

## Lessons from Mombasa: Al Qaeda's Long-term Strategy

By Paul Rogers

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An analysis of the status of al Qaeda published a month ago, entitled *Is al Qaeda winning?*, came to the conclusion that the organization had experienced disruption in Afghanistan as well as a number of recent reversals, but was, on balance, more active than 18 months ago. While major attacks in Paris, Rome, Singapore, and elsewhere had been prevented, their very planning demonstrated the power of the organization and its affiliates. Moreover, many other attacks had succeeded in their aims—not least the Bali bombing, the attack on the Tunisian synagogue, several bombings in Pakistan, and assaults in Yemen.

One overall conclusion that could be drawn from these developments was that al Qaeda was not a monolithic and hierarchical organization with one small group of key leaders directing every operation anywhere in the world. Rather, the al Qaeda phenomenon is best seen as an association of like-minded groups operating in many countries with some loose coordination, with more centralized training, financing, and technical expertise available when required.

Within this wider organization, al Qaeda may be the most significant group and it may have a strategic sense of direction that provides some long-term coordination, but the removal of its most senior leadership would not in any sense bring the numerous paramilitary actions to an end.

### For the U.S., a Harsher Climate

If this is a reasonably accurate assessment of the position a month ago, what is the position in the aftermath of the bombing of the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel near Mombasa and the attempt to destroy an Israeli charter airliner taking off from the nearby airport?

The first point to make is that this was actually one of a series of recent developments. In Pakistan, following the provincial elections, a radical Islamic leader, Akram Khan Durrani, was last week elected chief minister of the Northwest Frontier Province. This followed the success of his United Action Forum religious coalition in elections held on 10 October. The coalition has a 32-seat majority over all other parties in the 124-seat assembly, and Durrani has come to power with policies that include the strengthening of Islamic law and also the exclusion of U.S. troops from the province.

In another development, the trial began this week in Rotterdam of four men accused of planning attacks on the U.S. embassy in Paris and on the Kleine-Brogel Air Force Base in Belgium, which includes a U.S. munitions store. The trial relates to activities being planned before 11 September 2001, indicating the extent of other operations that were already under development.

Elsewhere, there was a further shooting incident directed against U.S. soldiers in Kuwait,

when two soldiers were wounded by a junior Kuwaiti police officer. This was the latest in a string of incidents in Kuwait, including the killing of a U.S. marine last month, and one result has been the sacking of the head of security in Kuwait. In Lebanon, a young American evangelist, Bonnie Witherall, was killed at the clinic in Sidon where she worked as a nurse. Lebanese security officials were reported as saying that they thought the murder was linked to the anti-American mood that is prevalent across so much of the Middle East.

In their different ways, these four examples serve as a reminder of two aspects of the war on terror. First, there is the extent of the anti-American mood that is rampant throughout the Middle East and southwest Asia, a mood which is much harsher than before the attacks on New York and Washington fifteen months ago. Secondly, we are reminded that al Qaeda and its associates are involved in a long-term struggle.

## For al Qaeda, the Gulf Remains the Focus

In such a context, what is the significance of the attacks in Kenya? Two issues come to the fore immediately. The first is that the attacks largely failed but, had they succeeded, would have been the most devastating incidents since 11 September 2001. The bombing of the hotel was intended to kill scores of Israeli tourists who had just arrived. Instead, the timing was wrong, the tourists had checked into the hotel and had dispersed to their rooms. As a result, most of those killed were young members of a Kenyan dance group.

The attempt to destroy the passenger jet using shoulder-launched missiles

was intended to kill over 200 people, an atrocity that would have been by far the largest loss of life for the Israelis in a single incident in the 54-year history of the country. Causing this loss of life when a singularly hawkish administration was in power would almost inevitably have involved an extreme Israeli military response.

Successive Israeli governments have been particularly uncompromising when it comes to attacks on Israeli citizens abroad. Although the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was already being planned, it was prompted as a response to the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador to Britain.

As it is, considerable U.S. pressure is being exerted on the Sharon government to refrain from such action, but this will not be easy. There is a widespread feeling of insecurity in Israel because of the many bombings, though still a certain perception of safety when people are travelling abroad on holiday. Going by Israeli-owned charter jets to Israeli-owned hotels had been presumed safe. With hindsight, the very identity of these facilities actually made them clear-cut targets for a paramilitary movement with extensive international resources.

Even so, we have to go beyond these immediate attacks to get a clearer idea of al Qaeda's strategy and its associates. Here is the second area where the Kenyan incidents offer wider significance.

At root, the al Qaeda network is involved in a long-term program aimed at creating a wider and more coherent Islamic world based on a particularly rigorous interpretation of Islam that is not shared by the great majority of Muslims. Within this

overall intention, two specific and more short-term objectives are the determination to expel American forces from the Gulf and the ending of the Saudi monarchy's control of Saudi Arabia.

Even this is quite a long-term program, already underway for a decade and with another decade in prospect before it might be achieved, but it is part of a much longer strategy that might stretch over half a century, beyond the lifespans of the main participants. For the moment, though, the Gulf, U.S. influence, and the House of Saud remain the main targets of al Qaeda's focus.

## Entangling the U.S.—and Israel?

In this mindset, Israel and Iraq have been relatively unimportant until recently. The Israeli-Palestinian confrontation may cause endemic ill-feeling across the region, but al Qaeda has not been a ready supporter of the Palestinian cause, and this may well be for regional social reasons. Ever since the start of the Palestinian refugee problems in 1948, very large numbers of Palestinians have sought recourse to education as a way out of their marginalization. This has been the case right through to university level; one result has been a diaspora of highly educated Palestinians, many of whom have gone on to be the professionals running public services throughout the Gulf.

While their presence has been indispensable to the economic development of the region, their sheer competence has frequently been resented, especially as young nationals of the Gulf states have more recently found it difficult to establish themselves in the professions at a time of relative economic recession.

The accumulated result of these trends has been that al Qaeda's natural sources of support have not been particularly positive toward the Palestinians; yet even this has been overcome by the hard-line policies of the Sharon government, such that al Qaeda has now embraced Israel as one of its core enemies, a process made so much easier by the prevailing regional perception of Israel as nothing more than a client state of Washington, using American bombers and helicopters to kill Palestinians.

Similarly, there was no great affinity between al Qaeda and Iraq, with the Saddam Hussein regime seen as an unacceptably secular state in the heart of the Islamic world. Even this antagonism has now been overcome, with al Qaeda now speaking out in favor of Iraq almost entirely because Baghdad is now in the sights of the Washington security hawks.

Indeed, by taking this line, al Qaeda will seek to gain substantially from Washington's destruction of the Iraqi regime. Even the immediate collapse

of the regime at the onset of a war would result in its replacement with a client state, and this would be represented as further proof of al Qaeda's long-term claim that the United States is utterly intent on controlling the region, in concert with Israel. A more disastrous war, with heavy civilian casualties and U.S. forces tied down for many weeks or even months, would be an absolute gift to the organization.

This leads us on to a general feature of the strategy that still seems largely unrecognized. This is that al Qaeda is specifically interested in inciting greater U.S. and western military action anywhere in the Islamic world. It is not expecting to defeat the United States in the short term. Quite the contrary—it positively seeks an increased confrontation as a means of greatly increasing support for both its medium- and longer-term aims.

The Mombasa attacks therefore serve two purposes. One is specifically to draw the Israelis further into a regional war on terror. The other is to

demonstrate, by attempting to shoot down an airliner, that the reach of al Qaeda and its associates is potentially worldwide.

Meanwhile, the view from Washington remains that this is an unconventional war that can be fought and won on American terms. There is still little interest in understanding where al Qaeda is coming from or why support for it may be increasing. The tragedy is that it may take more atrocities and much more loss of life before a deeper understanding begins to dawn.

*(This article was first published in its entirety on the global issues website [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net) as part of an ongoing debate about Global Security. Paul Rogers is professor of peace studies at Bradford University and is openDemocracy's international security correspondent. He is a consultant to the Oxford Research Group. The second edition of his book *Losing Control* has just been published by Pluto Press.)*