

McConnell on the Movement: The 2008 DNI Annual Threat Assessment

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In his 2006 Annual Threat Assessment, John Negroponte was absolutely clear: “Al-Qa’ida remains our top concern.” He asserted that the infamous but battered group’s “core elements still plot and make preparations for terrorist strikes against the Homeland and other targets from bases in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area.” The 2008 speech of his successor, Michael McConnell, opened with a discussion of Al-Qa’ida-linked plots in Europe and the state of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI). Characterizing its relative strength, McConnell said that “Al-Qa’ida and its terrorist affiliates continue to pose significant threats to the United States at home and abroad.” Even the January 2008 killing of Abu Layth Al-Libi was characterized as a blow to Al-Qa’ida’s links to North Africa as much as its autonomous attack capability. McConnell is describing an Al-Qa’ida that sits at the center of a web of terror and increasingly relies on others to carry out attacks, while Negroponte’s is a more monolithic, action-oriented version. Is one right and the other wrong? No; rather, Negroponte mentions a spreading “jihadist movement” before he even brings up Al-Qa’ida in his 2006 address. Their different perceptions stem from the fact that the global jihadist movement has, in the past three years, moved.

Each of the three DNI Assessments (2006-2008) cited successes by the United States’ Intelligence Community. Effective cooperation with the intelligence services of foreign allies is a common theme, as is the continued pounding of Al-Qa’ida’s ‘middle management’—those below the household names of bin Laden and Zawahiri who play key roles in the day-to-day business of terrorist jihad. These victories, however, have been countered by “the group’s adaptable decision-making process and bench of skilled operatives have enabled it to identify effective replacements (McConnell 2008).” Can such developments be characterized as progress in the war on terror? To offer a truly political answer, it depends.

Al-Qa’ida, more than any enemy America has ever faced, is uniquely equipped to fight a hyperpower. Unlike a nation-state, it has no cities, infrastructure, or civilian population it is obligated to defend; in fact, when it suits them, Al-Qa’ida in Iraq is willing to “conduct high-profile, often mass casualty attacks that are effective accelerants for the self-sustaining inter-sectarian struggle between Shia and Sunnis” (Negroponte, DNI Annual Threat Assessment, 2007). The organizational structure of Al-Qa’ida is an additional asset; while bin Laden and Zawahiri’s fugitive status limits their role to largely rhetorical ones, that rhetoric remains compelling to many restive Muslims and inspires such individuals to join established terror groups such as AQI or begin ATCs (autonomous terrorist cells) informally affiliated with the ideas and values of Al-Qa’ida.

The organization is able to perpetuate itself without a formalized hierarchy because “the growing use of the internet to identify and connect with networks throughout the world offers opportunities to build relationships and gain expertise that previously were available only in overseas training camps. It is likely that such independent groups will use information on destructive tactics available on the Internet to boost their own capabilities” (McConnell 2008). When Al-Qa’ida members had to go through training camps in Afghanistan or physically pledge *bayat*, or allegiance, to bin Laden, Al-Qa’ida was limited to how many jihadis it could recruit through personal contacts and mosques, how many it could train in its facilities, and how many were of sufficient caliber to formally tie themselves to bin Laden. Such restrictions kept the *organization* of Al-Qa’ida from becoming a true *movement*. Now, with the limitless reach of the internet, individuals can converse anonymously, share tactical knowledge, convert Westerners, and form autonomous terrorist cells anywhere in the world. Such diffusion, however, has drawbacks; within them lie our hopes for victory.

For an organization so rooted in theology and orthodoxy—however perverse it may be—moral standing and superiority are tremendously important. Thus, the failure of Al-Qa'ida's offshoots and franchises to adhere to some basic principles espoused by the core of the organization has been a huge blow to its standing: "The brutal attacks against Muslim civilians unleashed by AQI and [Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb] and the conflicting demands of the various extremist agendas are tarnishing al-Qa'ida's self-styled image as the extremist vanguard. Over the past year, a number of religious leaders and fellow extremists who once had significant influence with al-Qa'ida have publicly criticized it and its affiliates for the use of "violent tactics" (McConnell 2008). This year's DNI Assessment depicts AQI as suffering major setbacks in light of the U.S. 'surge' strategy and the Sunni Awakening movement, but expresses concern that it will use its tactical experience to move beyond Iraq in the coming years. Given the divisions between core Al-Qa'ida and AQI (such as the targeting of Shiite Muslims or, one can assume, the use of disabled women in suicide attacks) a broadening of AQI's theater of operations could lead to competition within the global jihadist movement about which people and which doctrines are ultimately in charge. While such a division could, in theory, be helpful to U.S. security interests, the emergence of a game of one-upmanship between two violent forces trying to outdo one another would be a highly negative one.

An additional drawback of Al-Qa'ida's diffusion stems from a significant decline in quality. The attacks of 11 September required two years of planning, specialized training, outstanding operational security, many small, detail-oriented tasks, and roughly \$500,000. Today's ATCs and Al-Qa'ida offshoots are unlikely to assemble these many components into a successful, grand-scale strike. McConnell states that

"to date, cells detected in the United States have lacked the level of sophistication, experience, and access to resources of terrorist cells overseas. Their efforts, when disrupted, largely have been in the nascent phase, and authorities often were able to take advantage of poor operational tradecraft. However, the growing use of the internet to identify and connect with networks throughout the world offers opportunities to build relationships and gain expertise that previously were available only in overseas training camps. It is likely that such independent groups will use information on destructive tactics available on the Internet to boost their own capabilities" (2008).

Thus, it seems that we have taken a powerful core terrorist group (core Al-Qa'ida), beaten it into a largely tactically irrelevant 'remnant' Al-Qa'ida, and traded one enemy for an atomized, amateur jihadist movement. As it stands today, it is young and will continue to make youthful mistakes for the time being; it remains to be seen whether the United States will be able to prevent the movement from reaching its potential.

It does not bode well for our success in this endeavor, however, that Director McConnell is misgauging the intentions of this movement. In his mind, "al-Qa'ida's Homeland plotting is likely to continue to focus on prominent political, economic, and infrastructure targets designed to produce mass casualties, visually dramatic destruction, significant economic aftershocks, and/or fear among the population" (2008). And yet he also states that Al-Qa'ida increasingly sees the U.S. as a hard target due to increased security measures. Given this added degree of difficulty and the influx of Westerners into Al-Qa'ida's considerably reduced training areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, it makes little sense that what terror infrastructure Al-Qa'ida can develop in the United States would then be thrown at the hardest conceivable targets with a relatively low probability of success. Given that some elements of Western society are increasingly receptive to jihadist propaganda but are restricted by their lack of operational knowledge, it makes much more sense for Al-Qa'ida to use its Western recruits to bolster the

jihadist movement's ability to strike smaller-scale 'soft' targets in the Homeland through cooperation with ATCs than risk failure in larger-scale attacks.

We have seen in recent years an increased willingness of Al-Qa'ida to engage in the practices of the globalization process it so detests when used by the West; outsourcing, online networking, and cultural imposition. To imagine that Al-Qa'ida will stick to the same operational plans it has used in the past is tantamount to imagining that major U.S. automakers will never move operations outside of Detroit. In the same way that Ford is willing to purchase parts in some areas of the globe, assemble them in others, and ship finished products to even more, so is Al-Qa'ida increasingly able to draw recruits from the West, train them in Waziristan with techniques learned in Baghdad, and send them to American cities—or, in my reasoning, suburbs. Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell has a difficult job synthesizing the perspectives and biases of our Intelligence Community, but without a more nuanced and forward-thinking conception of our enemies, we will be doomed to stay behind the curve. While Al-Qa'ida is almost certainly on the decline, the global jihadist movement that its devastating past attacks and continuing rhetoric inspire is on the rise. We too must rise to the occasion.

Suggested Reading:

McConnell, J. Michael. "Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence" (5 February 2008).

Scheuer, Michael. Through Our Enemies' Eyes (Potomac Books, 2002, 2006).

Brynjar Lia. Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (Columbia University Press, 2007).

Fawaz Gerges. The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Abdel Bari Atwan. The Secret History of al Qaeda (University of California Press, 2006).

Raymond Ibrahim. The Al Qaeda Reader (NY: Broadway Books, 2007).