

Al-Qaeda: Rebirth in Pakistan and Iraq

2002 is a low point for Al-Qaeda. But as its members and leaders are thrown out of Afghanistan, many relocate to Pakistan where it regrows. Now, remember that Pakistan was home turf for Al-Qaeda as well as Afghanistan, that during the anti Soviet period, they were based in Pakistan. And also, even while they were in the Taliban's Afghanistan, they still had extensive ties to groups in Pakistan, and still a considerable presence in Pakistani cities and areas.

Now the Pakistani government allows Al-Qaeda to regrow. And much of this is not deliberate, but due to the weakness of the Pakistani state. There are parts of the country that the state had, at best, limited control over, and some parts where it effectively had no control over. And so, when Al-Qaeda relocates to remote tribal parts, where many individuals are hostile to the government, there's a limit to what the government can do. And when the government does try to crack down, it takes hundreds, and later thousands, of casualties. And you see a civil war start to develop in Pakistan over this issue.

But it's not just a question of capabilities. The Pakistani government is also working with a number of organizations in Pakistan that are close to Al-Qaeda. It uses these organizations for its own purposes, especially to fight India and Kashmir, and also to exercise influence in Afghanistan. So it's hard for the Pakistani government to go after Al-Qaeda without going after these like minded organizations. And it's not willing to do so. Christine Fair in her class will talk more about this issue.

A second place Al-Qaeda is able to regrow itself is in Iraq. In 2003, the United States invades Iraq and topples the regime of Saddam Hussein. Now despite some claims, there was no link between Iraq and Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 attacks. However, the U.S. invasion and occupation are tremendously unpopular. It's unpopular in Europe. It's unpopular in Asia. And it's especially unpopular in the Muslim world. And almost a few months after the United States goes in, we start to see the beginnings of an insurgency. We start to see unrest. We start to see low level violence. And because the invasion is so unpopular, we start to see the flow of foreign fighters come to Iraq from around the Muslim world. And increasingly, parts of the insurgency are defined by an ideology that's akin to Al-Qaeda. And, also over time, we see growing coordination and cooperation between Iraqi groups and Al-Qaeda. And later on, we see the local organization, the dominant local organization, led by Abu Masab al-Zarqawi, take on the Al-Qaeda name.

Now, Iraq has two big benefits for Al-Qaeda. The first is in terms of operations. This is a war zone. So when foreign fighters come in, they start to learn tremendous skills. So they learn how to fight. They learn discipline. They learn how to build advanced improvised explosive devices. And they learn techniques like suicide bombing. And so suicide bombing, which had been rare, where in the 1990s we saw that a few suicide bombings in Israel grabbed world attention. Now we start to see multiple suicide bombings each week against U.S. forces and against Iraqi forces.

But also in Iraq we see inspiration for the group in general. Bin Laden had long pushed the idea that the United States was an enemy of the Muslim world. And although many Muslims didn't accept it in the past, here it seemed was perfect proof the United States was, in their eyes, bent on subjugating the Islamic world. And it had invaded and toppled the strongest Arab power. And bin Laden seemed prescient in what he was arguing.

And when the foreign fighters come to Iraq, when Iraqis take up arms in the name of Al-Qaeda they start to form networks. They start to form bonds that serve, not only in Iraq, but show up elsewhere around the world. But just as Iraq is a tremendous success for Al-Qaeda over time it becomes a disaster. Many of the foreign fighters coming in are just as concerned about Iraq's government, which is now dominated by Shia Muslims. And many of the foreign fighters consider Shia Muslims to be apostates, and, thus, enemies of true Islam. And they also see them as dominated by the leading Shia power, Iran. And many are going there to kill Shia, much more than to kill Americans.

In addition, although Al-Qaeda is sworn to attack the United States, many of the attacks in Iraq are against Sunni Muslims, who Al-Qaeda claims it wants to protect. And we see tremendous casualties and power struggles among Sunni tribes, among Sunni leaders. And, over time, this sours. Not only many Iraqis, but many Muslims on Al-Qaeda operations, that they are seen as falsely promising to attack the United States, when in reality, they're killing their fellow Muslims.

The criticism of Al-Qaeda culminates as various religious leaders around the Muslim world denounce the organization. And we see this in Saudi Arabia. We see this in Libya. And it's especially clear in Egypt, where an individual named Doctor Fadl, who was one of the early founders of the jihadist movement there, had close ties to Ayman al-Zawahiri himself. And he denounces Al-Qaeda for, quote, "every drop," unquote, of blood in Iraq. So he is criticizing it for the deaths of innocents. And many are saying that, while fighting Americans is justified, Al-Qaeda itself, is not. And this is a tremendous blow to the prestige of the organization. It makes recruiting and fundraising much harder.

Now, Al-Qaeda itself, suffers huge blows in Iraq, starting at the end of the core period of the Iraqi civil war, so starting in 2007, and going on for subsequent years. Its ranks are decimated. However, and unfortunately, in 2014, we're seeing the organization rebound. It's getting stronger. It's gaining more recruits. And it's able to take territory in Iraq again. So this organization is not done.