

## A Beheading in London; A Bombing in Boston: The Transformations of the al-Qaeda Threat

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The world is now in Phase Three of the al Qaeda threat. This Phase is the ultimate dispersed threat – the most difficult to control and potentially the most dangerous.

Phase One of the al Qaeda threat spanned the period when Osama Bin Laden founded the organization in Afghanistan in late 1988 and its being driven out of that country by the U.S. in late 2001 and 2002. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 – after considerable foreign funding for the Afghan mujahedin. (A mujahed is a Muslim waging ‘jihad,’ one of the five religious duties of Muslims that calls for ‘struggle’ against those who do not believe in Allah.) Bin Laden had previously left Afghanistan, living in Sudan, then Saudi Arabia, and then back to Sudan before being forced out of that country and returning to Afghanistan in 1996.

From Afghanistan, Bin Laden and his commanders were able to plan and carry out attacks on Middle Eastern leaders allied with the United States and, ultimately, on the U.S. itself, culminating in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the downing of United Airlines 93 and the deaths of 3,000.

Phase Two of the threat was marked by the proliferation of al Qaeda ‘franchisees.’ With the destruction of al Qaeda’s headquarters in Afghanistan and the flight of Bin Laden to Pakistan and the capture or killing of many of his lieutenants following the U.S. invasion, the center lost control. Arabs who had moved to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets had long since moved back to their homelands. They set up their own branches of al Qaeda in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen (AQAP – Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), Iraq (AQI), North Africa (AQIM – Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), and elsewhere. In turn, smaller groups announced their affiliation with the ‘franchisees.’ For example, the Islamic faction Ansar Dine in Mali that has recently caused such havoc had earlier announced its formal alliance with AQIM.

The al Qaeda threat magnified in Phase Two as the number of centers perpetrating terrorism proliferated. But at least terrorism still “had an address.” The branches of Western governments battling terrorism knew where to look for the terrorists and were able to disrupt many of their plans.

But Phase Three of the al Qaeda threat is now upon us and the dangers from Islamic terrorism are more dangerous and more difficult to counter than ever before. In this Phase, the West and Islamic leaders still face the threat of the ‘franchisees.’ But added to that geographically distant threat is the more proximate threat posed by home grown Islamic terrorists.

What we have learned from the Boston bombers and the London beheading is the power of al Qaeda's ideology. It has clearly motivated Muslims, mostly young Muslim men, many living in Western countries, to perpetrate violence. So far that violence has been relatively ineffective. In Boston three were killed although hundreds were injured. In London, one soldier has been killed. But these young Muslim men will become more sophisticated and learn from the failings of their predecessors. They can be expected to learn more destructive ways of carrying out al Qaeda's ideology.

That ideology has three essential pillars – governing countries on the basis of the Shari'a (Islamic law) – the Quran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad; liberating Muslim lands from foreign control exercised either directly through Western invasions or indirectly through 'puppet rulers;' and the right to overthrow rulers who violate Islamic laws and principles. (Taken from Christopher Blanchard, *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology*, Congressional Research Service, 2010.)

For disgruntled young Muslim men – whether immigrants to Western countries (the Tsarnaevs) or native born (the London attackers) – that ideology provides a powerful explanation of their plight and what should be done about it. Given that the ranks of the disgruntled will not plausibly shrink – especially given what is inevitably going to be greater scrutiny of Muslims in Western countries – the likelihood of others being attracted to al Qaeda's ideology is a given. More 'home-grown' terrorist violence seems inevitable.

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