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Al-Qaeda reconsidered

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By luring America into escalating its war effort in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda has driven the last nail into the coffin of the US-centred unipolar world order, writes

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 it had not planned to stay for long. Its intention was merely to bolster the communist government that it helped come to power in Kabul in the late 1970s. The mistake committed by Leonid Brezhnev and his successors was to let themselves be lured deeper and deeper into conflict in Afghanistan, and a trap that had been laid by the so-called "Afghan Arabs" and their Western supporters with the purpose of sapping Soviet morale and resources. By 1988, the USSR had more than 100,000 troops in Afghanistan and a casualty toll of more than 14,000 dead and 35,000 wounded. It withdrew from the country the following year without having accomplished its objectives.

Today, Al-Qaeda is playing the same game with the Americans. It has shifted its focus from targeting American interests in the US and abroad to the type of full-scale war of attrition it had waged against the former Soviet Union. While Al-Qaeda's position in the field may be materially and logistically weak, its ideological fervour is still strong, its jihadist agenda is still on track, and its human resources are far from depleted. It would be a mistake to take the holes in the organisation's network as a sign of its ebb. Such "universal" phenomena do not die as long as they can live on the flow -- if only slight -- of the classical Islamist jihadist trend. This applies all the more to Al-Qaeda that now holds a virtual monopoly over the "jihad industry" in the Islamic world, having succeeded in establishing itself as a global jihadist umbrella and not just a regional organisation. As such, it resembles other international Islamist organisations that continue to pursue their original strategic projects, such as the 80-year old Muslim Brotherhood and the 50-year old Islamic Liberation Party.

In general, we can divide the evolution of Al-Qaeda's strategic objective and jihadist agenda into three phases. The first, from 1998 to 2000, we might term its establishment phase. It was in this period that the organisation sought to demonstrate its power and scope through such violent operations as the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, which is to say only six months after it proclaimed its existence. These actions

were followed by the bombing of the warship USS Cole in the Gulf of Aden in October 2000, two foiled operations targeting Los Angeles Airport, and an attack against Israelis in Jordan during the celebrations of New Year's Eve 2000. The chief aim of Al-Qaeda at the time was to issue a warning to the US that Washington should not underestimate the power of Al-Qaeda and that it should reassess the way it responds to its demands accordingly. The organisation's field of operations during this phase was the Horn of Africa. These operations and their strategic aims were consistent with the organisation's ideology, as can be gleaned from the writings of top Al-Qaeda figures such as Ayman El-Zawahri and Abu Mussab Al-Suri (Mustafa Sethmariam Nasar) as well as those of sympathisers such as Abu Qatada Al-Filistini (Othman Omar Mahmoud) and Abu Mohamed Al-Maqdisi.

The second phase was inaugurated with the attacks against the US mainland on 11 September 2001. The aim here was not just to deliver a historic and painful blow against the US, but also to provoke and lure the US into a protracted war for which it was unprepared. Washington soon obliged, embroiling itself in two wars, in Afghanistan and in Iraq, for the sole purpose of avenging its injured pride, for the wars had no other clear aims. In an interview on Al-Arabiya news channel, Osama Bin Laden's personal guard, Nasser Al-Bahri -- known also as Abu Jandal -- acknowledged that one of the reasons why Bin Laden launched the 11 September attacks was to lure the "American bull" into waging a war on more than one front. Indeed, as one looks back over the course of Al-Qaeda operations during this period one observes two developments. The first is the broadening of their geographic scope: from Bali in the east to Jerba and Casablanca in the west, and from London and Madrid in the north to Yemen and Somalia in the south, with Riyadh, Istanbul and Mombassa in-between. The second development is the broadening wings of Al-Qaeda's umbrella as militant Islamist organisations and cells in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, the Gulf and North Africa rallied beneath its banner though without developing clear organisational bonds.

As for the third phase, it is currently in progress, now that Al-Qaeda's war of attrition against the US has stepped up into full gear in Afghanistan and Pakistan, under the banner of the Taliban movements in those countries. The organisation's chief aim at this juncture is to keep US forces in the conflict zone as long as possible in order to materially and militarily drain America. It is little wonder, from this vantage point, that Al-Qaeda regarded the US decision to withdraw from Iraq as a strategic loss. Not only does it eliminate Al-Qaeda's major pretext for continuing to fight in Iraq, it threatens to reduce support for the organisation in Iraq and elsewhere, and to expose it politically and militarily. Conversely, President Obama's decision to increase US forces in Afghanistan to 63,000 troops was a gift to Al-Qaeda as it effectively inaugurated its attrition project. We find confirmation of this in Bin Laden's recent message marking the eighth anniversary of the events of 11 September.

While Al-Qaeda presses ahead with its strategy and develops its campaign of psychological warfare accordingly, the US appears to be floundering in its attempts to outmanoeuvre it and sustain the war. What Washington is not doing is exploring the possibility of calling the war to a halt or radically altering its strategy.

Contrary to commonly held expectations or impressions, Al-Qaeda was both provoked and stimulated by Barack Obama's arrival to the White House. The impetuous folly of the neoconservatives fuelled Al-Qaeda's mission, giving it justification for its actions and facilitating the mobilisation of support. Obama's conciliatory approach threatened to turn off the taps to that "fuel". Simultaneously, Al-Qaeda leaders felt that the possibility of

delivering a debilitating defeat to the US was within closer reach because, in their opinion, Obama would not be strong enough to handle them, either because he lacked political experience or because, in his desire to change the US's image in the eyes of the Islamic world, he would withdraw from active engagement in hostilities, which would give Al-Qaeda forces time to catch their breath and reorder their ranks.

Quickly reviewing the most important gains the war of attrition has scored against the US so far, the first is the material and economic toll it has exacted. The costs of the American war effort have climbed to around \$3 trillion, including \$684 billion in direct operations in Iraq, \$223 billion in Afghanistan, and \$33 billion for the war on terrorism. The costs will climb by another \$338 billion this year if the US sends in 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, by another \$867 billion if it increases its forces by 75,000 by 2013, and by \$2 trillion by 2019 according to the projections of the Armed Services Committee of the US Congress. The situation looks even grimmer for the US if we add the bill for salvaging the American economy from the latest financial crisis.

The higher the levels of troop commitment and the longer US forces remain engaged increases the risk of military attrition. Al-Qaeda has clearly lured the US into this trap. US force levels in Afghanistan are currently at 63,000 and will rise to 100,000 by the beginning of next year (recall the Soviet case) if the conflict in the White House over this issue comes out in favour of the recommendation of US commander in Afghanistan General Stanley McCrystal. In addition, the losses in lives of US and NATO forces have shot up dramatically. Meanwhile, because the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan have deteriorated so seriously, the US has lost many of the strategic advantages held for so long in the Gulf, and southeast and central Asia. The US now finds itself forced to enter into negotiations and treaties with adversaries such as Iran, Russia and China in the hope of safeguarding its interests in these regions.

We should add here an observation that has great significance: none of Afghanistan's neighbours (Iran, China, Russia, Pakistan and India) is among the 42 nations participating under the NATO umbrella in Afghanistan in the International Security Assistance Force. This compounds Washington's burden in resolving its Afghan dilemma.

The third gain is the attrition in the US's political and moral prestige, which is linked to the erosion in the US's image as the dominant superpower in a unipolar order. This phenomenon has become steadily clearer over the last nine months and was openly proclaimed in Obama's recent address to the UN General Assembly in which he officially pronounced the end of the unipolar order and inaugurated a new era in international relations the precise nature and contours of which are not yet clear. That Al-Qaeda has succeeded in accomplishing this objective in its campaign against its "distant enemy" should compel us to reassess our views on the nature of the organisation and how to respond to its strategic project.