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Approved for Release: 2020/02/25 C05428602

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY



DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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21 February 2004

US Efforts Grinding Down al-Qa'ida

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Central Leadership Breaking Down...

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The war in Afghanistan, detention of the Management Council in Iran, and capture of Khalid Shaykh Muhammad (KSM) and his subordinates have gutted nearly three-quarters of the upper echelons of al-Qa'ida's central leadership. This virtual decapitation of the group limits its ability to provide overarching operational inspiration and direction, manage its international infrastructure, route money from fundraisers to operatives and their families, articulate its message to sympathizers abroad, and provide long-term organizational continuity in the event of the death or capture of Usama Bin Ladin

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Because of US and allied efforts, the al-Qa'ida organization we faced two years ago does not exist today. Successive blows to its central leadership have severely restricted its capabilities and cohesiveness, transforming it into a loose collection of regional networks that operate more autonomously and have been forced to rely largely on their own resources. **This forced decentralization has decreased the threat al-Qa'ida poses to the United States at home and abroad, but only to a point.**

- Al-Qa'ida's regional components and affiliated groups have nonetheless demonstrated their operational prowess with successful attacks over the past year, and those capabilities will increase if al-Qa'ida leaders in Pakistan succeed in their efforts to reconnect the chain of command.
- In addition, the steady growth of Bin Ladin's anti-US sentiment throughout the wider Sunni extremist jihad movement—especially in response to US intervention in Iraq—and the broad dissemination of al-Qa'ida's destructive expertise ensure that a serious threat will remain for the foreseeable future, with or without al-Qa'ida.

- The capture of KSM and other major operational planners disrupted or set back several large-scale terrorist plots, including plans for 11 September-style attacks on the US West Coast and against Heathrow Airport as well as an effort to conduct an operation similar to Richard Reid's failed shoe-bomb plot, which could have killed hundreds of US citizens.

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At the same time, al-Qa'ida's finances are being steadily squeezed, especially in Saudi Arabia.

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This undercut the group's legitimacy and led many of its traditional

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This report was prepared by the DCI Counterterrorist Center's Office of Terrorism Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief OTA, on

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donors to shift their support to other causes, sapping the morale of fighters and their families.

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...But Struggling to Regain It's Footing

Bin Ladin and the remnants of al-Qa'ida's central leadership have responded by withdrawing deeper into remote areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where they are attempting to replicate the coordinating functions previously performed by the Management Council and KSM. Detained al-Qa'ida facilitator Hasan Ghul [redacted] place al-Qa'ida finance chief Shaykh Sa'id and top paramilitary commander 'Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi in Waziristan [redacted]

The concentration of most of the remaining central leadership in and around Waziristan has not stopped the inefficiency in communications and bickering among Bin Ladin's lieutenants, however, that has plagued the group for much of the past two years. Hasan Ghul has described bitter strategic disputes and personality clashes between 'Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi and several other senior al-Qa'ida leaders and associates in the area—suggesting that Bin Ladin and Zawahiri remain unwilling or unable to step in and exercise their authority decisively, even in their immediate vicinity.

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- From its base along the border, the central leadership is opening new lines of contact to operatives and allies abroad. Ghul was captured

[redacted] Bin Ladin would initiate contact by sending a courier to his subordinates. [redacted]

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As we increase our attacks against the remaining leadership, we must be prepared for al-Qa'ida to try to violently undermine our efforts. [redacted]

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[redacted] in Iraq. [redacted]

Regional Networks Seize the Initiative

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- Ghul also reports that Hamza Rabi'a—a former Egyptian Islamic Jihad operative whom he sees as al-Qa'ida's new chief of terrorist operations—is based in the area and overseeing attack planning [redacted]

Despite substantial progress against the upper echelon, the remaining fighters in al-Qa'ida's regional networks—estimated to number in the low thousands—and affiliated groups remain a significant threat. These terrorist nodes have their own targeting priorities and can independently muster the resources necessary to mount successful attacks. Most of the attacks over the past year have used

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[redacted] Other operatives in this area have been linked to KSM's plot against Heathrow Airport [redacted]

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several-hundred-pound vehicle bombs, highlighting the networks' ability to obtain and fashion highly destructive explosive devices.

- Operatives associated with [redacted] al-Qa'ida [redacted] conducted the bombings in November 2003 in Istanbul, Turkey,

- [redacted] the Casablanca bombings in May points to a loose network of local extremists assisted by groups affiliated with al-Qa'ida, such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group.

These networks have demonstrated their ability to remain viable and potent without the central leadership's assistance, but they will be even more capable if reliable lines of contact are reopened.

[redacted] Hasan Ghul reports that al-Zarqawi has [redacted] requested that al-Qa'ida send skilled operatives from Afghanistan to assist him in Iraq. [redacted]

The devolution of targeting decisions to regional networks has contributed to a broadening of al-Qa'ida's priorities for attack. This shift in strategy

has led to strategic blunders over the past year, such as the Riyadh bombings in May and November, which endangered al-Qa'ida's traditional fundraising and recruiting base.

- More recently, al-Qa'ida associate Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi has argued for making Iraqi Shia his and al-Qa'ida's principal target in Iraq. According to Hasan Ghul, 'Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi [redacted] oppose this strategy, but reporting from him [redacted] to kidnap Iranian officials to bargain for the release of the Management Council. [redacted]

Iraq: The Emerging Rallying Point [redacted]

Al-Qa'ida and other jihadist groups see the US-led action in Iraq as proof of the United States' intention to occupy Muslim lands and de-Islamicize them. The presence of US military forces in Iraq has united jihadists and terrorist groups in their desire to expel the United States through any means necessary.

- Many jihadists participating in anti-Coalition operations in Iraq hope to inspire an Islamic extremist movement among Iraqi Sunnis that would bring about a fundamentalist Sunni government.
- Others are more focused on attacking the United States and undermining US goals of creating a secular Iraqi democracy by targeting the developing Iraqi government and its citizens. [redacted]

While our understanding of and pressure against this jihadist network is growing, should al-Qa'ida succeed in developing effective relationships with new Iraqi Sunni extremist groups or in creating its own network in Iraq, it may be able to remain there for the long term. Safehaven networks in Iraq—although far more limited than bases and camps once held in Afghanistan—could provide jihadists with enough of an infrastructure to threaten the transitional Iraqi authority, serve as a base to recruit and train

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operatives for international operations, and to perpetuate their image of success globally. [redacted]

jihadists look forward to another major strike on US soil and eagerly exchange rumors and speculation on the timing of the attack [redacted]

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The Threat: Less Coordination. More Anti-US Foot Soldiers [redacted]

If we capture or kill Bin Ladin and the other remnants of al-Qa'ida's central leadership, the organization and its wider jihadist allies' ability to plan complex operations on the scale of 11 September will be further diminished.

- A jihad movement facing communications breakdowns, an unforgiving security environment, and lacking a unified al-Qa'ida at its center is less likely to achieve the kind of synergy that produced 11 September. The 11 September attack was conceived collaboratively by several senior al-Qa'ida leaders co-located in Afghanistan, cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and involved handpicked operatives recruited from both Western Europe and the Arabian Peninsula. [redacted]

Operatives will attempt to achieve glory by staging another innovative attack in the United States, and they appear eager to inflict large-scale casualties by using chemical or biological agents—such as anthrax or the *mubtakar* CW devices—or conducting another attack involving commercial aircraft. Creative operatives [redacted] are refining their tactics to take advantage of US vulnerabilities to produce spectacular results.

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- Jihadists who lack the wide-ranging contacts or technical skill necessary to pull together a complex, resource-intensive plan might instead focus on attacks that will attract worldwide media attention out of proportion to the casualties they cause, such as the assassination of a high-ranking official, an attack involving a radiological dispersal device, or a prolonged hostage situation.

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The steady growth of anti-US sentiment throughout the jihad movement, however, offsets this advantage. Unlike several years ago, when al-Qa'ida was the movement's principal force advocating anti-US attacks, anti-US sentiment now dominates jihadist Internet discussions, and new recruits to other Sunni extremist groups [redacted]

- We have not extinguished al-Qa'ida's funding, however, and the group remains capable of financing terrorist operations. Improvised explosive devices such as the ammonium nitrate bomb that killed 17 persons in Riyadh in November 2003 cost little, and even the 11 September operation cost less than \$400,000. [redacted]

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[redacted] are being taught that attacking the United States and its interests worldwide often must take priority over local struggles. **Even if Bin Ladin soon dies and his organization crumbles, he will have succeeded in realigning the larger jihad movement's goals and priorities behind a unifying anti-US vision.** [redacted]

Keys to Future Success [redacted]

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To complete the job of eliminating al-Qa'ida and diminishing the broader extremist threat will require continued aggressive US and allied action. Al-Qa'ida and its allies will take advantage of any lessening of our efforts to attempt to resuscitate their organization and capabilities.

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Major Attacks in the US Will Remain a Focus [redacted]

For the growing number of jihadists interested in fighting the United States, a spectacular attack on the US Homeland is the "brass ring" that many will strive for—with or without encouragement by al-Qa'ida's central leadership. Internet discussions indicate that

- Capturing or killing Bin Ladin will greatly accelerate the development of splits in al-Qa'ida. Intelligence shows that he is the only figure whose authority is universally accepted in the group. [redacted] few trusted couriers and family [redacted]

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members who likely know the location of Bin Ladin

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- We must continue to detain other key al-Qa'ida leaders and operatives. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The Coalition's political, economic, and military efforts will hopefully compel regional leaders and affiliated terror groups in South Asia and the Middle East to see the personal risks of harboring and working with bickering and ineffective al-Qa'ida leaders.

- Increasing stability and indigenous capacity in Afghanistan and Iraq is adding new strength to the alliance fighting al-Qa'ida and extremism. Combined with allied efforts, we are dismantling terror networks in these two countries. [REDACTED]

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