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Al-Qaeda finds new friends

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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"In the view of American spy agencies, Osama bin Laden and a dwindling cadre of al-Qaeda operatives hiding in Pakistan no longer have the capacity to carry out a terror plot similar to the September 11 attacks.

US Vice President Joe Biden

ISLAMABAD - The emergence of Egyptian Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri in al-Qaeda in the mid-1990s turned the group's firebrand but erratic operations into a broader strategic pattern and policy.

However, the situation changed diametrically after al-Qaeda's devastating defeat in the "war on terror" following the post-9/11 United States invasion of Afghanistan that led to the fall of the Taliban - the Taliban were punished for harboring Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda became reliant on local partners, namely the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani pro-Taliban tribes, anti-Shi'ite outfits such as the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and ideological mercenaries in Pakistan's Islamic *madrassas* - seminaries - and groups. Al-Qaeda's overall strategy became diluted in the process. It faced a similar situation in Iraq and Somalia.

Two major developments then rejuvenated al-Qaeda. The first was the come-back of the

Taliban in Afghanistan after 2006, the second the mass migration of battle-hardened commanders to Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area - they had previously been fighting in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Veteran leaders like Ilyas Kashmiri and Badr Mansoor absorbed al-Qaeda's ideology and this fusion of ideology and the astute guerrilla strategy of well-trained fighters by 2007-2008 helped create a new army for al-Qaeda in South Asia.

Two major jail breaks - in 2006 and 2010 - in Yemen also solved a leadership crisis in the Arabian Peninsula and Somalia and helped al-Qaeda to revive its operations in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa.

These developments have given al-Qaeda a commanding position in South Asia, Iraq, Yemen and Somalia, and reduced its dependency on local partners like the Taliban, the Iraqi resistance, Yemeni tribes and Somalia's insurgent groups. Now al-Qaeda can effectively manipulate these groups for its cause.

Background interviews conducted by Asia Times Online confirm that an early idea of al-Qaeda's role as an international Islamic front for the liberation of occupied Muslim lands, carrying all Muslim groups and movements onboard, is in place for the coming year, when the US war on al-Qaeda will be a decade old.

Balochistan: Al-Qaeda's watershed in the region

An unsuccessful suicide attack in December on the chief minister of southwestern Balochistan province, Nawab Aslam Raisani, a most respected Baloch chieftain, stunned everybody. Responsibility was claimed by the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ - al-Alami), a faction of an anti-Shi'ite group that has given up its cause of anti-Shi'ite assassinations as its main operation to fit in with al-Qaeda's global operations.

Balochistan had witnessed little sectarian violence, and attacks on Shi'ites after 2003 were not taken seriously, considered as a quirk and the stand-alone activities of a few dozen Balochi nationals who had joined LJ and who were not part of the mainstream Pashtun-based Taliban movement.

The LJ's operations were not even in the limelight when the anti-state Iranian Jundallah revived its network in Iran and carried out several devastating attacks. Yet the LJ was the main force behind those attacks.

A sudden surge in attacks on Afghanistan-bound (through the Chaman-Kandahar border crossing) North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supplies, a hallmark of al-Qaeda and its allied groups, especially in the ethnically Baloch regions of Balochistan, forced decision-makers for the first time to rethink the serious penetration of al-Qaeda in the region that had been the domain and ownership of the indigenous Pashtun Taliban.

Balochistan province borders Afghanistan's southwestern regions of Kandahar and

Helmand , the spiritual heartland of the Taliban where the real Afghan Taliban, the Kandahari clan, with no al-Qaeda influence, runs the insurgency.

"This is evidence that the situation is clearly slipping out of control," a senior security official told Asia Times Online. "There was a hope in the past that Pakistan could intervene and talk through the Taliban who run southwestern Afghanistan without any al-Qaeda influence, but if they have opened a theater in Balochistan, that means the situation is taking a new turn and the war theater will flare up."

This coincides with a crucial stage in the region when Balochistan is the main factor in a struggle between Chinese and United States interests running all the way from Balochistan's Gwadar port to Central Asia via Kandahar and Herat in Afghanistan. China has taken control in Gwadar and aims to create its hegemony on main water trade routes.

The American-backed energy project, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline is expected to get a decisive push next month. The main route of the pipeline is through Herat-Kandahar and Balochistan. The project is largely seen as a guarantee of peace in the region as it would involve Pakistan's interests and force it to encourage the Taliban to sign ceasefire agreements in Herat and Kandahar with NATO forces so that the pipeline project could be executed.

"An indication of a strong pro-al-Qaeda LJ presence in the region shows a complete anti-thesis of the grand American designs for an endgame," the Pakistani security official said. "If the LJ is so strengthened that it can carry out attacks on the chief minister of Balochistan, it could attack NATO supply lines on a daily basis, especially in the non-Pashtun region. It senses that al-Qaeda has entered into the Taliban's domain and the chances to speak to the indigenous pro-Taliban tribal leaders to control the insurgency will be fewer than ever in the region."

The most dangerous element is the LJ's ethnic non-Pashtun and Baloch roots. Balochistan is already mired in an anti-Pakistan Baloch separatist insurgency. Both the LJ and Baloch insurgents are against the state of Pakistan and they could possibly cooperate to fight against security forces. If this development takes strong roots in Balochistan, as is clearly indicated by the high number of attacks on NATO supplies, the influence of the indigenous pro-Taliban Pashtun tribes over the insurgency would decline, as it is case in southeastern Afghan provinces and in the northwestern Pakistani tribal regions; al-Qaeda would take ownership of the insurgency even in southwestern Afghanistan.

Europe and India

Targeting foreign hotspots in India and avenging the individuals and institutions involved in the Prophet Mohammed's cartoon controversy has been decided as the main strategy opening up al-Qaeda's new war theaters.

The crux of this is no stand-alone operations like bomb blasts, but a comprehensive terror

campaign that could polarize societies and generate a massive amount of unease and insecurity in European capitals.

This is what commanders like Ilyas Kashmiri did in Indian-administered Kashmir and in major Indian cities during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir was the result of ideological inspiration when it began in the late 1980s, but by the late 1990s it was a meticulous nexus of local mafias and the underworld that ensured uninterrupted logistical support, and the jihadi cadre were the human resources. This successfully took the fight to India's major cities, such as Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata. Once commanders like Mansoor and Kashmiri joined forces with al-Qaeda, they were given charge of al-Qaeda's operations in Europe and in India.

"The strategies will certainly take shape by 2011," said a senior Pakistani security official who has interrogated several jihadis, including those involved in attacks at the Ahmedi sect's worship places in Lahore. He said there were clear leads that al-Qaeda's affiliated groups had established cells in India and Europe and that they were arranging a network that would ensure an uninterrupted supply of weapons, money and other logistical support.

Similar plans have been prepared through pro-al-Qaeda Somali groups to smuggle al-Qaeda members to the US and Europe for terror attacks. Black converts with their former Christian names on their passports are the main components of this strategy.

This comes at a time of debate within al-Qaeda on whether it should become a popular movement. (See [Broadside fired at al-Qaeda leaders](#) Asia Times Online, December 10, 2010.)

The issue is whether it should connect with mainstream international jihadi groups and with political Islamic parties. Sources in militant circles confirm that al-Qaeda's leaders have agreed in principle and are gathering suggestions for such a move.

By opening up war theaters and connecting with the Muslim masses, al-Qaeda would gain a lot of space in which to maneuver across the globe and it would be in a better position to engage Western forces.