



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 1, Issue 5

November 2010

How Strong is Al-Qaida Today?

by Stephanie Kramer

Al-Qaida is a different organization today than the one that coordinated and executed the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Some analysts and policy makers argue that Al-Qaida no longer has the ability to carry out such a large-scale, sophisticated attack.[1] Counterterrorism efforts have disrupted the leadership structures originally based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and many key leaders (especially 3rd-level officials) have been either captured or killed. Additionally, Al-Qaida's popular support in the Muslim world is reportedly in steep decline- an ideological backlash provoked by Al-Qaida attacks that have harmed or killed Muslim civilians.[2] These developments do not bode well for forming a pan-Islamic caliphate.

AL-QAIDA... (CONTINUED ON PG 2)

MES Launches Iran Lecture Series

by Adam C Seitz

As part of an ongoing effort to broaden the Marine Corps knowledge of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Middle East Studies (MES) at Marine Corps University has launched a lecture series entitled "Framing the Iranian Challenge."

To date MES has hosted two lecturers in the series, Dr. Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service and Mr. Simon Shercliff, from the British Embassy in Washington. Both lectures highlighted the complexities of framing the Iranian challenge and moving forward with engagement Tehran and meaningful negotiations with regards to its nuclear program.

IRAN SERIES... (CONTINUED ON PG 3)

MES Notes

MES Iran Lecture Series

MES at MCU is hosting an Iran Lecture Series throughout the 2010-2011 Academic Year entitled "Framing the Iranian Challenge."

Further information and resources pertaining to the MES Iran Lecture Series, as well as the 2010 MES AfPak Lecture Series, are available at: <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil>, under the Middle East Studies tab.

POC for MES Lecture Series is Mr. Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu.

MES and AFPAK Hands

Capt Arthur Karell, USMC, with the AFPAK Hands program joins the MES at MCU team. (page 4)

MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

At the same time, however, Al-Qaida could be seen as stronger and more resilient than ever. While the “core leadership” may be compromised, Al-Qaida has still mounted a sophisticated counter-intelligence operation, and is adept at recruiting Western operatives. The organization has also spread. In 2004, Jordanian jihadist leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi committed his Iraq-based group to Bin Laden, which is now known as “the Islamic State of Iraq.” Two years later, in 2006, the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat formally allied with Al-Qaida, and now fights under the name of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. In 2009, Yemen and Saudi extremists unified under the banner of Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. The group became famous last December for the foiled Christmas underwear bombing plot.

In addition to these somewhat-more-formal Al-Qaida branches, numerous other Islamic militant groups have a strong affiliation with Al-Qaida. Government sources estimate that Al-Qaida cells or associates can be found in over 70 countries around the globe.[3] Well-known examples are Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and Jemaah Islamiya in Indonesia.[4] Though these offshoots are by-and-large more focused on local issues than the core Al-Qaida, some are projecting power beyond their original domains. The attacks, while perhaps less spectacular, are more diverse, unpredictable, and arguably more difficult to counter.

This situation invites tough questions: does this proliferation of affiliated organizations signify a fragmentation and loss of control for Al Qaida, or is it an indication that Al-Qaida is purposefully shifting its strategy? How much influence and control do Osama bin Laden and the core leadership still exercise over these nodes? Which of the groups are the most successful (or dangerous), and why? Finally, are the United States and its allies equipped to deal with the new Al-Qaida?

A research team at the Marine Corps University, headed by Dr. Norman Cigar, is investigating these and other questions. The research project is being funded through the Minerva Initiative, a DoD grant program that encourages universities to investigate social science issues of strategic interest to the United States. Dr. Cigar will focus on Al-Qaida’s adapting relations with the tribes in Iraq; and Al-Qaida headquarters’ management of operations in Iraq. In addition, he hopes to shed light on what Al-Qaida’s geo-political vision for the future world might look like, and to provide insight into which theaters Al-Qaida chooses and why. Dr. Chris Harmon, the current Horner Chair of Military Theory at Marine Corps University, will focus his research on Al-Qaida’s interactions with international institutions.

As a substantial piece of the project, Marine Corps University plans on hosting a conference next spring entitled Al-Qaida After Ten Years of War: A Global Perspective of Successes, Failures and Prospects. The conference will bring together regional experts from academia, the government (both civilian and military), think tanks, and media. Each discussion panel is set to focus on a specific region of the world where Al-Qaida operates, and will provide a net assessment of Al-Qaida’s successes and failures in the respective area. By doing this, the team hopes to paint a comprehensive picture of Al-Qaida today in order to inform the strategic decisions of tomorrow. After all, no matter what one believes about the relative strength of Al-Qaida, the United States will be dealing with its actions for the foreseeable future.

MES kicked off its Iran Lecture Series, with a presentation by Dr. Katzman entitled “Iran’s Revolutionary Guard: Facing Challenges Foreign and Domestic.” Dr. Katzman provided an overview of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) as it faces both internal and external challenges, which are not purely military, brought on by growing international pressure on the Islamic Republic to end its nuclear program.

Dr. Katzman’s presentation provided insight into the evolution of the IRGC from the defender of the Iranian regime to a “business conglomerate, active in all spheres of the Iranian economy.” He laid out how this evolution has made the IRGC susceptible to international pressure on Iran to end its nuclear program, in the form of sanctions. This susceptibility has highlighted growing schisms in the Guard Corps as their business interests are threatened by the implementation and expansions of sanctions imposed on the IRGC by the United Nations Security Council.

In the second lecture in the series entitled “A British Perspective in Negotiating with Iran”, Mr. Shercliff shared Dr. Katzman that the overwhelming international support for the latest round of Security Council sanctions, as well as supplemental actions taken by individual nations, is working to curb Iran’s nuclear program by making it more difficult for anyone to do business Tehran.

Through the lens of his diplomatic post in Tehran as a political office in the British Embassy from May 2000 to July 2003, as well as his experience from his subsequent postings in Baghdad and Kabul, Mr. Shercliff presented his “10 Iranian Negotiation Tactics”, expressing some optimism as to the effectiveness of the “carrot and stick” approach that has been employed by the international community to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions. He highlighted the slow progress of its Iran’s nuclear program over the last three decades. However, Mr. Shercliff cautioned that the perception of an Iranian nuclear program, no matter the actual pace of progress in such a program, is a destabilizing factor in the region.

Dr. Katzman and Mr. Shercliff’s presentations laid the groundwork for framing the Iranian challenge with an assessment of the evolution and current state of the IRGC, the effectiveness of current policies aimed at deterring Iran’s nuclear ambitions, the complexities of negotiating with Tehran, and what is at stake should Iran contain along its current path.

The presentations discussed above, as well as more information about the lecture series, are available online at <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil> under the Middle East Studies tab, in both audio and DVD versions. For further information on the series or how to obtain copies of the lectures, please contact MES of MCU at MCU_MES@grc.usmcu.edu.

MES Past Events and Recent Publications

21 September 2010

Dr. Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Recalibrating the Afghan Reconciliation Program”, to the Key Leader Training of ISAF at JFC HQ Brunssum, Holland.

14 October 2010

Dr. Tarzi participated at Middle East Policy Council’s 62nd Capitol Hill Conference entitled “Middle Eastern Perspectives on the United States: Are We a Reliable Security Partner or ‘A Problem To Be Managed’?”, Washington, DC.

26 October 2010

Dr. Tarzi contributed “Iran Has a Chip on Every Number” in “What Does Iran’s Cash Buy in Afghanistan?” – *The New York Times* online “Room for Debate”.

Al-Qaida Notes

[1] Vice-President Joe Biden, for instance, said in an interview on CNN's Larry King Live Show: "The idea of there being a massive attack in the United States like 9/11 is unlikely, in my view". Instead, he said, the attacks are likely to be of the "small", "frightening" type attempted by the Christmas bomber in 2009. See: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-6197550-503544.html.

[2] Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, *The Almanac of Al Qaeda*, Foreign Policy, May/June 2010.

[3] John Rollins *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*. Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress R41070, February 5, 2010.

[4] Facts on Al-Qaida affiliates come from the National Counterterrorism Center's Counterterrorism Calendar 2010, available at: <http://www.nctc.gov/site/index.html>. Further background information is found in Chapter 6. *Terrorist Organizations from Country Reports on Terrorism 2009*, US Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, August 5, 2010: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2009/140900.htm>.

Stephanie Kramer is a research associate for the Minerva Project, Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University. Ms. Kramer holds a BA in Language Studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Before coming to MCU, Ms. Kramer was a research assistant at the Congressional Research Service in the Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade Division. She can be reached at kramerse@grc.usmcu.edu.

MES Welcomes AFPAK Hand

Captain Arthur Karell, USMC, has joined Middle East Studies as an Afghanistan/Pakistan Hand. He will be in residence until August 2011. His current work includes study of village stabilization programs, reintegration of anti-coalition forces into local communities, and military initiatives for economic development.

Upon completion of officer training in 2007, Captain Karell was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, where he served as a rifle platoon commander with Company F and deployed to southern Afghanistan in 2008. He then served as the Company F executive officer from 2009-2010 and deployed to the western Pacific in support of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit. Before joining the Marine Corps he worked as an associate with Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP in Washington DC and a Teaching Fellow at Athens College in Athens, Greece. He has a B.A. in Government and Latin American Studies from Harvard University and a J.D. from the University of Virginia.

While with MES Capt Karell can be reached at:

Office: (703) 432-4771

E-mail: karellae@grc.usmcu.edu

Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University

Dr. Amin Tarzi • Director, MES • tarzia@grc.usmcu.edu

Adam C. Seitz • Senior Research Associate, MES • seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu