

Understanding the Enemy: al-Qaeda Net

A Global Terrorist Network

To truly understand how to stop the radical jihad movement, first its structure must be understood, and to understand its structure, one must first understand its history. The international Jihad movement is centered around al-Qaeda, which in Arabic means “the base” or “the foundation”. Al-Qaeda was formed in 1988 by Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden was part of the multi-national Islamic group which went to Afghanistan to fight Soviet forces. In the 1980’s, Bin Laden used his personal wealth to help finance a group known as Maktab al Khidmat, which means “Bureau of Services,” this group acted as a recruiting network, finding potential fighters, then providing the means, through paperwork and transport to get recruits into the area. In addition to helping this group, Bin Laden also helped to procure weapons and build training centers for mujahedeen fighters. Once the Soviets were defeated Bin Laden founded al-Qaeda as a means to create a global Islamic Army (Al-Qaeda Net), the purpose of which would be to expel westerners from Muslim countries, destroy Israel, and force Muslim countries to obey strict interpretations of Islam.

After the expulsion of the Soviets from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda moved to Saudi Arabia, however in 1991 as Western forces built up in Saudi Arabia in preparation for Desert Storm Bin Laden and al-Qaeda fled to Sudan. By 1992 Bin Laden had concluded that in order to reach his goals he had to attack America. Bin Laden then began to create his Al-Qaeda Net. Terrorist groups from Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Somalia, and Eritrea joined forces and began collaborating on attacks. Al-Qaeda built weapons depots and training facility in Sudan, which other Islamic terrorist organizations used. During this time al-Qaeda also built a fundraising network, which utilized mosques around the world, although primarily in Saudi Arabia; Muslim charities; and corrupt government officials.

Al-Qaeda then began a series of major terrorist attacks which targeted American forces and offices, in addition to some Saudi targets. During this time al-Qaeda broke Sunni, Shia lines and did some amount of collaboration with Iran and Hezbollah, both of which are Shia Muslim groups.

Then in May of 1996 Bin Laden and al-Qaeda were forced to leave to leave Sudan, at which point they moved back to Afghanistan. Although at first there was animosity between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, who were in the process of taking over Afghanistan at the time, the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, and Bin Laden came to realize that they shared the same views, and the two groups became close allies. The Taliban allowed al-Qaeda to build training camps and prepare for and coordinate terrorist attacks, and in turn al-Qaeda provided resources and trained soldiers to the Taliban. Al-Qaeda also used state resources and agencies to help coordinate attacks.

In August of 1996, Bin Laden, called for all Muslims to attack Americans to force their withdrawal from Muslim countries in his “Declaration of Holy War on the Americans Occupying the Country of the Two Sacred Places.” Then on February 23rd, 1998, Bin Laden along with Ayman Zawahiri signed and published a fatwa that announced that according to Islam, it is the personal duty of every Muslim to attack American citizens and soldiers, and their allies.

Al-Qaeda's training camps were designed to train soldiers for guerilla warfare, only a select few skilled individuals went on to receive specialized terrorist training. It is estimated that in al-Qaeda's camps as many as 20,000 men received training, training they took to many different places, back to many different organizations.

Due to its goals and history the al-Qaeda Net, which has at its heart al-Qaeda and also includes the rest of the jihadist movement, which could also be thought of as Bin Laden's "Islamic Army", can be described as being a network. To be able to successfully and efficiently defeat the Jihadist movement one must understand al-Qaeda Net. Al-Qaeda Net is what is known as a directional scale free network. A scale free network is a network in which there is a constant ratio in size between small hubs, such as a mosque which has a few members contributing money, and large hubs, such as the al-Qaeda senior commanders. This ratio does not change no matter how large the network gets, and this allows the network to efficiently grow to any size. In addition to being a basic scale free network, there is a directional aspect to the Al-Qaeda Net, there is a portion of the global network which has no direction restrictions, this would be the central command of al-Qaeda proper, where information and other resources flow freely and will be called the network core. There is also a part of the network which only inputs into the network core, this would be groups such as mosques around the world, who send money and men to al-Qaeda Net, but who do not get much of anything back. And finally there is a portion of the network which only receives things from the network core, this would be individual terror cells and other terrorist organizations who receive supplies and orders from the core, but who would not have much in the area of a response. So that leaves the core to do most of the planning and organizing. The network is known to exist in over 50 countries.

In order to destroy this network there are two methods which can be taken. A random attack plan could be taken, where nodes in the network were randomly destroyed, this would require an estimated 80% of the nodes in the network to be destroyed for there to be a failure of the network. The other option is to target the most important hubs and destroy them; this method would only require the destruction of about 10-20% of the hubs in the network to result in catastrophic disruption of the network. There are a number of criteria to consider when looking at which hubs to destroy. The first is the amount of connections which a hub is making; the larger a hub is the more critical it is to the network. Another consideration is what the hub is involved in, al-Qaeda Net is actually comprised of a number of smaller networks, such as the financing network, which moves money from sources around the world, into the core, the weapons network, which procures weapons and explosives and delivers them to wherever they are necessary, the tactical network, which organizes and runs operations, and so on. So the area with hubs which would be the most critical would be the core, as its hubs are invariably the most connected, and are part of the most sub networks. If enough of these critical hubs were to be destroyed, then a cascading failure could occur in the network, where all hubs would become disconnected from each other as each hub became overloaded with the responsibilities of destroyed hubs, and collapsed.

Although a cascading failure of al-Qaeda Net would be a serious blow to the global jihadist movement, it would not guarantee its destruction. To understand why, one must understand the structure of al-Qaeda Net's individual cells. Members can form into a cell when they form a small network with other like-minded individuals in their area.

This can occur when a group, whether it is a radical Islam college club, or a mosque with a radical mindset exists in an area where a person has their previous network(s) destroyed. This can happen through death of members in the old network, people moving, or whatever else. The endpoint is that that person no longer has a network, and so they then become vulnerable to being sucked into the radical group in their area, and the person may begin to buy into the radical Islam which that group is spreading. Association with this group or mosque will allow an individual node (a person) to create a network with other nodes who are actively buying into the message of radical Islam. As this small network gets stronger, these nodes will begin to sever any remaining connections to networks other than the new one which is based on radical Islam. Once this network becomes strong enough, then the group of nodes may begin to seek a hub which can connect them to al-Qaeda Net. Now even if a cascading failure were to occur, then these small groups of nodes, which due to the spread out nature of al-Qaeda Net would probably be undiscovered, would begin to re-hub to each other and rebuild the network.

So in order to successfully deliver a final blow to al-Qaeda Net, first a cascading network failure must be achieved through the destruction of key hubs, and then the remaining nodes would need to be attached to hubs of safe non-violent networks, to prevent them from seeking out and/or creating new hubs for al-Qaeda Net.