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Al-Qaeda Spreads Its Tentacles

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Philip Smucker, '[Al-Qaeda Spreads Its Tentacles](#)', Asia Times Online, 29 May 2009

EXCERPT: "Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network is seizing a greater role behind the scenes in Afghanistan and Pakistan in an effort that could block the Barack Obama administration's stated goal of denying the terror network sanctuary in South Asia. A three-month investigation of al-Qaeda's activities, from Nuristan in the north to Paktika in the southeast, suggests that bin Laden's terror network - working through Afghan and Pakistani partners - is present in almost every Afghan and Pakistani province along the fluid border areas between the two countries. Interviews with US military commanders and American radio intercepts of Arab and Chechen fighters as well as confirmed captures or kills of foreign fighters inside Afghanistan bolster the findings. More alarming to Western terrorism analysts and US commanders, however, is the recognition that al-Qaeda has succeeded in goading its regional partners into accepting the idea of a 'two-front-war' against US-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan and the government in Pakistan. That war in turn guarantees bin Laden's network permanent safe havens along the porous border between the two nations, from which it can plan larger international terrorist attacks."

Unlike in Iraq, where al-Qaeda chose to participate directly in battles with its own frontline fighters and under its own brand name, bin Laden's al-Qaeda network in South Asia is increasingly content to play a role behind the scenes, influencing key players in the struggle and furthering its political interests, said Western terrorism analysts and Afghans.

American terrorism experts say that al-Qaeda's leadership has chosen the senior leader of Pakistan's Taliban, Baitullah Mahsud, as their point man. Uzbek and Chechen "trigger men", most of whom have been living opposite across the border in the North and South Waziristan tribal areas in Pakistan, have helped Mahsud, 34, consolidate his own authority up and down the border in the past year. In March, the US government offered a US\$5 million reward for

Mahsud, whom it says is a "key al-Qaeda facilitator", or ally, responsible for multiple suicide attacks.

Pakistani officials in Afghanistan and Pakistan said this week that Mahsud was using al-Qaeda's highly trained gunmen in the Pakistani Taliban's ongoing guerrilla struggle in the Swat Valley. Mahsud bullied his way into a position of leadership across most of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas earlier this year when a new coalition of insurgent groups confirmed him as their "supreme commander" in February.

American counter-insurgency efforts in Afghanistan are focused on building a bulwark against al-Qaeda, which the Barack Obama administration deems an essential part of the puzzle for peace in South Asia. But Mahsud and several of his deputies, who operate on both sides of the border, have created a strong bridge linking the Pakistani Taliban with the Afghan Taliban in a two-front war with a border that has proven impossible for US and Pakistani forces to control.

"Al-Qaeda is operating parasitically on the successes of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban by providing them with critical services, including global media networks, resource mobilization and precious human capital," said Vahid Brown, an al-Qaeda analyst with West Point's prestigious Combating Terrorism Center (CTC).

An Afghan, working with Western forces in Afghanistan and who asked to remain anonymous, said he had monitored al-Qaeda radio traffic in a Paktika province district that is a stronghold of the Haqqani network, run by Sirajuddin Haqqani. "I set up a radio scanner two months ago and I picked up Chechens and Arabs talking regularly," he said. "At one point, we heard an Arab talking to a Chechen say, 'Hey, the money has come in, you can attack soon.'" The Afghan said that an Afghan al-Qaeda figure, Maulvi Twaha, who he said he had personally seen shoot dead five Afghan students in 2001, was operating openly in the province, assisting foreign agents and fighters to enter and leave the region. An American, embedded as a trainer with the Afghan National Army, confirmed similar radio traffic. "It sounds from radio chatter like they have more recruits coming in, including Arabs, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Chechen fighters," said US Army Major Cory Schultz, 37, from the San Francisco Bay Area.

A leading al-Qaeda propagandist and ideologue, Abu Yahya al-Libbi, an escapee from the US prison at Bagram in July 2005, claimed in a propaganda booklet released in mid-March that Pakistan's army should be treated as an occupying infidel army waging an offensive war on an invaded Muslim population. He told Pakistanis that it was incumbent on them, as "good Muslims", to fight their own government.

Al-Libbi has helped the Pakistani Taliban set up successful propaganda operations of their own with FM broadcast stations that operate through portable Chinese transmission boxes. "Abu Yahya al-Libbi translates the network's ideas to a popular audience" on both sides of the border, said Brian Fishman, also at West Point's CTC.

Al-Libbi maintains close ties to the "Tora Bora Front" in eastern Afghanistan, north of the White Mountains, and has been interviewed on the website of the front, which is the domain of Mujahid Khalis, the son of deceased mujahideen leader Younus Khalis, who welcomed bin Laden to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996.

Al-Qaeda's proxy Mahsud has aligned his fighters closely with those of Mullah "Radio"

Fazlullah, whose insurgents are fighting a protracted war with Pakistani forces well to the north of Waziristan and centered in the region of Swat in Pakistan.

In a 2007 interview with this correspondent, Fazlullah did not mince words in support of al-Qaeda's goals in neighboring Afghanistan and around the globe: "When Muslims are under attack in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have a duty to fight back against the American crusaders and their allies," he said.

Other leading insurgent groups led by Jalaluddin Haqqani's son, Sirajuddin, as well as Mullah Nazir, who operate along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border out of Waziristan, have been forced to agree to the new al-Qaeda-backed strategy for the two-front war, said Western terrorism analysts.

Though bin Laden remains the head of al-Qaeda, operational control and support for wars in South Asia is largely believed to be the work of his right-hand man, Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, who lives in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Other leading American terrorism experts said al-Qaeda had made significant adaptations meant to enhance its own power base, albeit usually well hidden behind the scenes. "Al-Qaeda is acting as a force multiplier by providing funding, assistance in propaganda efforts using its print and video outlets, strategic planning ability and aid on tactics," said Seth Jones, an advisor to the US military and the author of the forthcoming book, *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires*.

Terrorism analysts believe that bin Laden has likely taken refuge in North or South Waziristan, or a large city well inside Pakistan's settled areas. They say his larger-than-life presence remains a thorn in the side of US efforts. "He is the head of the snake and he does matter," said Fishman, adding that bin Laden still likely takes part in the network's major decision-making.

West Point's terrorism analysts believe that al-Qaeda stands to gain from continued fighting and chaos on both sides of the border. "There has already been a significant movement of Pakistani Taliban leaders in the al-Qaeda camp into the settled areas of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province and their front for operations planning is spreading," said Brown. "Hundreds of thousands of additional internally displaced persons in Pakistan means lots of fresh blood for al-Qaeda's ranks."

Both US military and Afghan security officials confirmed a steady movement - by air from Dubai and other aerial hubs, by land across Iran and water from the Gulf - of international jihadis from the Middle East to South Asia. Many Arabs, Chechens and other foreign fighters recently completed tours of fighting in Iraq, where al-Qaeda suffered significant setbacks.

American military commanders say they are doing what they can to flush out known Taliban and al-Qaeda safe havens inside Afghanistan, but terrorism experts believe insurgents are planning fresh attacks in conjunction with an influx of 20,000 US and NATO forces this summer.

Colonel John Spiszer, 46, of Harker Heights, Texas, who commands US forces north of the White Mountains in eastern Afghanistan, acknowledged that one, Abu Ikhlas al Masri, an Egyptian al-Qaeda member, was contributing to the intense fight against his forces in the

province of Kunar, not far from the Pakistani regions of Swat and Bajaur.

"The guys [al-Qaeda and other financiers] giving the insurgents money right now are doing it to survive and get fighters," he said. He added that his goal in pressing the fight along the border with Pakistan was to keep "facilitators and financiers" locked down in a battle near the border and keep them from further impacting the fight inside Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, the ties between al-Qaeda and leading insurgent groups go back to the days of bin Laden's own involvement in the fight against the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, he fought in eastern Afghanistan himself near Khost in the remote town of Jaji in Paktia province. Many of al-Qaeda's Arab operatives later took up residence inside Afghanistan as the Taliban rose to power in the late 1990s. Most of this crowd fled to Pakistan in the wake of the US invasion in 2001.

Leading Arabs and Uzbeks, in addition to plotting international terrorist actions, became successful in the cross-border trade of opium and heroin. Efforts of Pakistani and Afghan warlords to wrest more control of Pakistan's share of the regional drug trade from these same groups have failed, said Western analysts and Afghans.

Across from Khost in Pakistan, over mountains traversable by bicycle, al-Qaeda's own military trainers still work closely with strategic Taliban commanders at Haqqani command centers like the Manba Ulum Haqqania *madrassa* (seminary) in Northern Waziristan.

American unmanned Predator drones have repeatedly dropped bombs on or near the religious school, which is believed to maintain a number of secret bases across Waziristan. As a precaution against the US's aerial raids, al-Qaeda members in Waziristan rarely have tea in groups of more than three, said Afghans who travel to the region.

In addition, Taliban fighters, often working with al-Qaeda military trainers, have started to train indoors as well as in small mud-walled compounds, where they attract only limited attention from US aerial overflights and drone bombing runs.

Most Afghanistan-Pakistan insurgent groups, led by Mahsud and Mullah Omar's Afghan Taliban, have not officially adopted the "al-Qaeda" brand name, but they have essentially sworn their allegiance to bin Laden, say leading experts on the terror network. They claim that al-Qaeda has learned from the mistake of going into business under its own name in Iraq and it prefers, instead, to remain behind the scenes, protected by local gunmen on the one hand, but capable of influencing the fight against US and foreign "infidels" in South Asia on the other hand.

Philip Smucker is a commentator and journalist based in South Asia and the Middle East. He is the author of Al-Qaeda's Great Escape: The Military and the Media on Terror's Trail (2004). He is currently writing My Brother, My Enemy, a book about America and the battle of ideas in the Islamic world.