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The Future Actions Series

Seven Years After 9/11: Al-Qaida's Strengths and Vulnerabilities

Richard Barrett

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The logo for eden intelligence, featuring the lowercase letters 'e' and 'i' in a blue, sans-serif font. The 'e' is slightly larger than the 'i'.

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About the Future Actions Series

The *Future Actions Series* features informative papers by leading security experts aiming to address some of the key long-term challenges posed by counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation. Conceived at the 2008 *International Terrorism and Intelligence Conference* on 9-10 June in London, the series responds to the need to look beyond day-to-day threat analysis to identify emerging challenges and develop strategies for addressing them. Each paper focuses on a specific challenge, providing a brief assessment of its nature, how it will evolve, and how to respond to it.

As we have learned, building forward-looking, effective frameworks for approaching counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation requires intricate coordination among the diplomatic, military, intelligence and law enforcement communities, as well as cooperation between the public and private sectors. Our hope is to advance the strategic dialogue within and between these areas and to provide a valuable reference for policymakers and practitioners.

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Summary

The core Al-Qaida leadership remains in place, but it is still far from recovering the position of strength it enjoyed in 2001. It has suffered from an inability to clarify its role and aims. Though it may still count on thousands of sympathisers across the world, the leadership has failed to find a consistent and reliable way to connect with and direct its supporters. Furthermore, there has been a considerable backlash against Al-Qaida-inspired violence across the Muslim world, with the result that even in places where Al-Qaida used to be highly active – such as Iraq, Algeria, Egypt, and Saudi-Arabia – its campaign has lost traction and influence.

The one geographical area where Al-Qaida has retained influence, or even consolidated or increased its standing over the last three years, is the Afghan-Pakistan border region. Though fragile, Al-Qaida's alliance with the Taliban has survived, and the group's future now largely depends on whether it can maintain this accommodation. With the Pakistan and Afghan Taliban becoming increasingly distinct, the most promising option from Al Qaeda's perspective is to foster and deepen its relationship with the Pakistani rather than the Afghan Taliban.

The key to defeating Al-Qaida will be to undermine its local base in the Afghan-Pakistan border area. The Afghan and Pakistan governments must encourage a measure of security and good governance in these areas. Furthermore, it will be important to promote the drift of the Afghan Taliban away from Al-Qaida, which could be achieved by allowing President Karzai more political room to negotiate a deal. The Pakistan government, on the other hand, needs to drive a wedge between tribal leaders and Al-Qaida. For both Governments, it will be critical to improve their bilateral relationship and cooperation.

The international community can and must help with this, but it will have to do so carefully. Al-Qaida will fight hard to obstruct the influence of the central government (in both Pakistan and Afghanistan) and will try to discredit it by arguing that it acts on behalf of external interests; it will aim to provoke further intervention by foreign forces, knowing that this is the one thing all the tribes will unite against. In order to be successful, therefore, the key objectives need to be achieved – and need to be seen to be achieved – by local governments on their own rather than as a result of external intervention.

What the international community can do is to support local governments discreetly, and reduce Al-Qaida's appeal by saying or doing anything that appears to support its claims or legitimacy. The key is to keep Al-Qaida's leaders pinned down in the remote areas of the Afghan-Pakistan border and prevent them by all means from connecting in person with their supporters and sympathisers elsewhere.

About Richard Barrett

Since March 2004, Richard Barrett has been the Coordinator of the *Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team* of the United Nations Security Council in New York. This takes him to all parts of the world and has allowed him to establish close partnerships with the international intelligence and security community in particular.

His advice to the Security Council is based on these contacts and focuses on the effective development and implementation of a sanctions regime that the Council has introduced against named individuals and groups associated with Al-Qaida and the Taliban. His team is required to provide the Security Council with assessments of the threat posed by Al-Qaida and the Taliban to provide a context for international counter-terrorist action.

Richard Barrett is also a member of the Secretary-General's Task Force established to promote the implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy which was adopted by the General Assembly in 2006. He has a particular responsibility for issues to do with radicalisation and extremism that lead to terrorism, terrorist use of the Internet, and terrorist financing.

Before working for the United Nations, he had a full career with the British Government and served both in the United Kingdom and abroad. He was in charge of overseas counter-terrorist work before and after the attacks in the United States in 2001.

Disclaimer

The paper represents Richard Barrett's own views – not necessarily those of the United Nations – and is written in his personal capacity.

Seven Years after 9/11: Al-Qaida's Strengths and Vulnerabilities

By Richard Barrett

What's next for Al-Qaida? There is no doubt that Al-Qaida remains a force to be reckoned with, but it has its weaknesses. By exploiting these and by recognising the limited policy options open to the Al-Qaida leadership, it is still possible to keep the threat in check while dealing with its constituent parts.

The core Al-Qaida leadership remains in place, but it is still far from recovering the position of strength that it enjoyed in 2001; the appeal of Al-Qaida still attracts many thousands of supporters globally, but it is increasingly challenged by other strands of extremist thought; the Afghan Taliban has increased its reach and influence but is no longer strategically close to Al-Qaida, and the Pakistan Taliban, while a new and highly dangerous element in the mix, is not a single movement and may not provide Al-Qaida with the long-term protection and security that it needs.

Al-Qaida has suffered considerably from the action taken against it internationally and nationally since 2001; in particular it has lost its secure base and a reliable means of contact with its supporters. While news media still provide daily reports of Al-Qaida activity it is debatable how much attention the organisation really merits. In terms of other global threats or more immediate problems, it may count for rather less than the coverage suggests, with much of its prominence flowing paradoxically from the enormous effort devoted to countering it.

While the mass of counter-terrorist assessments over the last seven years may have led to an over-estimation of Al-Qaida's strength, it has also helped to develop an understanding of it as an organisation. It has shown that the Al-Qaida leaders in the Afghan-Pakistan border area have no intention of giving up their ambition to remain a presence on the world stage and to lead an effective global terrorist movement. It has also shown that there remains a large number of people around the world who would like for many different reasons to become active supporters of Al-Qaida. But most importantly, it has shown that the leadership is currently unable to find a consistent and reliable way to connect with and direct its supporters. The danger for the international community is that Al-Qaida will be able to overcome this difficulty and from a secure base, contact, motivate and train cells that currently it can only influence remotely. Inevitably, this will allow it to plan and execute further major attacks. The

challenge for policy makers is to analyse how Al-Qaida will try to achieve this and to ensure that the conditions for its success are as hostile as possible.

Al-Qaida Weaknesses: A Remote Leadership and Vague Objectives

While Al-Qaida leaders have managed for the time being to keep their profile high without mounting regular, large-scale attacks, they need to rethink their strategy and tactics if they are to meet the crucial challenge of continued relevance. Usama bin Laden is increasingly remote from operational planning and has become an almost mythical figure, along the lines of a latter day Che Guevara; but a dreamy face on a T-shirt is not enough to inspire a terrorist organisation, it smacks of symbolism rather than action. Al-Qaida leaders stand to lose credibility if they are unable to follow through with their threats and warnings; without significant attacks, their image is increasingly dated and frayed. They also need a fresher, younger set of recognisable second-tier leaders. Apart from bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and perhaps abu Yahya al-Libi, even its most ardent supporters might find it hard to name or recognise another living hero of Al-Qaida terrorism. Al-Qaida needs re-packaging to reflect its post 9/11 content, and its leadership needs a make-over to bring it up to date.

Although it stresses that its fight is a long-term one¹, Al-Qaida does not present itself convincingly as a resilient, long-term organisation with a clear set of benchmark goals. Its policies for the future are obscure, even to its followers. In December 2007 Zawahiri invited supporters and critics to ask questions about Al-Qaida and those that were posted on the web mainly sought clarification of Al-Qaida's priorities and policies – a clarification that Zawahiri notably failed to provide in his answers.² Furthermore, although Al-Qaida claims to protect or re-establish an ancient heritage, its significance and influence is judged only in relation to current events. Its long-term goals are vague and its future policies withstand little critical examination; to maintain the interest of its supporters it has to provide much more of a reaction to the now than a vision of the future. Its supporters do not get their inspiration from arguments in favour of an Islamic state governed solely by sharia law,³ of which they have little theoretical understanding and even less desire, they are motivated by personal grievance mixed in with a sense of global mismanagement.

Al-Qaida leaders must certainly understand their need to capitalise on the issues of today and are aware of the imperative of maintaining momentum through new

1 The initial Al-Qaida vision of a war to the finish as expressed by Usama bin Laden's *Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Mosques* of 1 September 1996, and his *Fatwa* setting the goals for a World Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders of 23 February 1998 has remained unchanged.

2 Translation of As-Sahab Media transcript available at http://www.lauramansfield.com/OpenMeetingZawahiri_Part%201.pdf

3 See Ayman al-Zawahiri statement of 30 January 2005.

operations.⁴ The attacks in the United States of 2001, though still vivid, have begun to look like an unrepeatable high point; a dramatic demonstration of power and reach by an organisation which no longer has the capacity or skill to mount such world-shaping spectacles. Given that recent recruits to Al-Qaida now often appear to be in their late teens,⁵ potential successors to Mohammed Atta and his eighteen fellow hijackers were still children on September 11th, 2001, and except in small areas of the world where training camps exist and active campaigns continue, their access to Al-Qaida influences is now largely limited to the virtual world, thus reducing their opportunity to sense the reality of terrorist planning and to get caught up in the excitement of action.

Al-Qaida Weaknesses: Ideological Challenges

The broader ideological justifications for Al-Qaida's violence have also suffered blows, most notably in Egypt with the very public denunciation of its arguments in November 2007 by Sayyid Imam al Sharif, the imprisoned leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and a major influence in extremist circles.⁶ In Saudi Arabia, Salman al-Ouda, an influential preacher in radical circles, has also offered very public criticism of the pointlessness of Al-Qaida attacks, also stressing the numbers of Muslim women and children who have suffered from them.⁷ These criticisms have often been very personal, addressing Al-Qaida leaders by name as if to underline that the organisation is nothing without them. It is hard to tell what effect these criticisms have had on Al-Qaida's support. New recruits may be less concerned with the ideological rationale behind its terrorist programme than with gaining a sense of belonging to an important and illegal organisation. But in places where membership can only be an aspiration because of the difficulty of making any meaningful or personal contact with its leadership, a lot depends on local figures who can express the inchoate anger and frustration of potential recruits in terms of a larger cause. These local leaders will need to explain to themselves, as well as to their followers, the higher ideals of Al-Qaida, and will be well aware of the accusations and criticisms made against them. There has also been extensive discussion of these ideological debates on extremist websites.

4 For example, see Usama bin Laden's Message to the Islamic Nation of 18 May 2008. Available on the web site of the NEFA Foundation: <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/ufabinladen0508-2.pdf>

5 Author's conversations with authorities in Algeria.

6 'Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World' first published in the newspapers al Masri al Youm (Cairo) and al Jarida (Kuwait).

7 Letter read live on MBC television on 14 September 2007.

Al-Qaida Weaknesses: Losses on Political Fronts

Opinion polls are not necessarily a good measure of political views, especially when addressing an issue such as terrorism. Some respondents will say what they think, but others may fear to do so, or may say what they believe the pollster wishes to hear, or even decide deliberately to mislead. But even so, evidence suggests that in most areas where Al-Qaida might look for recruits, popular support for Usama bin Laden and his core Al-Qaida lieutenants has declined.⁸

There are several reasons for this. The failure of Al-Qaida to influence events in any positive way has become increasingly evident, with much of the violence carried out in its name directed at co-religionists in local communities far from the main enemy that Al-Qaida claims to oppose. The West and its allies appear to have been able to carry on regardless, in many ways using the threat from Al-Qaida as a reason to intervene more in Muslim states rather than a cause to withdraw. The Western presence in the Middle East is as entrenched as ever, and the regimes that Al-Qaida has condemned as supportive of the West are as stable or as unstable as they were in 2001.

The Palestinian issue, the core concern for many people that Al-Qaida would wish to exploit, is much the same as before, with the level of violent resistance as opposed to political dialogue, steady or slightly reduced.⁹ Al-Qaida's attempt to gain a foothold in the Occupied Territories has not met much success, despite bin Laden and Zawahiri's consistent reference to the Arab/Israel tension as a defining element of their political agenda.¹⁰ Al-Qaida has argued with Hamas and condemned any Palestinian group that is prepared to court public support, but its advocacy of uncompromising armed resistance has not resonated with the Palestinians themselves and has looked patronising and out of touch when set against the realities of Gaza and the West Bank.

Also worrying for the leadership is that in areas where Al-Qaida had been most active, it is now weaker. This decline has resulted both from successful counter-

8 Pew Research Center. 'Where Terrorism Finds Support in the Muslim World', 23 May 2006; available at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/26/where-terrorism-finds-support-in-the-muslim-world>. Terror Free Tomorrow, 'Pakistani Support for Al Qaeda, Bin Laden Plunges; Moderate Parties Surge; 70 Percent Want President Musharraf to Resign', January 2008; available at <http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/upimagestft/TFT%20Pakistan%20Poll%20Report.pdf>. Also Terror Free Tomorrow, 'Pakistanis Strongly Back Negotiations with Al Qaeda and Taliban over Military Action; Public Support for Al Qaeda Gaining Ground', May 2008; available at <http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/upimagestft/PakistanPollReportJune08.pdf>.

9 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Available at: <http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/eed216406b50bf6485256ce10072f637/be07c80cda4579468525734800500272?OpenDocument>

10 See for example Usama bin Laden's message to the people of the west on the 60th Anniversary of Israel published on 15 May 2008. Available on the web site of the NEFA Foundation: <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/ufabinladen0508.pdf>

terrorist action by the authorities and from the disillusion of its sympathisers. In Iraq, Al-Qaida had little choice but to accept the affiliation of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a street thug and murderer who before his death in 2006 gave a short-term boost to Al-Qaida's claim to be in the vanguard of the Iraqi resistance to foreign occupation, but who ultimately mired the movement in a squalid reality of sectarian violence. Videoed beheadings of Iraqis and attacks on mosques and on Shiite pilgrims demonstrated the falseness – if any demonstration were needed – of Al-Qaida in Iraq's claim that its fight was somehow religiously based and in the tradition of the Prophet. Since then, Al-Qaida in Iraq and its umbrella group, the Islamic State of Iraq,¹¹ have declined rapidly, with an ineffective leadership allowing local cells to deteriorate into increasing coercion and criminality as a way of self-financing, which has led to a further reduction in support.

The affiliation with Al-Qaida of the Algerian Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat and its renaming as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in January 2007 has not inspired a rush of new recruits. If the Algerian group had hoped to present itself as part of a global movement, it in fact remains fixed on local objectives. Its attacks have killed many more local people than foreigners and if it calculated that its attack on the offices of the United Nations in Algiers on 11 December 2007 would help to internationalise its struggle, it appears to have failed.¹²

In Egypt, Al-Qaida has managed to make almost no headway despite widespread opposition to the government. The Muslim Brotherhood has no time for Zawahiri or the other Egyptians grouped around him,¹³ and it is only with the Bedouin in Sinai that the Al-Qaida message may have achieved any traction.¹⁴ Similarly Al-Qaida has seen a steady string of setbacks in Saudi Arabia with disrupted plots and many arrests.¹⁵ The Saudi Interior Ministry announced towards the end of June 2008 that it had arrested 520 Al-Qaida supporters since January.¹⁶

Law enforcement successes have been reinforced by a parallel success in a growing number of countries that have instituted national programmes designed to counter radical influences by examining and addressing the specific factors that have drawn individuals towards extremism. Saudi Arabia is a particular example of this, as is Indonesia, where the government has introduced a sophisticated programme

11 The establishment of the group was announced on 15 October 2006.

12 Of the 17 United Nations staff killed, 14 were Algerian nationals.

13 Lydia Khalil, 'Al-Qaeda & the Muslim Brotherhood: United by Strategy, Divided by Tactics' Global Terrorism Monitor, Jamestown Foundation, 23 March 2006; <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369939>

14 In addition to the attacks on Red Sea resorts in October 2004, July 2005 and April 2006 carried out by al Tawhid wa al Jihad, Zawahiri makes a direct appeal to supporters in Sinai in his 4 May 2008 statement Lift the Siege of Gaza. Available on the web site of the NEFA Foundation: <http://www.nefaoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefazawahiri0608.pdf>

15 Bruce Riedel and Bilal Saab, 'Al Qaeda's Third Front: Saudi Arabia', Washington Quarterly, Spring 2008. http://www.twq.com/08spring/docs/08spring_riedel.pdf

16 Statement by Interior Ministry spokesman on Saudi TV on 25 June 2008.

of rehabilitation for people caught up in political violence. The success of these programmes in allowing a way for extremists to return to society, and the publicity they have generated, have also helped to undermine any sense that Al-Qaida expresses the concerns of the broader community.

Al-Qaida Strengths: One Vital Area of Success

The one area where Al-Qaida has retained influence, or even consolidated or increased its standing over the last three years is in the Afghan/Pakistan border area. This has to do with the circumstances of the region rather more than with the efforts of Al-Qaida, but nonetheless, the leadership seems to have exploited local conditions successfully so as to gain a firm foothold in this ungovernable area. The pre-2001 alliance between the rag-tag army of foreign fighters loosely grouped under Usama bin Laden and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan under Mullah Omar was founded on memories of shared opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan by troops from the then Soviet Union and through joint support for the experiment of a truly Islamic State. But by September 2001 that alliance was already under strain, and the attacks in the United States appear not only to have been unknown to Mullah Omar, but also against his wishes.¹⁷

Nonetheless, the alliance between the two groups has survived, helped by the pressure of the campaign to dislodge the Taliban and destroy Al-Qaida. But the Taliban battle is a local one and there is no guarantee that if Mullah Omar's Taliban were able to retake and hold some of Afghanistan on a long-term basis, it would welcome the re-establishment of Al-Qaida training camps and the continued international harassment that would follow.

However, the Taliban is no longer a single movement and more important than the Afghans under Mullah Omar are the various Pakistan-based groups in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). One should be careful not to lump all these groups together, but Al-Qaida has been working successfully on forging links with several and its future depends largely on these alliances.

Policy Objectives and Options for Al-Qaida

Al-Qaida needs sufficient stability, freedom of movement and protection from attack to be able to develop and project to the outside world a refashioned image of its programme and capabilities. It needs to be able to run its propaganda campaign without interruption and to attract recruits to camps and schools so as to train them and send them out as a new army of loyal activists ready to plan and execute further multiple attacks and put Al-Qaida back in the limelight. It does not much matter where

17 'National Commission on Terrorist Attacks', 9/11 Commission Report. Accessed via University of North Texas Libraries. <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>

this safe base is, but given the attractions of the un-policed tribal areas on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and the dearth of other options, it seems that Al-Qaida has little if any choice but to consolidate its presence where it is.

In calculating how to achieve this, Al-Qaida leaders may reckon that their alliance with Mullah Omar, who is focused purely on Afghanistan, is now less promising and less important than an alliance with the Pakistani Taliban. These two Taliban groups, although they have objectives in common like the ejection of foreign troops from Afghanistan, are not the same. Mullah Omar's Taliban has relatively clear targets while the Pakistani Taliban is still feeling its power and deciding on its next moves. The Pakistani Taliban is prepared to use force to keep the Pakistan government at bay and knows that it has the power to do so, while Mullah Omar's Taliban has no argument with the Pakistan government and, rightly or wrongly, sees it as supportive, or at worst as neutral towards its efforts to regain power across the border.

Al-Qaida also has certain advantages with the Pakistan Taliban that it may find harder to exercise with Mullah Omar's supporters. Unlike the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistan Taliban is a localised and unsophisticated force. Baitullah Mehsud, currently one of its most prominent leaders, and others such as Maulvi Faqir Mohammad have charisma but little education. Al-Qaida can claim to have greater knowledge of religion, better general education, more of a global outlook and contacts beyond the confines of the tribal areas. It can offer an embracing ideology that can transcend the differences and boundaries between tribes and pretend a higher cause than local issues such as revenue collection and water rights. It can provide training and trainers and can draw on experience from battles elsewhere. In addition, as one of the very few sources of education in the area, Al-Qaida-run madrassas can influence the next generation and ensure its loyalty.

However, tribal traditions run deep and strong, and as the Pakistani Taliban adjust to their power, old rivalries could well re-emerge, resentments against foreigners revive, and the limits of what Al-Qaida has to offer become apparent. With no external irritants, the relationship between the tribes and the Pakistan government would eventually settle down into some sort of uneasy truce, not necessarily through a negotiated settlement but through a mutual understanding of each other's power and red lines. If this happened, Al-Qaida would begin to upset the balances and interrelationships of the area and its nuisance value exceed any possible contribution.

Policy options for Al-Qaida are therefore limited. It seems fairly certain, especially given the lack of alternatives, that Al-Qaida will do what it can to ensure that it remains as deeply rooted as possible in the area that it now occupies, build its tribal alliances and indoctrinate the next generation to ensure long-term support. The only disadvantages of the border area, with its rugged terrain and suspicion of outsiders is that it is hard for Al-Qaida to maintain and develop a sophisticated cadre of strategists and regenerate a core leadership that is representative of its potential global membership. But good security, access to an impressionable and hardy population, and a familiar operating environment, make up for this.

But the other major problem for the Al-Qaida leadership is how to make direct contact with its supporters. In essence, it needs to establish a secure operational

base where it can gather people from around the world without having to be overly concerned that by doing so it will compromise its own security. It needs to identify recruits who it can train to mount spectacular operations under its control, in places and at times of its choosing. It also needs to ensure that it is based somewhere where it can continue to operate its sophisticated propaganda machinery, taking advantage of all available forms of modern technology.

Objectives and Options for Countering Al-Qaida

Policy options for dealing with Al-Qaida should take account of its objectives and of the limited options that it has to achieve them. In the context of the Pashtun areas of the FATA, or in the adjacent territory of Afghanistan, it will take time before traditional balances reassert themselves and appropriate central government initiatives emerge. The international community should do what it can to speed the process and avoid impeding it. To undermine Al-Qaida's influence with its local base, the Afghan and Pakistan Governments must encourage a measure of security and good governance, must develop alternative livelihoods to poppy cultivation and opium smuggling, and most importantly must provide schools and teachers. The international community can and must help with this, but it will have to do so carefully. Al-Qaida will fight hard to obstruct the influence of the central government and will try to discredit it by arguing that it is all on behalf of external interests; it will aim to provoke further intervention by foreign forces, knowing that this is the one thing that all the tribes will combine to oppose; it will exult in civilian casualties that it can exploit to stir up tension, and it will continue to abuse religion as a method of indoctrination and justification for its acts.

The international community should also encourage the drift of the Afghan Taliban away from Al-Qaida, and promote the message to the Pakistan Taliban that were it not for their decision to allow Al-Qaida to remain in Afghanistan following the attacks on the American Embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998, it is highly likely that the Taliban regime in Kabul would have been able to reach an accommodation with the international community and so been able to consolidate and extend its authority. The international community should also allow President Karzai more political room, including to negotiate with the Taliban and so try to split the movement and isolate those who are irreconcilable. For this it may need to take risks and make mistakes, and certainly the outcome of any deal cannot be assured, but the international community should accept that a stable Afghanistan will not be the country that they would ideally like to see, and may not be stable for long. While dealing with Al-Qaida remains a priority, it makes sense to make dealing with the Afghan Taliban a separate issue. However interconnected they may be, by addressing counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics problems all as one it becomes almost impossible to solve any of them. Each element is hard enough, but at present, dealing with the insurgency through negotiation may be the best place to start.

On the other side of the border the Pakistan Government will face as much of a challenge to its stability as does its Afghan neighbour. It too is likely to make mistakes.

But these will be easily exacerbated by any obvious foreign intervention. Islamabad will have to recalibrate its relationship with the tribes and will need to find ways to limit the power of those leaders who are determined to cause wider unrest. It will also have to establish a better relationship with Afghanistan. So long as these two neighbours understand, as they surely must, that the threat from the Taliban and Al-Qaida is as real and serious on both sides of the border, and has to be seen as a whole, they will be forced to find a way to work together to defeat it. The border is unenforceable and largely meaningless in much of the Tribal Areas, and unilateral action, particularly if taken without due consideration of the interests on the other side, is doomed to fail. Whatever its past history of support for the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistan Government seems well aware that allowing it to thrive in a new form among its own people will cause problems throughout the country. It faces a delicate and complex task and will need the understanding and cooperation of its allies, even if that means keeping them well away from the front line. At present Pakistan regards the Taliban and Al-Qaida as two parts of the same threat,¹⁸ but if the authorities manage to strike a deal with the tribal leaders, they should ensure that it excludes the foreign fighters of Al-Qaida; they should take any and every opportunity to drive a wedge between the two groups.

The international community will face huge frustrations. But pouring more troops into Afghanistan will not help if it alienates the local population and allows both Pakistan and Afghan Taliban to forget their internal differences and combine against a common enemy. The focus should remain squarely on Al-Qaida, not on the internal politics of Afghanistan. Whoever has influence in Kabul, they are unlikely to allow Al-Qaida the foothold it enjoyed before. In Pakistan, the Government will need to show the tribes that they are far better off without Al-Qaida in their midst, and more likely to be left alone. It may need to remove some of the tribal leaders or reduce their influence, but it will have to appear to achieve this on its own. No doubt there will be provocative cross-border attacks by the Pakistan Taliban, there may also be terrorist operations by Al-Qaida that can be traced back to the area, but the international response has to bear in mind the long-term objective of allowing the Al-Qaida flame to burn out in the border area through purely local intervention.

Away from the Afghan-Pakistan border area, the international community must do what it can to reduce the appeal of Al-Qaida and put every obstacle between its leaders and its supporters. Counter-terrorist initiatives can all too often feed the beast they attempt to destroy and some terrorist groups have managed to survive for many years helped by a diet of repressive measures taken against them. But ultimately all have declined and faded away as circumstances have changed, leaders have given up the struggle, new members have slowed to a trickle and the old guard has died off. Counter-terrorist policies should allow these natural tendencies of disintegration to play out, and ideally find ways to accelerate them. Certainly they should avoid giving new impetus to the terrorist message or create a new constituency of support.

18 Author's conversations with authorities in Pakistan.

Addressing Al-Qaida's Appeal

The political issues of the Middle East and complaints by Muslims around the globe that they are disrespected and at a disadvantage in the modern world will not disappear any time soon, but these are not necessarily the main drivers of Al-Qaida-related terrorism. By focusing on opposition to the existing world order rather than offering any well-developed or credible alternatives, Al-Qaida is able to appeal to a wide variety of angry and alienated people, each with a different set of grievances. Resolving long-term irritants, such as the Palestinian issue, would help ease tensions and cut some ground from beneath Al-Qaida, but it would not stop terrorism. It is impossible to imagine a political and social equilibrium that would satisfy all its demands.

Where Al-Qaida succeeds is in providing a framework for individuals to express their opposition to whatever it is they oppose, even if the roots of their anger lie in issues completely unknown and uninteresting to the Al-Qaida leadership. Al-Qaida manages to offer its supporters a sense of belonging and importance by taking personal or local grievances and setting them in a global context. Even so, there has to be some substance to the Al-Qaida appeal, and the individual supporter will be less inclined to follow its lead if Al-Qaida is subject to criticism within its own core community of radical commentators, as has happened. The Al-Qaida argument that it offers guidance on the meaning of 'jihad' or provides an essential defense of Islam are clearly baseless when judged against the nature of the attacks launched in its name. Its opponents should therefore avoid intentionally or unintentionally saying or doing anything that appears to support its claims, from the use of terms to describe Al-Qaida to the introduction of policies that would appear to confirm its argument that the Muslim world is under attack.

Recognising the self-destructive nature of the movement, the international community should help Al-Qaida suffer from its internal contradictions and lack of coherence; it is not well-organised, nor particularly effective, and depends greatly on its ability to exploit events through effective propaganda. That propaganda relies greatly on media are available to all sides. A free debate, whether on the Internet or elsewhere, is likely to weaken Al-Qaida, particularly as its skill lies more in spreading propaganda in set piece films, videos or audio tapes, rather than in the interactive, consumer led form that has come to dominate the web.

Most importantly, the international community must continue to prevent by all means possible the opportunity for Al-Qaida leaders to connect in person with their supporters. The best ways to prevent this is to keep the leaders concerned about their own security and to keep them pinned down in the remote areas of the Afghan/Pakistan border and allow them to suffer the fate of all other outsiders who have attempted to establish themselves in the region.

About ICSR

ICSR is a unique partnership of King's College London, the University of Pennsylvania, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (Israel), and the Regional Centre for Conflict Prevention Amman (Jordan). Its aim is to counter the growth of radicalisation and political violence by bringing together knowledge and leadership. For more information, see www.icsr.info

About Eden Intelligence

Eden Intelligence organises small scale, high impact gatherings on counter-terrorism and security related issues in a strictly closed environment encourages debate and sharing of insights. Its goal is to facilitate dialogue and develop collaborative projects amongst the security and counter-terrorism community's leading experts. For more information, see www.edenintelligence.com