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Al-Qaeda: the second coming

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In a major investigation, an expert on terror reveals it is evolving into a potent new threat...

This weekend Osama bin Laden turned 50, probably on the wild Pakistan border, while Madrid falls silent today to honour its 2004 bomb victims . But what of al-Qaeda? In a major investigation, an expert on terror reveals it is evolving into a potent new threat

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For his 40th birthday, Osama bin Laden's followers gave their leader a white stallion. Bin Laden, a keen horseman despite back problems, rode for hours through the dusty farmland and hills around his base north of Jalalabad, the eastern Afghan city.
Yesterday the leader of al-Qaeda turned 50. It is unlikely that the gesture was repeated. Almost all the men who gave their chief the stallion are now dead, the base has been dismantled and a similar ride would be to risk detection, identification and a pinpoint missile strike. Yet, though he may lack horses and veteran associates, bin Laden is far from finished. Indeed, nine years after his declaration of war on the West and five and a half years after the attacks of 11 September, 2001, their leader is as present as ever on the world stage, linked, rightly or wrongly, to violence across half the globe.

This weekend there is talk of an al-Qaeda connection to the recent spate of particularly bloody bombings in Iraq. The trial of Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the terror group's associate who originally planned the 9/11 strikes, is due to start in Guantanamo Bay and will spark massive media interest. In the UK a series of trials of alleged Islamic militants, some accused of having links to bin Laden's closest collaborators, continue. In Afghanistan, where British casualties mount every week, Taliban militants boast of the forces they have gathered for a 'spring offensive'. The continuing evolution of the phenomenon of 'al-Qaeda' continues to surprise - and deeply worry - those charged with keeping us safe. An investigation by The Observer, involving hours of face-to-face interviews with current and former government and military officials, experts and intelligence analysts in Afghanistan, Britain, France, Germany and Morocco, as well as sources contacted in a dozen other countries including the US and Pakistan, reveals why - and discloses the frightening reality of the changing threat.

The camp is high in the mountains, near the Afghan city of Khost, at the end of a dirt track on the border with Pakistan. It is not much to look at - a few mud buildings and some tents that are barely visible on the satellite photographs that Western intelligence experts spend hours poring over. It does not even have a name. But it is the symbol of a newly resurgent al-Qaeda 'hard core' or 'headquarters' that is, according to analysts, 'more dangerous than ever'.

For the camp is a training centre, run by a mixed team of Afghan, Arab and Pakistani instructors, fundraisers and ideologues. It is only one of half a dozen such installations set up in the past 18 months. It is in these camps, The Observer has learnt, that dozens of British citizens are thought to have been trained and then sent into Afghanistan to fight in recent months. The men, all of whom come from families with strong links to Pakistan, are said to number between 20 and 30, although details are scant. Security services have traced the individuals to the camps - most of

which are on the Pakistani side of the border - but then lost the trail.

The men have either died in combat, are still fighting American, British or other Nato nations' forces in the country or are 'on their way home', say sources in the US, the UK and southwest Asia. 'We just hope they are dead,' one source admitted. 'It's best that they blow themselves up over there than over here.'

The men, like the camp, are part of a new wave of al-Qaeda activism that has astonished security services. As well as the British recruits suspected of having died in Afghanistan, The Observer investigation has revealed that:

· Britain is universally considered to be the nation 'most threatened by a major terrorist strike' outside the Middle East or southwest Asia because of its strong support for American foreign policies, relative accessibility compared to the US and strong historic connections to Pakistan which allows in hundreds of thousands of British subjects to travel virtually unmonitored every year. Though only a tiny minority are involved in militancy, the ease of access to the country for Urdu-speaking Britons is a huge advantage to those bent on violence.

· Al-Qaeda has re-established its 'nerve centre' in the lawless tribal areas of western Pakistan. The country is now considered the 'centre of gravity' of al-Qaeda by security services and the 'critical battlefield' in the years to come.

· Contrary to the British government's public claim, every source spoken to by The Observer, official or otherwise, in Britain and elsewhere believes the Iraq war has exacerbated the threat to the UK specifically and to the West generally. 'It is a huge part of the problem,' one senior British government counter-terrorism specialist said. However, contrary to exaggerated reports, the number of Westerners who have gone to Iraq to fight is said to be 'a handful'.

· Major co-ordinated attacks on the critical infrastructure of Western nations, such as the Channel Tunnel or passenger jets, are 'within the capability and ambition' of militants close to the al-Qaeda leadership and acting independently and are being actively planned.

· All sources consulted believe Osama bin Laden to be alive. However, his death would 'make little operational difference', analysts say, possibly damaging 'the organisation' but not 'the movement'.

· All thought the struggle against Islamic terrorism was growing and would last 'many decades'.

Western government analysts now usually split al-Qaeda into three elements. The first is a 'hard core' of well-known leaders such as bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, his Egyptian-born associate, in Afghanistan. Security officials believe key decisions and operations take place on a new 'middle management' level dedicated to training volunteers who make their way to Pakistan and to co-ordinating both propaganda and bomb attacks around the world.

'Al-Qaeda as an operational, technically capable network, with chains of command leading back to Pakistan from many places, is very much alive and well and continuing to plot,' said one security source. 'This is very, very surprising given the damage they have suffered but they are a very resilient organisation.'

Although the mid-level management frequently suffers losses as key figures are arrested or killed - 'the job with the shortest life expectancy in the world must be al-Qaeda's director of external

communications,' said one UK official - there is no shortage of new faces to fill the ranks. 'We are seeing an entirely new generation of militant,' said one US source.

The second element is the 'network of networks', defined as the series of groups affiliated to the al-Qaeda hard core in Iraq, elsewhere in the Middle East and, increasingly, in some North African countries. These 'franchises' have links to individuals inside Western European countries, particularly the Algerian-based Groupe Salafiste de Predication et le Combat, and are seen as a potentially major threat. Analysts see a 'clear convergence, practically and ideologically, among militant groups globally' with greater co-ordination between them.

'There is subcontracting of functions,' said one Casablanca-based expert. 'Groups in Morocco were tasked with logistics for groups elsewhere, in Spain for example. So, like multinational companies, al-Qaeda "delocalises" key functions - and constructs cosmopolitan leadership teams.'

So the arrest of two French militants returning from Iraq, who were allegedly planning to strike in Italy, has not surprised officials in Paris. 'Plot an attack here, execute it in another country and hide somewhere else is very logical,' said Christophe Chaboud, head of France's Anti-terrorism Co-ordination Unit.

'The national barriers are falling by the wayside,' said one Pakistani official. 'Once a group was just dedicated to jihad in Kashmir or Afghanistan. Now it has a far broader agenda and engagement.' With Kashmiri groups historically having a significant presence in the UK, this growing unity is of great significance for British domestic security.

Significantly, the Taliban in Afghanistan is not considered to be closely linked to the al-Qaeda hard core, though there is reported to be ad hoc co-ordination between the various groups comprising the insurgency, including some transfer of technical and tactical know-how and cash. One civilian source in Kabul described links between Afghan and Iraqi militants as 'sketchy'.

'The Afghans are said to have learnt their bomb-making skills from the Iraqis but in some areas, such as detonators, they are far ahead and need no tuition,' he said. Only two of the 140 suicide bombers who have died in Afghanistan since mid-2005 have come from outside Afghanistan, Pakistan or Afghan and Pakistani communities living overseas.

'They may well include British Pakistanis,' the source said, 'After the explosion, it is difficult to tell.' Some suicide bombers have been identified as relatives of people killed in coalition bombing strikes who are seeking revenge.

Bin Laden himself, however, is thought by Afghan military sources to be exploiting his links through marriage to senior Taliban figures such as Mullah Mohammed Omar to boost his security. 'Being part of a tribal network makes him much safer,' said one Afghan official. Though some believe that bin Laden and al-Zawahiri are in the northern Afghan province of Kunar, the consensus is that they remain further south, probably in the mountains south of Khost. They are unlikely to be together, to prevent the organisation being decapitated by a single strike. Many analysts believe that, instead of moving around, bin Laden has 'found a bolthole and has bolted it'. No one can be sure. 'Hard info on bin Laden's recent whereabouts or his state of health is one of the rarest commodities in the world,' said an ex-CIA officer.

The third element of 'al-Qaeda Mk2', say security officials, is ideology. This has mobilised thousands of young Muslims from a wide variety of backgrounds around the world in the last five

years. Analysts now say their radicalisation is occurring far faster, aided by the internet. 'We are talking about a group of guys deciding to do something in West Yorkshire, Paris, Casablanca or Montreal', said one Western intelligence official. 'It's still amateur.'

But it can be horribly effective. According to France's Chaboud, the largest source of danger 'is the home-grown extremist'. Belgian officials point to a recently arrested teenager who had 'gone from no engagement at all to full commitment to a suicide attack' in the space of a few weeks 'alone with a computer in his bedroom'. British officials talk of suspects so young that '11 September is virtually a childhood memory' being radicalised by 'slick, effective' propaganda and contacts with older people. 'Teenagers' bedrooms are difficult to penetrate,' said one UK official.

Group thinking plays a major role. 'In reinforcing each other's view of the world, there is a shift in the perception of what is acceptable and normal,' said one senior counter-terrorism official. One Whitehall official described the sentiments of embryonic militants, often second or third generation immigrants, as: 'I am unhappy, I have an identity problem, I have too much testosterone, I have some mates who feel the same way.'

It is not the poorest people who are drawn to militancy either. The standard profile is male, mid-twenties, often with a degree and with parents who have migrated, often from southwest Asia or north Africa to the West. There are also an increasing number of converts.

But though, according to one Whitehall official, 'there is not a single person who has posed a major threat here in recent years who was not radicalised primarily in the UK,' the crucial 'X factor' which changes angry young men into terrorist killers does comes from overseas, British and French government analysts have concluded.

'For a few years it looked like the core of al-Qaeda had been destroyed as a genuine physical presence by the war of 2001 and all that remained were its ideas, powerful though they were,' said one senior Western European security source. 'Yet we have seen the core element returning as a major force. They can provide the critical legitimacy and direction that volunteers need.'

Analysts point to journeys made by the leader of the 7 July London bomb plotters, Mohammed Siddique Khan, to Pakistan, where he is believed to have met senior al-Qaeda figures. In a speech last November the director-general of MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, said terrorist plots in Britain 'often have links back to al-Qaeda in Pakistan', adding that 'through those links al-Qaeda gives guidance and training to its largely British foot soldiers here on an extensive and growing scale'.

The fact that videos featuring the logo of al-Sabah, the al-Qaeda production house, now emerge within days of an event rather than taking weeks as they once did, has reinforced the idea that the 'al-Qaeda hard core' has been able to rebuild in the havens it has established in the rugged hills of northwest Pakistan.

It is the continually evolving interaction between the three main elements - the hard core, the network of networks and the ideology - that make it so resilient. Last year Deputy Assistant Commissioner Peter Clarke, head of the Anti-Terrorist Branch of the Metropolitan Police, described the threat to the UK from al-Qaeda-related terrorism as 'real, deadly and enduring'.

The problem, say all the sources, is not going to go away soon. 'Some talk about a generational struggle, something taking around 30 years but I think that is too optimistic,' said a senior UK source.

Ten years ago, when bin Laden rode his horse across the Afghan hills, few outside specialised circles had even heard of him. Now he is one of the best-known individuals on the planet. And therein may lie, for him at least, the best birthday present of all.

Key Figures

At large:

Osama bin Laden
Accused of masterminding the 11 September atrocities, he has been indicted for the 1998 US embassy bombings in East Africa and the attacks in 2000 on the guided missile destroyer USS Cole. Last confirmed sighting in Afghanistan, 2001.

Ayman Al-Zawahiri
Egyptian al-Zawahiri is seen as the strategic thinker of al-Qaeda. He was a key figure in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which merged with al-Qaeda.

Saif Al-Adel
A former Egyptian army officer, was Bin Laden's security chief and ran al-Qaeda's training programmes.

Abu Mohammed Al-Masri
The 45-year-old Egyptian ran the training camps in Afghanistan.

Believed dead:

Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi
A Jordanian, he rose to notoriety as head of militant Islamic groups in Iraq. Killed in a US airstrike on an Iraqi safe house in June 2006.

Mohammed Atef
Al-Qaeda's military commander, died in an airstrike near Kabul in 2001.

In prison:

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed
Captured in Pakistan in 2003, he is to be tried at Guantanamo, accused of being an architect of the 11 September attacks. Born in Pakistan, Mohammed joined al-Qaeda in the mid-1990s.

Ramzi Binalshibh
Also to be tried as a key plotter of 11 September . The former bank clerk from Yemen was arrested in Karachi, Pakistan, in 2002.

Abu Zubaydah
A Saudi of Palestinian origin, he ran the logistics for bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan. Implicated in the USS Cole attack. Captured in Pakistan, he is to stand trial.

Ali Abdul Rahman Al-Ghamdi
Said to be al-Qaeda's leader in Saudi Arabia. Suspected of masterminding the 2003 Riyadh bombings. Surrendered to Saudi authorities shortly afterwards.

A trail of terror

1998: Osama bin Laden declares war on the West and bombs two United States embassies in Africa

2000: Al-Qaeda attacks an American warship in Yemen

2001: 11 September strikes kill 3,000 people

2002: Bombings in Bali, Indonesia

2003:Bombs in Casablanca

2004: Bombs in Madrid kill 200

2005: More than 50 people killed by four bombs in London on 7 July

· The Observer's Jason Burke is one of the world's leading experts on terrorism. His latest book, On the Road to Kandahar, is published by Allen Lane.

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