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Al Qaeda: the link and threat to Europe[†]

In recent months there have been a spate of arrests on the European continent and in the United Kingdom, of individuals allegedly linked to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network. These interdictions have occurred in Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy. In some cases individuals have been apprehended with the means and necessary intelligence to execute an unconventional attack. In other cases they could not be linked to an imminent atrocity but were identifiably part of the "Arab mujahedeen" network trained and linked to al Qaeda. The obvious question remains: are these events the result of a heightened level of efficiency and cooperation amongst European law enforcement authorities and elements of the intelligence community (IC), or it is rather the result of a heightened level of activity and increased number of terrorist operatives within the countries involved? The following analysis looks to the existing trends and information with an eye to describing the extent of the network involved and the likely threat posed by the members who are still at large.

Channels and Means

For obvious reasons the penetration of al Qaeda-connected operatives is greatest in those nations of the European Union that have liberal asylum and immigration laws (e.g. Holland), and/or those countries that maintain established and strong immigrant communities within well-defined geographic boundaries (for example the city of Leicester in the UK where British authorities have made numerous arrests of late). The problem has grown to such proportions in the former category of states that the Dutch internal security service, the Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst, or BVD, has publicly stated in one of its official threat assessments that potential terrorists have already probably singled-out Holland - as a result of its lenient attitude to asylum and religious freedom - as a place of refuge from which to set up operational bases for the furtherment of their cause, in other words as a "safe haven". Add to this the proportionally higher number of Afghans and Iraqis that make it to the Netherlands, and it is understandable why domestic Dutch media has estimated the existence of several hundred terrorists on Dutch soil.

Technically those arrested since September 11th have often been legally resident immigrants, but in France, for example, non-Arab, previously non-Muslim French nationals have also been detained, having similar Islamic conversion stories to that of the UK's own shoe-bomber, Richard Reid. Nevertheless, wide use is also made of fake or re-engineered EU passports. During one raid and set of arrests on the continent, no less than 28 false passports were retrieved. The unitary Schengen frontier around the continental members of the EU obviously makes EU-nation-state issued travel documents all the more appealing given the freedom of movement guaranteed to the holder once across the Schengen frontier controls.

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Once inside the given EU member state, from post-apprehension questioning, it is clear that the early Arab Service Bureau system with its affiliated charities as jointly set-up and eventually usurped by Osama bin Laden, continues to function on the continent and also in the UK. Along with remaining bureaus, certain mosques have become the recruiting and meeting place for lower level operatives, especially those associated with the radical and charismatic imams. Overlapping this network is a string of charitable organisations, often linked to Islamicist philanthropists resident in Saudi Arabia and several schools which if not overtly Islamicist, are linked via board members or in other ways to the previous net.

Capabilities

According to the confirmed information available to date the operatives already apprehended have indeed demonstrated novel capabilities. Whilst it is still not possible to accurately evaluate the rumours of al Qaeda intentions or abilities to detonate a radiological device, or “dirty bomb”, there is evidence of other unconventional capabilities. In addition to those arrests where small-arms and classic chemical explosives were unearthed, there have been reports of a possible chemical weapon attack against the London Underground. Whilst these reports could not later be substantiated, the fact remains that two further arrests have raised the “threat threshold” unquestionably. At the moment little is known about the substances found in the possession of the three Algerians and one Moroccan arrested last month in Paris, but the recent Rome arrests included a confirmed poison in the possession (potassium ferrocyanide) of those apprehended as well as schematics of the water system supply to the US Embassy in that city. Whilst it has since been stated that this compound is unsuitable for direct contamination of a water system, the fact remains that it can be used as a base for the extraction of the far more lethal gas hydrogen cyanide. Given the fact that the suspects also were in possession of a chemical protection suit, this may indicate indeed that they were intending to use the initial 9 kilos of potassium cyanide simply as a base for further extraction and refining.

If al Qaeda - or even an unrelated extremist Muslim group - has come this close to deploying a chemical agent, this would represent a landmark event. To date the only successful non-state deployment of a chemical weapon has been the Aum Shinrykio cult’s sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Whilst the cult expended millions of dollars on both a chemical and biological weapons programme, the end result was a weak solution of sarin and the attack killed only 12 commuters. A well planned out attack against a metropolitan water system could prove far more devastating and given that the group it reported to have been in possession of intelligence describing the city’s as well as the embassy’s water supply, then there does seem to be a level of professionalism and determination apparent which represents a first for a non-cultist, non-nation state actor such as al Qaeda.

Possible Targets

It is clear that for Osama bin Laden the premier enemy remains the United States, especially as Washington - despite efforts to the contrary by the UN weapons



inspection team – appears to be gearing up every more seriously for a war whose aim is regime-change in an Arab state, namely Iraq. Nevertheless, in his occasional videoed, and recently more often simply taped speeches, no mercy is demonstrated towards to America's allies. As the arrests have demonstrated, the likely candidates, remain the same: the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Holland and Belgium, with perhaps the latter half of this group serving primarily as safe havens and operational bases, and the first half as potential targets ranked immediately behind the United States. Even so, this specific roster of likely European candidate-targets, may be increasing to include Central European states.

This week, following a hotly debated decision on behalf of the Hungarian government, a vanguard of PENTAGON and American IC personnel will arrive to a military base in southern Hungary. The base, which was used very successfully as a deployment hub for NATO troops being sent to the Balkans following the Dayton Accords of 1995, is to become home to 3,000 Iraqi dissidents over the next few months. Recruited and screened by Washington, these individuals will be militarily trained as frontline resistance operatives in the increasingly unconventional campaign that Washington is drawing up against Saddam Hussein and his regime.

Tactically, it is difficult to explain why the US wishes to train these quasi guerrillas in a nation far from the theatre-of-operations and in no way climatically or geographically similar to Iraq, unless it is simply to remove this activity and the attendant dangers from US soil. As for the Hungarian government, this serious gesture seems to be a way to curry favour inexpensively for the new government which is struggling with a legacy of sour relations with Washington, inherited from the last administration and which is also recovering from the recent domestic scandal during which it was revealed that the new Prime Minister was no so long ago a serving member of the Communist secret police directorate that was briefed to spy on NATO. The motivations are therefore clear. Even so, the terrorist threat will increase as a result for this new NATO nation. Already, a full four weeks before the first troops and trainees were to arrive an Arab news agency was reporting on the creation of this new base in Hungary. As a result it cannot be questioned that Hungary must have suddenly jumped from obscurity onto the radar screens of Arab and Muslim extremists, given the fact that this will be the first time in modern history that a large number of Arabs will be trained in a non-Arab state to support a US engineered regime-change in the Middle East. This alone will mean that Hungary will have to be added to the list of potentially enticing terrorist targets in the future.

To conclude, the threat remains, the list of targets appears to be increasing and the methods that the terrorists intend to use are not only unconventional but may prove to be precedent setting.

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