Why al Qaeda May Never Die

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The first anniversary of the murderous raid on Osama bin Laden's hideaway presents an opportunity to evaluate the threat al Qaeda now poses. For its part, the Obama administration/reelection campaign seems more interested in using the event to score political points against Mitt Romney. But terrorism alarmists are more focused on al Qaeda itself and are in peak form explaining that, although the organization has been weakened, it still manages to present a grave threat.

Various techniques, honed over a decade, are applied to support this contention. If they are accepted as valid, al Qaeda will cease to exist or be "defeated" only when we run entirely out of tiny groups or individual nuts operating with al Qaeda-like aspirations.

One technique is to espy and assess various "linkages" or "connections" or "ties" or "threads" between and among a range of disparate terrorists or terrorist groups, most of which appear rather gossamer and of only limited consequence on closer examination.

Another is to darkly elevate the vague and the distinctly aspirational as if there were some tangible potential there. Thus, al Qaeda's "ideology of the global jihad" still "survives," we are told, and the group is "making provisions for the

long term," is "poised to survive," "isregrouping," is "not entirely isolated," might work with Iran because "they share a common enemy," has been "embraced" by a Nigerian group with purely local concerns, has provided "strategic advice," has "inspired" a number of inept would-be amateur terrorists here and there, and has been thinking about plotting the assassination of Barack Obama.

A third technique is to exaggerate the importance and effectiveness of the "affiliated groups" linked to al Qaeda central. In particular, alarmists point to the al Qaeda affiliate in chaotic Yemen, proclaiming it to be the "deadliest" and the "most aggressive" of these and a "major threat."

Insofar as it threatens the United States, the Yemen group has been elevated by two efforts at international terrorism, both of which failed abysmally.

It apparently supplied the 2009 underwear bomber with an explosive that he was unable to detonate, one that, a test by the BBC suggests, might not have downed his plane even if it had gone off.

The other failure is the foiled effort to set off bombs contained within laser printers on planes bound for the United States in 2010. The organization explained that one of their packagescontained a copy of Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* to express its optimism about the operation's success even as the group promised more such attacks. The optimism, and thus far the promise, have gone unfulfilled.

With that track record, the group may pose a problem or concern to the United States. But it scarcely presents a "major threat."

Much of the alarmist perspective has been generated in opposition to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's contention last year that "we're within reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda." Insofar as this declaration can be decoded, it actually seems to be supported by the alarmists' own admission that "the organization that brought us 9/11 is essentially gone" and that it no longer plays "a major strategic and operational role."

More important, however, is to supply some degree of quantitative heft to an evaluation of the "threat."

To the administration's claim that it is trying "to keep our country safe," Associated Press intelligence writer Kimberly Dozier rhetorically observes, "How safe remains in question."

But there is a perfectly valid method for assessing the question and for measuring the risk international terrorism presents to the United States. At current rates, an American's chance of becoming a victim of terrorism in the United States is about 1 in 3.5 million per year. In comparison, that same American stands a 1 in 22,000 yearly chance of becoming a homicide victim, a 1 in 8,000 chance of perishing in an auto accident, and a 1 in 500 chance of dying from cancer.

These calculations are based, of course, on historical data. However, the terrorism data include not only 9/11, but also the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, and alarmists who would reject such history need to explain why they think terrorists will suddenly become vastly more competent in the future.

But no one seems to be making that argument. Indeed, notes Dozier, U.S. officials say al Qaeda has become less capable of a large attack like 9/11.

She also discloses that these officials made this brave disclosure only on condition of anonymity because they feared that "publicly identifying themselves could make them a target" of terrorists. Meanwhile, however, terrorism specialist Peter Bergen observed to Dozier in heroic full attribution mode that "The last terror attack (in the West) was seven years ago in London," that there "haven't been any major attacks in the U.S.," and that "they are recruiting no-hopers and dead-enders."

The problem is that there is an endless supply of no-hopers and dead-enders out there.

And also, it appears, of terrorism alarmists.