
Program Brief

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"Al Qaeda: Status and Future Prospects"

A Luncheon with Rohan Gunaratna and Marc Sageman

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At a luncheon at the Nixon Center, Rohan Gunaratna and Marc Sageman spoke about the global Islamist network that wrought the September 11th attacks. Rohan Gunaratna is the author of six books on armed conflict, including *Inside al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, and is an associate professor at the Institute for Defense and Strategic Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Dr. Gunaratna has served as a consultant on terrorism to several governments and corporations. Marc Sageman is author of the forthcoming *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, April 2003). He teaches at the Solomon Asch Center for the Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict at the University of Pennsylvania.

Gunaratna first described the antecedents of Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda evolved from the Mekhtab al Khidmat (MAK). The MAK was formed in 1984 during the jihad against the Soviets to recruit and elicit financial support. The MAK had a network of 30 offices in the U.S. In 1988 the MAK evolved into Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda's first phase was as a base of support for Islamist movements around the world.

Al Qaeda armed, trained, and financed tens of thousands of Islamists across the world. This was possible in part because the US neglected Pakistan and Afghanistan after the Soviets retreated from Afghanistan.

According to Gunaratna, Pervez Musharraf and Hamid Karzai are the two most threatened leaders in the world. Hizb-i-Islami is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Pakistan Islamist groups such as Harkat-ul-Mujahidin, Lashkar-i-Toiba, and Jaish-i-Mohammed exert significant pressure and influence on Musharraf. Musharraf

cannot crack down on these groups because they pressure India in Kashmir.

The massive attacks on September 11th were meant to inspire and instigate other groups to follow al Qaeda's lead. Al Qaeda attacked the U.S. because it sees itself as the pioneering vanguard of Islamist organizations. In that sense the strategy worked. Before 9/11 terrorist attacks were occurring at the rate of one or two per year. After 9/11 attacks were occurring about every three months.

All of Al Qaeda's post-9/11 attacks have been in "the Global South" because al Qaeda's ability to attack the U.S. has deteriorated. Estimates of al Qaeda's membership immediately after 9/11 hovered around 4,000. Since 9/11 there have been 4,100 arrests of members and sympathizers in 102 countries.

Dr. Gunaratna outlined three reasons why there has not been another terrorist attack in America since 9/11. First, there has been unprecedented security and intelligence cooperation since 9/11. Over 100 attacks have been disrupted. Second, heightened public vigilance does not allow terrorists to attack. Finally, the aggressive campaign against terrorism is curtailing al Qaeda's operations. Although the inability to capture bin Laden is a significant failure, al Qaeda is suffering setbacks. Al Qaeda does not have time to plan or to train recruits. Its sanctuary and base of operations has been destroyed. Its best operatives have been captured or killed.

Al Qaeda is financed by individuals and organizations, but charities are the main source. The Global Relief Fund (GRF) and Benevolence International Foundation (BIF) gave millions to al

Qaeda. As the U.S. is targeting the banking structure, al Qaeda is using the untraceable and informal *hawala* system.

Al Qaeda does not have a specific immigration strategy, but Gunaratna explained that all major terrorist attacks in the west, except the Oklahoma City Bombing, have been perpetrated by groups that recruit from and use the cover of migrant communities. Al Qaeda infiltrates and allies with groups who are active in the west, such as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).

The threat has evolved beyond al Qaeda. 30 Islamist groups are now conducting attacks with minimal guidance or support directly from al Qaeda. Al Qaeda mobilizes support and provides ideological guidance. For the future of the war on terrorism the U.S. must monitor and attack these subgroups and affiliated groups just like al Qaeda is being confronted.

Dr. Gunaratna stressed that "Iraq is the new land of jihad." Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on a small scale, but they generally ignored one another. Like Afghanistan produced the current generation of terrorists Iraq is producing the next. Islamist terror groups worldwide are exercising more influence because of the U.S. presence in Iraq.

Dr. Sageman offered an empirical perspective based on study of 170 Salafist terrorists, focusing on al Qaeda. Terrorism is only a small part of a larger social revivalist movement. Individuals who would never think of committing a suicide bombing would send money or provide logistical support to the organizations. Sageman's 170 subjects were concentrated in four clusters, Southeast Asian, Maghreb, Core Arab, and Central Staff.

The subjects refuted conventional wisdom about terrorism. Most are not poor, undereducated, or aggressive. 2/3 of the sample is from the middle class with intact families and secular educations. There was no record of psychological problems and only a small number were involved in petty crime before they joined.

To illustrate his data Dr. Sageman used the case of Ahmed Ressam, the "Millennium Bomber." The cell that planned the bombing was composed of Algerians in Canada through fraudulent asylum claims. The men drifted towards the mosque where they fenced stolen goods to an al Qaeda operative. Through the social bonds developed and extended at the mosque Ressam found his way to Afghanistan and to al Qaeda.

Dr. Sageman also spoke about the "Hamburg Cell." The members were all upper class, educated men. They congregated and formed friendships at the mosque, and then went to Afghanistan for training.

The financial war on al Qaeda is not successful. Al Qaeda receives much of its financing from individuals. Financing, like recruitment, was

from the bottom up. Individuals financed their operations through petty theft and credit card fraud.

Dr. Sageman closed by outlining his general findings. Men joined the jihad through preexisting social bonds. Homesick young men drifted to the mosque, which they knew as a cultural and religious anchor. To the extent there was a "recruitment" process, most joined through "passive bridges to jihad" rather than an individual who actively scouted them out. Al Qaeda was a thoroughly bottom-up operation. Volunteers joined spontaneously. Individuals drift to the jihad through passive bridges and existing social bonds. Because of this, al Qaeda is a self generating and replicating organization. Social hubs hold the network together.

This program brief was prepared by Immigration and National Security Program Assistant Steven Brooke.

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