

9/11 Redux?

September 11, 2001, was one of the few days in history that fundamentally changed the world. Fear of further attack from al-Qaeda is a constant theme within American culture. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan grind on and on with no end in sight. So, while America fights al-Qaeda on its home turf, what's the real risk of another catastrophic attack in USA?

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There's no doubt that another attack in USA, as destructive as 9/11, can happen. Most Americans, however, seem to shrug it off.

According to the Pew Research Center in USA, less than a quarter of Americans are still "very worried" about another terrorist attack in America. In October 2001, for example, only twenty-eight per cent held that view; in another Pew survey (September 2006), that had dropped to twenty-three per cent. At the same, in relation to effecting another attack, a majority of Americans (62%) still think that "terrorists' capabilities are the same or greater", a point of view that has stayed virtually the same since mid-2002. Does it matter, however, what the general population thinks? Well ... yes and no. It does because it's sensible to have a citizenry that is informed and aware – and able to provide local information, as appropriate. On the other hand, the population is generally powerless in the face of national uncertainties, for obvious reasons.

Nevertheless, despite that muted, if not entirely sanguine, attitude by the American people, soon after the events of 9/11 President George W. Bush publicly stated that he would take the fight to the terrorists so that it wouldn't be necessary to fight them at home, thus implicitly accepting the premise that another attack was not only possible but likely. Hence, in 2002, Afghanistan was invaded by U.S. and Coalition forces; in 2003, the Iraq war began. Since then, it's an established fact that there has been *no* terrorist attack in the United States of America, contrary to the continued belief another will happen. Thomas Keen, former head of the 9/11 Commission, supports that belief by stating: "We believe that the terrorists will strike again; so does every responsible expert that we have talked to."

That pervasive belief within the administration persists. In 2003, for example, a U.S. government report indicated an attack would occur "within two years"; that same report, however, also contained the admission there was *no* evidence to actually support that claim. In another report, an assessment of the threat to nuclear power stations – a prime target, according to many – the Nuclear Research Council in USA rated the probability of attack as "highly speculative." In truth, there is no doubt an attack *could* happen almost anywhere within continental USA: at a major sea port, a vital bridge, a busy airport, a congested freeway interchange, a petrochemical plant, the Hoover dam, and so on, all such infrastructure having a measure of risk attached. However, in a study released by the Rand Corporation in December 2007, Henry Willis, a researcher who co-authored the study, said "terrorism risk is concentrated in a few cities" and that "most cities ... have negligible relative risk." Risk, in this

context, is inextricably bound to vulnerability which, according to the study, resulted in Boise, Idaho, as having a high risk of attack, mostly due to the presence of a large, nearby dam. In that context, according to an LA Times article, the residents of that city are somewhat perplexed to be included in the same league as New York, Washington and other much larger cities. Moreover, when addressing the specter of nuclear attack by terrorists, Willis said: "We don't really know where a terror group would attack if they had a weapon of mass destruction." That degree of uncertainty is echoed by MIT Professor Steven Pinker, speaking four years earlier in 2004: "...anyone who claims to have calculated the mathematically correct *probability* that a horrendous terrorist attack will take place in the next year would be talking through his hat." And he also said that "...dealing with terrorists is a problem in game theory, not just a problem in risk estimation." Professor Pinker, of course, knows it's *not* a game: it's a "high-consequence event that keeps national security planners awake at night" according to Professor Ungerer, Project Director, Australian National Security, and the stuff of daily nightmares for others, for over six years now.

So, while nobody can provide a *usable* probability factor of when or where an attack will occur, the U.S. administration and a minority of citizenry are, naturally, still worried about it. But that's only part of the problem because the real fear is that the next attack may involve weapons of mass destruction (WMD), a collective term that has three components: chemical, biological and nuclear. While the first two are viewed as lower risks that must be monitored and reduced wherever possible, it is the nuclear aspect that causes the most concern, mainly because "Osama bin Laden has called the acquisition of nuclear weapons ... a 'religious duty'", according to a report on The Risk of Nuclear Terrorism presented to the U.S. Senate on April 2, 2008. The report further quoted U.S. Intelligence sources as saying that "at least a 'crude' nuclear device was within al-Qa'ida's (sic) capabilities" but only if that organization obtained enough fissile material, that is, Highly Enriched Uranium 235 (HEU-235) for a gun-type nuclear device.

The report went on to say that the theft of nuclear material is "an ongoing reality", but so far only in small quantities, an aspect that is supported by another report, published in December 2007 from the Centre for Non-proliferation Studies (CNS) in California. Furthermore, for example, a recent newspaper report written by an Iraq weapons inspector, and published in The Washington Post in March 2008, highlighted the fact that "Since 1993, there have been more than 1,300 incidents of illicit trafficking of nuclear materials..." and that "With enough stolen material, only a few specialists would be needed to build a nuclear weapon." No knowledgeable expert disputes the viability of those claims but the CNS report specifically warned of media excess about the use of such small quantities in any useful terrorist weapon, and asserted that amounts stolen to date are insufficient "for any sort of terrorist device." The Senate report, moreover, admitted that, when the actual chances of a major nuclear terrorist attack are assessed, "the short answer is nobody knows"; but some mathematical models indicate there is a 29% to 50% probability of a major attack in the United States within ten years. The report concluded with the warning that only by instituting an additional range of safeguards and controls regarding nuclear proliferation in USA, Russia, Pakistan and other nuclear powers, will that probability be reduced. Hence, while there is no doubt that a terrorist group such as al-Qaeda can obtain the necessary nuclear material; has stated publicly its desire to use such a

weapon; and, by all accounts, can in fact do so given the time and resources, the only question that remains is: Will it happen?

Launching any attack on the USA is not easy, despite al-Qaeda's success of 9/11. As a direct result of that atrocity, the U.S. government has instituted many specific measures to thwart further attacks. First, the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq remain, despite much domestic opposition in America and other countries and, while President Bush admitted underestimating the length of time to wage the war in Iraq, he is "...unwavering in his insistence that the invasion of Iraq, which began in March 2003, had made the world better and the United States safer." Regardless of personal feelings about the current president and his administration, with each passing day he remains more correct than doom merchants who warn of imminent attack. Second, recognizing that all attacks require money to finance any operation, the U.S. government took steps to reduce the ability of known and suspected extremist organizations to transfer money through the international banking and commercial systems. In a recent feature in the Los Angeles Times, however, it was reported that "In some cases, extremist groups have blunted financial anti-terrorism tools by finding new ways to raise, transfer and spend their money." There has been some success, over the years, in stopping the money flow, but "The international cooperation and focus is dropping, the farther we get from 9/11" according to Michael Jacobson, a one-time senior advisor in the U.S. Treasury Department. In other words, the finances of extremist organizations are still functioning and still remain a threat to America and other countries targeted by al-Qaeda and others. Third, over the last six years, the Pentagon and Intelligence services have found a new – but old – method of combating extremists: an *adapted* Cold War strategy designed to deny extremists credibility within the Muslim world coupled with direct threats to any country supplying nuclear material to any terrorist organization; in addition, a series of on-going classified cyberwar tactics are used to disrupt communications and sow disinformation within enemy groups. It is, according to Pentagon policy guru for special operations, Michael Vickers, quoted in the New York Times, "the new world of terrorist deterrence theory." And, finally, the security of continental United States has, with the formation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, been upgraded with more strict immigration and customs procedures, and tighter airport and border controls, particularly along the southern border with Mexico where a range of electronic surveillance devices and new border fencing are now in place or under construction.

In accordance with Sun Tzu's advice in *The Art of War* about knowing your enemy, keeping watch on terrorist websites and media releases does have pay-offs: in 2003, for example, Ayman al-Zawahiri commented online about a planned attack on New York subways using cyanide devices. In a New York Times' report, he was quoted as saying that such an attack was called off because it "was not sufficiently inspiring to serve Al Qaeda's ambitions." Essentially, al-Zawahiri was saying that such small scale attacks would be regarded as humiliating when compared to the destruction of the World Trade Centre (WTC). Hence, such an admission appears to bolster bin Laden's urge for terrorists to acquire nuclear weapons so that a future, large-scale attack does exceed the result from the WTC destruction.

However, established behaviour patterns over time are often better guides to future acts. Much has been written in the media, academia and the military about al-Qaeda's

objectives, tactics and successes, all of which have been freely available to read, digest and assess for years:

- Bin Laden wants to restore the Caliphate, which existed when Islam ruled the world from Europe to Asia, and which is viewed as a strategic al-Qaeda objective;
- Al-Qaeda's actions continue to push the USA into soaring defence budgets and ballooning deficits, thus chipping away at its overall economy – the very thing Osama bin Laden has vowed to destroy;
- Bin Laden continues to urge all jihadists to kill Westerners, particularly Americans – anywhere, anytime;
- Since 9/11, Al-Qaeda and others have attacked England, Algeria, Morocco, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia and The Philippines, to name but some; and
- The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are magnets for an ever-growing army of terrorists, acting for al-Qaeda and others, either directly or as proxies. In 2008, the war in Iraq continues, and recent reports from Afghanistan indicate a steadily worsening situation.

In sum, al-Qaeda is, with other terrorist groups, attacking Western interests from Europe to Asia, while effectively leeching Western economies, with the knockdown, drag-out conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Moreover, as a political bonus for *all* terrorists, there's been heavy negative fallout for the Bush administration since 9/11:

- From an 80% positive approval rating just after 9/11, President Bush has now sunk to a low of under 28%, according to the latest Gallup poll (April, 2008), within the USA itself and the lowest rating since President Franklin D. Roosevelt; and
- America's standing, prestige and influence around the world are now at a low ebb, not only because of Iraq and Afghanistan, but also from the disgrace of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and proof of torture by U.S. forces.

That is, America is now snared in unwinnable insurgencies which are increasingly unpopular with the majority of Americans, as America also becomes increasingly unpopular around the world. In the words of al-Zawahiri again, as broadcast on al-Jazirah TV on September 10th, 2003, "The Americans are now facing a delicate situation in both countries. If they withdraw they will lose everything and if they stay, they will continue to bleed to death." And despite the apparent success, in 2007, of the surge in U.S. forces in Iraq, the unpopularity of that regional conflict remains.

In the 1930s, only few people recognized the dangers posed by Adolf Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, which clearly laid out his plan for the destruction of the Jewish people and the establishment for German hegemony across Europe. In a similar fashion, bin Laden's objective for the restoration of the Caliphate is also well-known. Given that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have no foreseeable end, and that terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda surrogates continue around the world, a question must be considered: How

would another devastating attack within USA serve al-Qaeda's dream? There are four key aspects that help to provide perspective:

- First, the attacks upon Western infrastructure since 9/11 are all in countries that form part of the old Caliphate. This is in keeping with al-Qaeda's objective of attempting to remove foreign forces from those countries, and force them to "bleed to death" in faraway places, such as Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Second, it is a matter of public record that belief in attack upon USA remains high within the U.S. administration. Hence, military and security forces stay on high alert in lock-down USA, and the administration continues to spend multi-billions on Homeland Security – a further drain on the economy, and a key aspect of al-Qaeda's strategy. Furthermore, periodic TV and audio media releases from al-Qaeda continue to stoke that fear with continued vague threats upon the U.S.
- Third, the longer U.S. forces are perceived as oppressors in Muslim countries, the greater the growth of fundamentalist Islam and fanatical terrorists, and again, all in countries that form part of the Caliphate. That growth is in accord with al-Qaeda's need for recruits as suicide bombers and insurgents.
- And finally, the attack on 9/11 resulted in a worldwide surge of support for America, a very natural reaction from its allies and well-wishers. Since that time however, support has eroded, as noted above, because of situations like Abu Ghraib et al, an aspect that can only help al-Qaeda to rally continued support for its own cause. It need hardly be stated that enemies do not deliberately assist each other.

Connecting those dots adds up to a set of military tactics that is favorable to al-Qaeda's overall strategic objectives, but which do not necessarily include the destruction of "America, much less its freedoms and liberties", according to Michael Scheuer, ex-CIA operative-in-charge of Counterterrorism and author of *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is losing the war on terror*. Instead, Scheuer lists six al-Qaeda goals, all of which go to the heart of the restoration of the Caliphate, with the removal of all foreign powers and the destruction of Israel, and none of which includes direct attack upon continental USA.

Still, an attack on USA could happen again, an aspect with which Scheuer agrees, as does Jessica Stern, recognized as the foremost U.S. expert on terrorism at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. What more concerns Stern, however, is the fact that the debacle of Iraq, atrocities at Abu Ghraib, illegal confinement at Guantanamo Bay and such like "...will help Al Qaeda recruit Americans" and thereby further undermine efforts to defeat extremism within USA and elsewhere. The atrocity aspect, however, doesn't appear to worry President Bush who remains convinced that the harsh interrogation program – called torture, by others – has been instrumental in preventing another attack. On March 10, 2008, for example, President Bush was once again quoted in the New York Times, saying that "Were it not for this program, our intelligence community believes that al Qaeda and its allies would have succeeded in launching another attack against the American homeland."

Ultimately, it's impossible to say conclusively whether or not another attack will occur. On the basis of this review, however, there is more evidence to indicate that attacks upon U.S. forces will continue in Iraq, Afghanistan and other soft targets in countries other than the United States. And, as time passes, the difficulty of launching an attack upon the USA grows, thus making success for al-Qaeda, in that regard, even more uncertain. Hence, from a global perspective, the President's plan to engage the enemy abroad to keep America safe at home has worked. However, whether that's because of the Bush plan only, al-Qaeda's choice or a combination of both remains an open question.

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