippine **Abu Sayyaf Group** (plot to drive an explosive truck to the American embassy in Manila), the Pakistani **Lashkar-e-Taiba** (the attempt by Richard Reid to blow up American Airlines commercial flight using explosives hidden in his shoes-"the shoe bomber plot") and to a lesser extent the Uzbek **Islamic Jihad Union** (the simultaneous attack in Uzbekistan targeting the Israeli and American embassies on July 2004). These connections were mainly based on personal relations between Al-Qaeda senior activists (specifically **Khalid Sheikh Mohamed**, the former head of Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit and the mastermind behind the September 11 attacks), and senior activists of the other groups, such as **Hambali** (the former military chief of the Jemaah Islamiyah) **Hafez Sai'd** (the head of Lashkar-e-Taiba) and **Abd Al-Razek Janjelani** (the founder of the Abu Sayyaf Group). In the case of the Islamic Jihad Union, the personal relations of the important figures within the Uzbek group were with Al-Qaeda's senior military commander **Abu Layth Al-Libi**.

groups. Another formal merger took place between Al-Qaeda and **LIFG** (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group) senior leaders located in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

As for targeting policy, we have identified a shift in these groups' operational activity, diverting some of their operational efforts from domestic targets to western targets within their vicinity of operations, probably in accordance with Al-Qaeda's directives. The AQIY attacked in recent years tourists (Korean), Western embassies (US) and compounds, as well as oil facilities. The AQIM attacked UN facilities, kidnapped western tourists of different origins, threatened to attack western targets and de facto attacked the Israeli embassy (February 2008) and the French embassy (August 2009) in Nouakchott, Mauritania

In addition to these groups, Al-Qaeda seems to be searching for new opportunities to expand its operational and logistical reach by merging with more groups. Among the possible future branches, one can find **Al-Qaeda in Al-Sham** (mainly Syria and Lebanon- AQBS), **Al-Qaeda in Palestine** (AQP) and other Global Jihad organizations in Somalia and South-east Asia.

In parallel to the operational merger with local groups, Al-Qaeda has put a lot of effort in recent years to rehabilitate the operational capabilities and performance of its own External Operations Unit, in order to resume terrorist attacks on western soil. Recent reports provide indications for the continuation of the unit's activities, mainly throughout 2006-2008. It is assessed that these activities continue in 2009 as well, though possibly degraded due to Pakistan and US recent crackdown against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in north-west Pakistan.

The case of Aleem Nasir

The case of **Aleem Nasir**, a German citizen of Pakistani origin who joined Al-Qaeda and conducted logistical and possibly operational activity on behalf of the External Operation unit, provides some interesting insights into the unit's activity.³ Nasir was arrested in Pakistan (June 2007), following several trips he has conducted to the

³ For more information see NEFA foundation report on Aleem Nasir at: http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_AleemNasirNetwork0609.pdf

country, in which he joined hands with the **Lashkar-e-Taibe (LET)** group and later on with Al-Qaeda, providing them with thousands of Euros and paramilitary equipment. During these trips Nasir has undergone several training courses provided by both groups in different locations in Waziristan.

As a citizen of the European Union, Nasir was immediately considered a valuable asset by Al-Qaeda and quickly managed to engage with its top leaders, including **Mustafa Abu Yazid** aka **Sheikh Said Al-Masri** (Al-Qaeda 3rd in command), **Khalid Khabib** (The former overall Military Chief), **Abu Yahya Al-Libi** (The head Al-Qaeda's Religious committee) and others.

Nasir was taken to a special training camp for volunteers from the European Union, designated to train them as suicide bombers. One of the courses offered was a course in explosives, which lasted 40 days. Traditionally, Westerners oriented camps are run by Al-Qaeda's External Operations unit, for its future attack plans and sleeper cells abroad.

Among the trainers in the aforementioned camp were the Bosnian **Nihad Cosic**, **Sheikh Salim Al-Jazairi** and **Salahuddin Al-Tajiki**. According to Cosic, around 280 volunteers from different nationalities were trained as suicide bombers until early 2007, and those with European citizenship received higher priority in training.

Nasir's interrogation also provided insights into Al-Qaeda's External Operations unit's Geographical deployment. The unit in Pakistan is geographically divided into two main areas of operation. The training camps and safe heaven centers for most operatives are located in villages throughout the tribal areas in north-west Pakistan- **Jani Khel, Wana, Mir Ali, Miran Shah, Damadola** and more. Communications centers, however, and possibly additional operational apparatuses operate discretely from Pakistani major cities, such as **Karachi, Lahore, Quetta and Peshawar**. These centers were historically used to communicate between the unit's cells abroad and its leadership in Pakistan, mainly through Internet encrypted messages and International Phone calls. In recent years, however, these cities became dangerous locations for Al-Qaeda to operate from. Hence, the organization had to change its mode of activity in

these cities as well as to rely more on middle-men in Iran, and couriers carrying written letters and USB devices.

Routes to Pakistan, as depicted by Nasir, are diverse and constantly changing. Traditional routes originate at the Western country of residence (Germany, in Nasir's case), from which the activists boards a flight to Turkey (sometimes via other destination in Southern Europe such as Greece and Italy). From Turkey the activist will continue by flight or ground transportation to Iran (main cities on route are Tehran, Mash'had and Zahedan) and using Baluchi smugglers on to Pakistan/Afghanistan.

Another point worth mentioning is Nasir's role as the External Operations unit representative in Germany. The unit has traditionally operated in a semi hierarchal structure, where the Headquarters in Pakistan were directing the unit's representatives in the different countries (or "extensions") around the world. The commanders of these extensions were in charge of the cells and individuals operating in the country, responsible for recruiting, fundraising, conducting surveillance and plotting terror attacks.

Nasir has probably played such Al-Qaeda ringleader role when he was stationed in Germany. With this regard, Nasir appointed recruiters who worked for him, suggesting new recruits to be sent to Pakistan, which Nasir later picked and sent along with recommendation letters for the External Operations Unit. Nasir's network had raised and sent funds to the unit and provided it with equipment that was not available in Pakistan (night vision goggles, scopes etc).

The case of Bryant Neal Vinas

A different and more recent indication for the continuous activity of the External Operations unit surfaced in the disclosure of interrogation details of **Bryant Neal Vinas**.⁴ Vinas, an **American** citizen who converted to Islam in 2004, was arrested in Pakistan in late 2008. Vinas pled guilty to charges of conspiracy to murder U.S.

⁴ CNN: **Recruits reveal al Qaeda's sprawling web**
<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/07/30/robertson.al.qaeda.full/index.html>

nationals, providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization and receiving military-type training from a foreign terrorist organization. His more famous charge was the provision of New York Metro system details to Al-Qaeda.

Vinas's interrogation revealed important information as to Al-Qaeda's training, structure, attack plans and its significant adaptability to the challenges it faces. Specifically, Vinas's unique insights, along with those of other recruits from **France** and **Belgium** (all were of North African origin) whom he met in Pakistan, provide an inside glance to the current status of Al-Qaeda's External Operations unit.

Radicalized in a Long Island mosque, Vinas arrived in Lahore, Pakistan in September 2007 and immediately joined a local group whose commander he met through another NY friend. Similar to Aleem Nasir, Vinas was provided with training, participated in terror attacks in Afghanistan and was acquainted with some of Al-Qaeda's highest ranks such as **Rashid Rauf** (probably the former commander of the unit's British extension, who was deeply involved in Al-Qaeda's trans-Atlantic jet plot in the summer of 2006), **Abdullah Said** (The current leader of Al-Qaeda's Internal Operations Unit) and **Abu Yahya Al-Libi**. Rationally, Al-Qaeda recognized the special value of having a Western recruit, and rejected his offer to conduct a suicide attack in Afghanistan.

Vinas detailed a relatively surprising order and administrative procedures in the organization, in some ways similar to the formal and well structured organization Al-Qaeda used to be in Afghanistan before the American-led coalition storm into the country following September 11th. For example, each recruit had to fill forms and hand in his passport, trainers wrote thorough evaluations of the trainees etc. Such formalism is also known to be used by **Al-Qaeda in Iraq** when dealing with foreign recruits.

Still, however, Al-Qaeda is in no way similar to the manner in which it operated during the Taliban reign before September 11th. Its operatives in Pakistan, assessed by Vinas to be 300-500 in numbers, now hang out in small groups of around 10 operatives each, and have a rather decentralized command and control mechanism.

Training has changed as well, and is conducted in small groups and in temporary locations, sometimes inside caves.

The content of the trainings was adapted too, in order to meet the needs of the organization in Afghanistan and abroad. The training courses include explosives course (Construction of IEDs and suicide vests using various types of explosives-RDX, C3, C4 and more), light weapons course, and RPG and mortars launching courses. The variety of courses, as well as the different levels for these courses (beginners, advanced etc), suggest that despite Counter Terrorism measures in the region, Al-Qaeda still manages to provide a wide range of "Terror Services".

While the abovementioned courses can be attributed to the general Al-Qaeda training mechanism, conducted by the **Internal Operations Unit** (responsible for operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, headed by the Libyan **Abdullah Said**), Vinas was informed of a special course conducted by the External Operations unit. The course, named "**International Operations**", was led by "**Abu Hafith**" (Possibly Abu Hafeth / Hafiz / Hafs), who was depicted as the "head of the International Operations" (See below our assessment regarding the identity of the current chief of the External Operations).

Interestingly, Vinas was told that the International Operations course was focused on kidnapping and assassinations, a modus operandi rarely performed by Al-Qaeda in its attacks on Western soil. While Al-Qaeda has used these tactics in Iraq, Afghanistan, the African Sahel and other places, its attacks against Western targets were traditionally aimed at causing large number of casualties by focusing on "soft targets", by using large explosives devices and suicide bombers.

In addition to his training and fighting experience, Vinas was involved and/or aware of plots, which seems to be in very preliminary stages, to attack the New York mass transit system, the Brussels metro, a European football Stadiums and more.

Who is the current chief of External Operations?

While indications for the External Operations unit are accumulating, suggesting it continues to operate despite serious setbacks, the identity of the unit's current chief is still in question. The unit's chief is probably the most important role in Al-Qaeda after **Osama Bin Laden** and **Ayman Al-Zawahiri** (although the chief of external operations is formally subordinated to the overall Military Chief) and is the main concern for most Western Intelligence services.

After the death of its latest chief in December 2007, **Abu Ubaidah Al-Masri**, there have been many speculations as to his successor. Most of the names suggested- **Abu Sulaiman Al-Jazairi**, **Abu Jihad Al-Masri** and **Abu Zubair al-Masri**- are dead by now, and it is doubted whether they indeed fulfilled that position anyway.

Another speculation that might bear more credence is **Mustafa Abu Al-Yazid**, aka **Sheikh Said Al-Masri**. Sheikh Said is Al-Qaeda's "rising star" in recent years and a veteran operative who traditionally served as the head of the **Administration and Finance Unit**. Due to the loss of many Al-Qaeda seniors throughout recent years, Sheikh Said has fulfilled several roles, including the **overall Military chief** of the organization and the **head of the Shura Council**. Indeed, Sheikh Said is nowadays Al-Qaeda's 3rd in command and is running much of the organization's "day-to-day" affairs. As such, it is possible that he has filled, at least temporarily, the role of the External Operation unit.⁵

The recent information from the Vinas case suggests, as previously mentioned, that an Al-Qaeda operative named "**Abu Hafith**" is the current chief of External Operations, at least as far as the end of 2008. Abu Hafith's identity has not yet been verified.

All in all, the identity of the current External Operations Chief remains unclear. However, some guidelines can be suggested to better spot the possible successor, based on previous chiefs' background:

⁵ More about Sheikh Said at CeifiT's report <http://www.ceifit.com/?categoryId=41102&itemId=47789>

- ❖ The External Operations chief needs to be an experienced Al-Qaeda member with significant military background, preferable a veteran of the first Afghan war in the 80's.

- ❖ Commanders from the **Internal Operations Unit**, responsible for operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, are "natural candidates" to fulfill the role. In addition, we should not overlook the **Media Committee** of Al-Qaeda as an optional ground for the next chief of external operations. Several senior Al-Qaeda activists, such as **Ramzi Bin Al-Shiba**, **Mohammad Hawasawi** and above all **Khalid Sheikh Mohammed**, moved from the Media Committee to the External Operations Unit. In this regard, it seems there are various similarities between the unique qualifications needed for activity in both units. The understanding of western mentality and approach is prerequisite for operating in both units/committees, and hence the mobilization between the two seems logical, especially considering that the vast majority of Al-Qaeda's activists originated from the Middle East and lack knowledge of "the West".

- ❖ Nationality- While traditionally in the last years the position was filled by Egyptian operatives (with clear influence of Al-Qaeda's 2nd in command, the Egyptian **Ayman Al-Zawahiri**), there has been a recent rise of **Libyan and Somali** operatives, promoted to leadership positions in Al-Qaeda.

- ❖ Preference will be given to operatives with background and contacts in Western countries, like deceased Abu Obadiah Al-Masri, who lived and had contacts in Germany.

Conclusion

Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit is of great interest as it presents the most dangerous and sophisticated terror threat among all "Global Jihad" entities. In the last 4 years, the unit has been increasingly facing hardships, through killing or capture of its leaders, dismantling of its cells abroad, series of failed attacks and plots conducted by its operatives, financial shortages and other setbacks.

Nevertheless, and contrary to some speculations, the unit seems far from being inactive. The abovementioned indications suggest that during 2006-2008, the unit has maintained and possibly expanded recruiting, training and plotting of attacks "routine", adapting to the new conditions in Pakistan and in the target countries.

An organized and efficient network is facilitating the unit's activities, providing it with a cadre of hundreds of trainees possessing Western documentation. These American and European recruits might serve as a platform for enhancing Al-Qaeda's capabilities to conduct terror attacks on western soil. We assess, with this regards, that at least some of the Al-Qaeda External Operations cells in the west based upon those 2006-2008 trainees are about to reach operational maturation. Hence western countries are likely to face the resume and rise of terrorist attempts by Al-Qaeda on western soil in the coming future.

It is assessed that Al-Qaeda would attempt, as a high priority, to conduct attacks on American, British and above all Israeli soil, as well as attacking assets of these countries in the international arena. In addition, Al-Qaeda would seek to target western countries involved in the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq (such as Canada, Germany, Australia, the Netherlands, Poland and the Czech Republic). Other targets include countries that have performed what Al-Qaeda considers as "Humiliation of Islam", such as France ("The veil controversy") and Denmark (The Prophet Mohammed cartoons).

We assess that the recent indications for Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit activities are not rare ones, nor an exception, and that this process of recruiting, training and "planting" of sleeper cells in the West has been continued throughout

2009 as well. Although the current ongoing Pakistani and US-led crackdown against Taliban and Al-Qaeda activity in the tribal areas of Pakistan is likely to slow down its ability to efficiently train and operate,⁶ some existing cells of Al-Qaeda's External Operations Unit abroad would probably not sustain much damage and might be capable of launching attacks regardless of the situation in Pakistan.

To conclude- Al-Qaeda nowadays maintains two main operational arms:

The first is the small and shaken, yet functioning and sophisticated External Operations Unit that recent indications suggest it has resumed its operational capabilities. According to our assessment, the unit might be on the brink of conducting a new wave of attacks on western soil, first and for most against Israeli, American and British targets.

The Second arm is composed of Al-Qaeda "branches" in the Maghreb (North Africa, AQIM), Iraq (AQI) and the Arab Peninsula (AQAP, AQAI). These branches, widespread yet inexperienced in attacking in the US and Europe, expand Al-Qaeda's operational reach and serve as an important asset for the organization. We believe that these "branches" will be deployed in the coming months to attack western targets within their own vicinity, and possibly outside of it.

⁶ see Ceifit Terror Analysis: "Fighting Terrorism in Pakistan: Risks and Opportunities" at <http://www.ceifit.com/?categoryId=25149&itemId=76132>