

Al Qaeda, The Next Chapter

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The war against terrorism is going to last a long time, as President Bush and other officials have said, and predicting the future is always uncertain. But as we consider the evolution of this protracted conflict, we should be aware of one high probability: that the al Qaeda we will face in 2010 will be an even more dangerous threat to America than the al Qaeda our troops are fighting today.

Following the historical pattern of terrorist movements everywhere -- from Russia's Bolsheviks to the Irish Republican Army to Palestine's Hamas -- we can expect that within a decade al Qaeda will open one, or possibly several, political fronts in predominantly Islamic states, transforming itself from a deadly but diffuse terrorist movement into implacably hostile governmental factions throughout the Middle East that will pose critical geostrategic challenges to America and our allies.

Although today's terrorists are an indisputable menace, they do not yet threaten global peace or our survival. But the political transformation of al Qaeda into a radical pan-Islamic movement would divide the world between the progressive West and a number of belligerent, deeply reactionary, nuclear-armed states, and raise the possibility of far more serious conflict.

The current leaders of al Qaeda, and the generation emerging in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, are hard and practical men. They have promulgated a broad strategic agenda -- driving the United States out of the Middle East, forcing an end to U.S. aid to Israel and to U.S. backing for "corrupt" Arab regimes -- that cuts across Islam's fault lines and unites alienated Muslims throughout the underdeveloped world. Unspoken, but certainly assumed, in the al Qaeda agenda is the installation of more pious Islamic regimes, or even, ultimately, a resurrection of a pan-Islamic caliphate like the Ottoman Empire, long a dream of Middle Eastern Islamic radicals.

To carry out short-term plans for regional terrorism, al Qaeda has an almost limitless pool of manpower. But its emerging leaders will soon realize -- if they have not already -- that their higher objectives cannot be achieved by hit-and-run attacks, no matter how devastating.

For ambitions this vast, they need to transmute terrorism into political legitimacy in the same way that Fatah transformed itself into the quasi-government of the Palestine Liberation Organization, leading to the sight of a gun-toting Yasser Arafat at the podium

of the United Nations. Hezbollah is acquiring political legitimacy in Syrian-dominated Lebanon, as is Hamas in Palestine and Gaza.

"Legitimacy" doesn't matter to al Qaeda today, but it must have it tomorrow if it wants to stay in the game.

As al Qaeda transforms, it will likely follow three well-beaten paths. First, it will continue terrorist operations worldwide, with an effort to coordinate ever more spectacular attacks with specific events in Western countries.

The Madrid bombings in March, for example, will have taught al Qaeda that coupling terror bombings with political events -- especially elections -- can quadruple their impact. As the new leadership grows more sophisticated, we can expect more attempts at cuing terrorist acts to achieve Madrid-style effects; indeed, current U.S. alert levels and the unprecedented security planned for the November elections are proof of concern that al Qaeda has made the connection. Likewise, al Qaeda will move strategically to undermine Western consensus on Mideast policy and weaken solidarity against Islamic extremism by encouraging anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic feelings in the West, particularly in Europe.

But as al Qaeda begins to move into politics, it will design its terrorist attacks not only to destabilize apostate Middle Eastern and unbeliever Western governments, but also to attract the allegiance of the masses of disaffected Muslim believers who are the source of political "street" power in the Middle East, and many of whom are already supporters.

Second, al Qaeda will become more engaged in exploiting its grass roots appeal in the Middle East, particularly through charities and services that speak to the basic needs of the region's people. Charity is a major tenet of Islam, and sponsoring charities is not only the pious thing to do, it also provides social services, schools and jobs, and wins approval from the clergy, the most influential local authorities in the Middle East. On this path, al Qaeda will again be following in the footsteps of the PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah and others, though with a vastly more ambitious agenda and a broader regional reach.

As its influence grows in local precincts, it will seek to expand across the Middle East, with all the complications of adapting under different conditions and regimes, and coexisting with organizations such as Hamas that are already entrenched. This should not be an insoluble problem; turf wars will most likely be mitigated by the discipline of a common language, religion and, above all, common enemies.

Finally, al Qaeda, or political branches that may not bear the same name, will find positions in the government of one or several nations, perversely exploiting the very democracy that the United States is seeking to nourish in the region. After their experience operating openly in Afghanistan, the movement's leaders will probably be more circumspect about moving into countries where governments are weak or social conditions favor their integration. Lebanon, where Hezbollah is already entrenched, is vulnerable to further inroads from other anti-Western factions. Pakistan, with a nuclear arsenal, a firmly entrenched radical minority and porous borders, is a current and future

nightmare; if the present government falls, it will be open to extremist pressure. Al Qaeda may also find footholds in shaky local parliaments or other elected bodies in a number of other Arab states making the difficult transition from authoritarianism to democracy, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco.

As states in the Mideast take on the coloration of al Qaeda's agenda -- as many would today, unfortunately, if there were genuine democracy in the region -- a pan-Islamicism such as the one foreseen by the pre-World War II Muslim Brotherhood will begin to emerge, but on a larger scale. Pan-Arabism has been a dream of Muslim leaders for centuries, and has motivated modern Arab revolutionaries and martyrs, like the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, for nearly a century. Some Muslim leaders, like Libya's erratic Moammar Gaddafi, have fallen away from pursuit of the dream. But al Qaeda and its sympathizers have the true faith, and the new communication technologies of the 21st century make the prospect of a global pan-Islamic movement more likely. In al Qaeda's view, even with setbacks in Afghanistan and -- perhaps -- Iraq, momentum has been on its side since Sept. 11, 2001.

An important part of that momentum, in al Qaeda's eyes, is an emerging record of battle success against the West -- which most recently means against the technologically sophisticated and powerful warriors of the United States. In al Qaeda's battle traditions, Saladin's long-ago victories over the Crusaders have merged with victorious battles against the Soviets and the heroics of suicide bombers and action groups against Jews and Americans -- including the 1983 bombings of a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, the near-sinking of the USS Cole in 2000, and actions in Afghanistan, including the successful standoff against American and local forces at Tora Bora. Finally, resistance to the American-led invasion of Iraq, starting with the suicidal resistance of Saddam's Fedayeen and continuing through the current uprising, have created for al Qaeda and like-minded Muslims a strong martial tradition that, until recently, was wholly absent from modern times.

Regardless of the eventual success or failure of the new Iraqi government, resistance to the United States and our allies will become the stuff of heroic history throughout the Middle East to those who agree, secretly or openly, with al Qaeda's agenda. If, as I expect, al Qaeda makes the transition in the coming decade from a deadly, popular but rootless terrorist grouping to the sitting government of a number of countries, this heroic theme will inspire their governing institutions, including regular military and paramilitary forces, and will become part of the pan-Arab, anti-Crusader tradition.

In the Middle East, perception is often more important than reality, and legends can be born overnight. The 10-foot-tall reputation of the Israeli Defense Force was created, from zero, in just over 20 years. Popular Islamic opinion in the Middle East perceives a string of jihad "victories" over Western arms for about that long. Facts are immaterial; whether or not America wins a battle or even a series of battles, the belief that Muslims successfully stood up to foreign soldiers has galvanized and will continue to galvanize Islamic pride and support for anti-Western agendas.

As the West's unconventional war against Islamic insurgency continues, al Qaeda's political transformation will also present an unconventional challenge to traditional diplomacy, because the movement will grow from the bottom up by recruiting first disaffected individuals, then organizations and finally nations, in the Middle East and elsewhere. America's State and Defense bureaucracies, though they contain many talented and dedicated individuals, simply are not sufficiently flexible enough at present to deal with "stateless" movements -- witness the disjointed and delayed Iraqi reconstruction program. This bureaucratic inertia, not marginal issues of military force structure or "transformational" technologies, is the true and potentially deadly U.S. legacy from the Cold War.

The rise of radical Islamic governments in the Mideast and elsewhere, relentlessly hostile to the West and the United States in particular, owning the preponderance of the world's oil reserves, armed with nuclear weapons and inheritors of an exploding, militant population, could profoundly challenge the peace of the world, particularly if religious fundamentalism continues to inspire doctrines of rejection, suppression and war. This is the ultimate fulfillment of the al Qaeda agenda, the possible consequences of which include a U.S. face-off against nuclear-armed, jihadist states. Preventing al Qaeda's successful transition to a new stage of political power is the United States' greatest strategic challenge today.

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