

TRANSNATIONAL THREATS UPDATE

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“Globalization has broadened the number of threats and challenges facing the United States....The nation requires more from our Intelligence Community than ever before and consequently we need to do our business better, both internally, through greater collaboration across disciplines and externally, by engaging more of the expertise available outside the Intelligence Community.”

—The Honorable J. Michael McConnell, Director of National Intelligence, Statement for the Record to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 27, 2008

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Terrorism

Al Qaeda Strengthening in Yemen?

In late January, al Qaeda in Yemen (AQY) released a video interview of Nasir al-Wuhayshi with the release of the seventh issue of *Sada al-Malahim*, an AQY publication. Al-Wuhayshi, Bin Laden’s former secretary who was arrested by Iran and extradited to Yemen in 2002, was named the Amir of mujahideen in Yemen by al-Zawahiri in 2008. In this interview, al-Wuhayshi announced that the Saudi branch of al Qaeda declared loyalty to him, resulting in the creation of a new organization, *Tanzim Qa’idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-Arab* (al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), symbolizing the joining of the branches. Said al-Shihri and Mohammed al-Awafi, both former detainees at Guantanamo Bay, appeared in the video as representatives of the Saudi branch.

This video, and the unification of the Saudi and Yemeni branches, indicates the weakening of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and the strength of the Yemeni branch. The pledge of allegiance to al-Wuhayshi suggests that this reorganization was not a merger of equals; rather it reveals that the Saudi branch has been significantly weakened and that there is little substantial organizational infrastructure

remaining in the country, highlighting the success of the Saudi government in their fight against al Qaeda. The Saudi branch has not carried out a meaningful attack since the attack on an oil facility in Abqaiq in February 2006, while AQY has successfully carried out several attacks in the past few years—another indicator of the weakness of the Saudi branch and the strength of the Yemeni branch.

The video also indicates that al Qaeda plans to use Yemen as a launching pad for future activities in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula. Experts attribute this to Yemen being a more suitable environment for jihadis to operate in—proven by the continuation and increasing sophistication of AQY media production, recent open-air trainings, and the ability of journalists to interview the leadership. Furthermore, those with suspected linkages to al Qaeda often escape from prison or are released. In early February, Yemeni authorities released 176 al Qaeda suspects. Some believe this is because some members in the Yemeni security and intelligence apparatus are sympathetic to the jihadist cause. However, according to a Yemeni official, these suspects were not arbitrarily released and were required to sign a commitment to good behavior.

Experts are, however, questioning the strength of the newly united group following the capture of al-Awafi, a Saudi who appeared in the video with al-Wuhayshi. A press release from the Yemeni embassy in Washington claims that al-Awafi surrendered to Yemeni authorities in mid-February and was subsequently repatriated to Riyadh. If true, this would not be the first time a Saudi jihadist voluntarily surrendered to the authorities. In 2004, Khaled al-Harbi returned to Saudi Arabia from Iran and turned himself in to the authorities. Some question the likelihood of a peaceful surrender, as it seems odd considering al-Awafi’s recent appearance in the al Qaeda video.

Conflicting reports assert that al-Awafi was caught by the Yemeni authorities with direct Saudi assistance. According to these sources, Saudi counterterrorism forces were most likely responsible for his capture. Others allege that al-Awafi was sold out by the tribe that was sheltering him, a claim supported by Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh's recent appeal to tribal leaders to hand over terrorist suspects. A final theory is that al-Awafi was a Saudi agent planted within the group to gain intelligence. Regardless, the Saudis and Yemenis should be able to gain valuable intelligence from al-Awafi.

Hezbollah Strengthening in Latin America

U.S. officials recently revealed that Hezbollah is gaining strength within the Lebanese communities of Latin America. The U.S. government is concerned that Hezbollah—who, along with al Qaeda, enjoys connections to wealthy and powerful drug organizations—could use the area to stage attacks on U.S. interests in the region and at home.

Hezbollah agents in Latin America are supported by Iran and work to recruit new members and smuggle drug profits to the Middle East to aid their counterparts. Although previous U.S. reports have denied the occurrence of anything other than recruitment and financing in Latin America, Charles Allen, former undersecretary of intelligence and analysis in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), refuted this claim saying, “The threat of ties between criminal and drug smuggling networks and Islamic terrorism may be less pressing than the Middle East, but the threats in this hemisphere are genuine, insidious and not always limited to recruiting and finance.”

In October 2008, cooperation between U.S. and Colombian law enforcement agencies led to the discovery of a Hezbollah drug-trafficking ring that was funneling money to Europe, the United States, and militias in Lebanon. Additionally, according to officials at the U.S. Treasury Department, in December 2006, nine Hezbollah operatives were apprehended for running a rogue financial network in the tri-border area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. The TBA is known to be a haven for those involved in illicit activities, as well as home to thousands of Lebanese immigrants.

Larry Johnson, a former CIA official, does not agree with the current characterization in Latin America, arguing that “The whole issue of Hezbollah expansion down there is overblown.” Others believe that the threats from Hezbollah, and other organizations in Latin America, are understated and deserve more attention. Within Latin America, Hezbollah is thought to be operating in El Salvador, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela.

U.S. Fears Homegrown Terror

Since September 11, several young men throughout the United States have been recruited and radicalized then sent abroad to countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia. Somalia has effectively been without a government since the early 1990s. Over the past 18 months, at least two-dozen young Somali Americans have disappeared from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, with most of them believed to have reemerged in Somalia. About 100,000 Somalis live in Minnesota. Somalia is considered a failed state and a hotbed for Islamic extremist movements. Al Shabaab, an extremist Islamic organization with links to al Qaeda, operates throughout most of southern Somalia and has recently expanded its reach.

In October of last year, one of the missing Somali men, 19-year-old Shirwa Ahmed, became the first U.S. citizen to carry out a suicide bombing. According to the FBI and DHS, Ahmed and the other young Somali men were radicalized and recruited in the United States, raising renewed fears of a homegrown terrorist attack. The FBI fears that these individuals, or those in similar situations, will train in Somalia and return to the United States and launch an attack. According to Robert Mueller, director of the FBI, the radicalization and disappearance, “raises the question of whether these young men will one day come home, and, if so, what they might undertake here.” A spokesman for DHS rebuffed Mueller's claims, saying that a homegrown attack inside the United States is not likely anytime soon. In January, however, the FBI and DHS investigated a threat of an attack by al Shabaab directed at Washington to coincide with President Obama's inauguration.

The threat of homegrown terror is not a new one. The terrorist attacks in Madrid and London were planned and carried out by homegrown groups. Additionally, U.S. intelligence agencies have uncovered several homegrown plots—a plot to attack U.S. military recruiting facilities and synagogues in the Los Angeles area, a plot to attack the Sears Tower in Chicago and federal buildings in Miami, and the plot to attack Fort Dix.

Lashkar-e-Taiba Distancing from the Global Jihad?

Recently, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a terrorist group based in Pakistan, began toning down its violent agenda, instead claiming that it will pursue a peaceful settlement of the issue as well as distance itself from the global jihad. Jama'at ud-Dawa (JuD), an Islamic charity and known front organization for the LeT, has attempted to distance the organization from the global jihad, saying their struggle is only directed toward Kashmir. This contradicts their stated goals of challenging India's sovereignty over

the state of Jammu and Kashmir, restoring Islamic rule over India, and fighting the United States and Israel.

LeT is not the only group renouncing violence. Two other Pakistani groups, Hizb ul-Mujahedeen (HM) and the Muttahida Jihad Council (MJC), a terrorist conglomerate, have offered to cease their violent actions in Jammu and Kashmir. According to Ehsan Elahi, a HM operative and MJC spokesman, “It is [our] desire that the [Kashmir] problem is resolved through dialogue. We want peace but it does not mean that we are renouncing our stance or showing a weakness.” Some experts are not convinced that this renunciation of violence is sincere, but rather a reaction to the international community’s outrage over the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, for which the group and its Pakistani government sponsors were blamed. Instead, experts believe these claims to be a strategic move on the part of the leaders to ensure the survival of the organization.

In response to the Mumbai attacks, British foreign secretary David Milband called for a diplomatic solution to the Kashmir conflict so that LeT would no longer be justified in their violent struggle. A spokesman for the JuD, Abdullah Gaznavi, responded to these statements saying, “If the world listens to our cries, and plays its role in resolving the Kashmir issue, there is no point continuing the fight.” Whether LeT can confine itself to the Kashmir issue, however, remains to be seen, as the group has been suspected of having close ties with al Qaeda.

LeT (Soldiers of the Pure) emerged in 1993 as the military wing of the Pakistani Islamist organization Markaz-ad-Dawa-wal-Irshad and has been blamed for numerous terrorist attacks in India.

Germany Under Threat

Al Qaeda’s media wing, as Sahab, recently released a video entitled *Das Rettungspaket Fuer Deutschland (A Bailout Plan for Germany)*. In the video, Bekkay Harrach, a Moroccan-born German citizen from Bonn, directly threatened Germany. Harrach, also known as Abu Talha al-Alamani (Abu Talha the German), says that Germans were “naïve and gullible” if they believed that they were not going to be attacked for having the third-largest NATO military contingent in Afghanistan.

The 30-minute video begins with a lesson about the financial crisis and the German bailout plan, saying that withdrawing German troops from Afghanistan could help the economy recover. Harrach says that if Germany acts otherwise, lives will be lost in addition to money and jobs. He then states his desire and determination to carry out a suicide bombing within Germany. Harrach refers to

Germany’s “unlimited solidarity,” a reference to former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder’s guarantee of Germany’s “unlimited solidarity” in the fight against terrorism as a reason for targeting the country, among others.

German authorities believe that the recording is authentic and that Harrach has contacts with the upper echelons of al Qaeda, as well as underground militants throughout Germany, particularly in Frankfurt, Brunswick, and Ulm. Officials believe that Harrach has been living in a training camp on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan since 2007. Harrach has been under surveillance since 2001, and he is said to be active in al Qaeda’s “Department of Foreign Operations,” which is responsible for planning terrorist attacks. The video demands that Germany withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.

Germany is not a stranger to terrorist threats—this was the third German-language video issued by Islamic terror groups since October 2008. The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), an offshoot of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) with ties to al Qaeda, has released videos threatening action against Germany for its involvement in Afghanistan. The first German-language video was published by the IJU in October 2008 and featured Eric Breininger, a German Islamic convert wanted by Germany since he joined the IJU. In early January 2009, German national “Abu Adam” released another German-language video calling for German “brothers” to join the jihad. This film was produced by the IMU. Harrach’s video differs from the previous releases because it is the first that contains a direct threat against Germany, and it is the first video from al Qaeda in German.

British Terrorists Are Biggest Threat to the United States

Several media outlets have reported that the CIA warned President Obama that British-born Islamic extremists are the greatest threat to U.S. homeland security. According to these reports, the CIA launched a large operation in the United Kingdom to prevent an attack similar to September 11 being launched from Britain. Intelligence analysts fear that a British-born Pakistani extremist entering the United States under the visa waiver program will be the source of a future spectacular terrorist attack on American soil.

American espionage in Britain has dramatically increased in recent years. Reports indicate that the CIA recruited several individuals from within the British Pakistani community to act as informants and monitor the 2,000 terrorist suspects identified by MI5. A British intelligence source indicated that around 4 out of 10 CIA operations conducted to prevent direct attacks on U.S. soil are conducted against targets in Britain. A former CIA officer,

Bruce Riedel, believes that the British Pakistani community is “probably al Qaeda’s best mechanism for launching an attack against North America.”

Although the specifics of the CIA program in Britain cannot be verified, U.S. fears that terrorists will exploit the visa waiver program are detailed in the Homeland Security Threat Assessment for the years 2008 to 2013. According to the assessment, U.S. officials believe that terrorists will continue to try to place operatives inside the homeland to carry out attacks through a variety of channels—including the visa waiver program, which allows citizens of 34 countries to enter the United States without visas. Evidence of increasing connections between the British Pakistani community and groups like al Qaeda or LeT has intensified these fears, as British citizens are not required to have visas to enter the United States per the visa waiver program.

Organized Crime

Italian Police Break Up Counterfeiting Ring

In late January, police in Italy broke up a criminal cartel that was making high-quality counterfeit euro notes and coins. Italy’s police spokesman reported that the raid had resulted in the arrest of 94 individuals throughout the country. The ring was discovered when Italian police were investigating drug trafficking in Italy. Most of the arrests were made in the south of the country, in the Campania region where the Camorra mafia is active and in Calabria where the ‘Ndragheta mafia is active.

Eleven criminal gangs in Italy were cooperating to manufacture and distribute the counterfeit money. The ring made notes in denominations of €20, €50, and €100 as well as €1 and €2 coins that were distributed throughout Europe—the fakes were found in Germany, France, Spain, Lithuania, and Italy. Some fakes were also discovered in Latin America, speaking to the scope of the ring. During the raids, Italian police seized €1.23 million in counterfeit notes, as well as forged documents and revenue stamps that were used to pay administrative fees. The Italian police believe some of the money made its way into the illegal drug trade.

Counterfeiting in Italy is a big business—the Italians were the first to counterfeit the euro, even prior to its release. The largest euro counterfeiting operations in 2008 were in Belgium, Britain, Colombia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, and Spain. In 2008, Europol seized €34 million in counterfeit notes and coins, which is less than the €50 million seized in 2007.

Cyber Threats

Kyrgyzstan under Attack

From January 18 until the beginning of February, Kyrgyzstan experienced a series of cyber attacks on its Internet infrastructure. During the two weeks, two Kyrgyz Internet service providers (ISPs), accounting for 80 percent of the country’s bandwidth, sustained massive distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. DDoS attacks flood the victim, in this case the two ISPs, with large amounts of malicious data rendering it incapable of responding to legitimate requests. The DDoS attacks on Kyrgyzstan knocked most of the country offline and disrupted e-mail to and from the U.S. air base at Manas.

The cyber attacks on Kyrgyzstan were traced back to Russian IP addresses. Reports indicate that these attacks were part of a Russian campaign to pressure the Kyrgyz government to close the U.S. air base. These attacks were not the first cyber attacks traced back to Russia—Estonia, Ukraine, and Georgia have also come under attack from cyber militias in Russia. These attacks tend to increase during struggles between the West and Russia over policy in the region. During last year’s Russia-Georgia war, Georgia experienced increased cyber attacks from Russia, as did Ukraine during its NATO membership bid.

Experts believe that DDoS attacks by Russian cyber militias are becoming a more standard practice against nations in the region that are friendly toward the West, especially the United States. Since 2005, attacks attributed to Russia have increased in frequency. Researchers did not find any direct connection between the Russian government and the attack. Some experts assert that the cyber attack was an effort by a Kyrgyz opposition coalition that aims to remove the current government from office, although the majority of experts doubt this claim.

Human Trafficking

Trafficking of Rohingya Migrants

The plight of Rohingya migrants was brought to the attention of the international community in January due to allegations of abuse by the Thai military. Almost two million Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim group, reside in the northern Rakhine State in western Myanmar. The ruling junta in Myanmar denies the Rohingya citizenship, along with other rights—they cannot get married or travel without the permission of the government, nor can they own land or property. Hundreds of Rohingya cross into Bangladesh every year where they live illegally. It is

estimated that more than 200,000 have fled to Bangladesh in recent years.

Many of the Rohingya living in Bangladesh live in abject poverty and attempt to migrate to Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore in search of a better life. Those making the journey are often forced to pay traffickers to transport them. Those that can afford the price, upward of \$450, are often cheated or dropped on unknown islands along the way. The migration attempts occur most often in the winter when the seas are more conducive to a successful trip. According to Bangladeshi authorities, many of the traffickers arranging the trips are Rohingyas.

Those migrants arriving in Malaysia after a long journey from Bangladesh through the Bay of Bengal and Thailand continue to face additional hardships. According to an immigrant rights group based in Malaysia, the Rohingya are often sold to fish traders where the traffickers extort a portion of their earnings. Those who are caught by the Malaysian government often find themselves in extremely precarious situations, especially when taken to detention centers for illegal immigrants. Many rights groups assert that the Burmese migrants are subject to the practice called *bwan* (thrown away)—one of the worst forms of human trafficking. According to reports, Malaysian officials take the migrants from the government-run detention centers to the Malaysia-Thailand border where they are beaten and held hostage. First hand reports claim that the officials demand monetary compensation from the migrants themselves or their families. If the fee is paid, the migrants are allowed to return to Malaysia. Those migrants that are unable to secure funds are then sold to human traffickers in Thailand.

The U.S. Senate is currently investigating the allegations against Malaysian law enforcement officials. The Malaysian government heartily denies that any officials participate in the practice.

Regional Security Threats

Rwandan Rebels Kill Civilians in the DRC

Last month, thousands of Rwandan soldiers were deployed in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to participate in joint operations with the Congolese army against Rwandan rebels. The Rwandan army was invited by the Congolese president, Joseph Kabila, to help the Congolese army confront Hutu rebels operating in the eastern part of the DRC. Although the invite expires at the end of February due to domestic criticism, it signals an improvement in relations between the countries that have fought two wars in the last 15 years.

The joint operation targeted Hutu rebels, mostly members of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) operating in the eastern part of the DRC. The FDLR was formed by Hutu commanders involved in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. According to Human Rights Watch, the rebels have killed about 100 civilians since the launch of the joint operation, representing an increase in violence to a level unseen in recent years. The FDLR is accused of killing civilians and raping women in the North Kivu Province.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the joint operation prompted an increase in reprisal attacks from the FDLR. UNHCR does not know how many civilians have been displaced by these attacks; only 3,000 have been confirmed. Since 2006, fighting involving the FDLR, the Congolese army, and other militias has forced more than 1 million civilians in North Kivu to flee their homes. The United Nations fears that the withdrawal of the Rwandan army, which began on February 25, will spark more reprisal attacks, provide an opportunity for the FDLR to retake ground it lost during the joint offensive, and cause additional displacements.

The Congolese and Rwandan governments claim to have destroyed several FDLR bases and killed at least 90 rebels. According to UN Mission in Congo (MONUC), hundreds more were disarmed and returned to Rwanda. The FDLR denies that the operations were successful. The head of MONUC, Alan Doss, said that the mission will support a second wave of anti-FDLR operations in South Kivu province and will ensure that the FDLR does not retake the areas from which they were driven out.

President Kabila also invited the Ugandan army to hunt members of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)—a Ugandan rebel group—that operates in the northeastern region of the DRC. As a result, the LRA has begun launching reprisal attacks against civilians. The United Nations is sending an additional 1,000 peacekeeping troops to the region.

Drug Violence Reaching Mexican Tourist Areas

The grisly murder of a retired Mexican general in Cancun and a grenade attack on a police installation north of Acapulco highlight the spread of drug-related violence into Mexico's traditionally insulated tourist areas.

Brigadier General Mauro Enrique Tello, who built a fearsome reputation battling cartels in the western Mexican state of Michoacan, was killed February 3 by suspected affiliates of the Gulf Cartel. Tello, who had been invited by Cancun mayor Gregorio Sanchez to clean up the city's police force and improve overall security, was less

than three days into his new assignment when he was abducted along with his bodyguard and driver. The three men were tortured before being driven to a remote location and shot.

The Mexican army responded to the murders by raiding the local police station and intensifying its presence in Cancun. Masked soldiers and marines established checkpoints along the road to Playa de Carmen, another popular tourist destination, sidelining local police in the effort. The crackdown contributed to the February 11 arrest of seven members of Los Zetas, the enforcement arm of the Gulf Cartel, for the murders. Cancun's police chief, Francisco "the Viking" Velasco, was placed in custody under suspicion he collaborated in Tello's death.

In a separate development, a group of heavily armed gunmen threw grenades into a police facility in Zihuatanejo, a normally sleepy beach resort north of Acapulco. The February 21 attack, which wounded five, prompted the town's entire police force to go on strike.

Both incidents highlight the growing risk that Mexico's drug violence poses to traditionally secure tourist areas. Approximately 6,000 Mexicans were killed in drug-related violence in 2008, a dramatic increase from the 2,250 killed in 2007.

This update is produced by the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and provides monthly news on terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, money laundering, and other transnational threats. The *TNT Update* draws primarily on international media sources, including the Associated Press, ITAR-TASS, Agence France Presse, Reuters, Xinhua News Agency, World Tribune, Afghan News, and others.

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