2012: YEAR OF INDIVIDUAL JIHADISM PROLIFERATION?

As another year of analysis and predictions goes on, the counterterrorism intelligence community is today concerned with the growing trend of single-man terrorist cell; this individuals still represent the al-Qaeda main beliefs even if their training and actions are far different from the group main core planning and execution. This issue poses a serious threat to law enforcement agencies whose common methods and traditional investigation are not functional to pinpoint a single deviant person from a vast tolerant and moderate community.

It can easily be anticipated that al-Qaeda franchised groups will continue to exploit their local *jihad* against "apostates" Arab governments, while grassroots operatives will remain the relentless threat to western countries also for this year.

During its nearly 24 years story the "al-Qaeda concept" has suffered a considerable evolution and many changes pursuing the global *jihad* principles issued by the group leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Al-Qaeda has evolved at least in three distinct phases, from his creation in Afghanistan, as a resistance group against the "*Soviet invaders*", through the internationalization of the conflict against the "*Zionist and crusaders*" in areas such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia and Chechnya, finally evolving to the present situation, in which the al-Qaeda "*brand*" is attached to various organizations engaged in nationalist struggles (primarily AQIM[1], AQAP[2] and AQI[3]).

This last stage was meant to let the al-Qaeda name survive the fall of its logistic bases and ideological leaders, while the local groups linked to the qaedist core could receive major media coverage for their actions, being acknowledged as a serious international threat.

Al-Qaeda was founded as a paramilitary structure, a sort of "database" for all the *mujahedeen* who went to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet army. It was a methodic way to train, specialize and send the fighters all along the country.

The group then became a horizontal organization; after the Soviet withdrawal, the foreign fighters returned home, exporting and leading the global *jihad* in different places such as the former Yugoslavia and the African region. Today this

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[1] Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, formerly the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat)
[2] Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
[3] Al-Qaeda in Iraq, aka Islamic Emirate of Iraq

organization is more inclined to human assets pulverization around the world, single man cells that were created by necessity and by the will of the leadership itself.

This new development in fact is not an absolute innovation for al-Qaeda; since 2004, the modern *jihad* ideologue Abu Musab al-Souri[4], diverging from the al-Qaeda leadership mainstream ideology, preached a new *jihad* approach by a generation of single terrorists without top-down links, indoctrinated through websites and jihadist *fora*, whose activities would be of limited extent, but continuous and exhausting for Islamic enemies governments.

This message was then revived in 2009 by AQAP leader Nasir al-Wahayshi[5] which called for a strategy change in the struggle against the western *kuffar*[6]; from worldly shocking attacks (of difficult and complex preparation), to local activities against "low-level, soft-targets" through IED[7] assembled with ordinary craft and expertise. A new method exploited to exponentially increase the number of attacks while in the meantime promoting *jihad* among those uneducated and not trained people.

This new terrorist cells vision confirms the al-Qaeda trend followed in recent years; a tendency that necessarily changed, due to compulsory adjustment caused by the loss of safe areas as well as by new counterterrorism offensives. According to al-Wahayshi and as already theorized by al-Souri, al-Qaeda need a new generation of fighters, sufficiently educated and aware of their chances of hitting targets with few raw resources at their disposal.

The al-Qaeda actual phase of terrorist cells molecular diffusion and the repeated universal call to global *jihad* seems to obey a logic of operational tasks decentralization, leaving ideology and propaganda to the main leadership.

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[4] Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Sitt Maryam Nasar aka Abu Mus'ab al-Souri, is considered the main modern jihadist ideologue; he fought in Afghanistan and Syria and was apprehended in Pakistan in 2005 after the publication of the modern *jihad* manifesto: "*Global Islamic resistance call*". Different from al-Zawahiri perspective, al-Souri preaches a defensive *jihad* against the local governments, waiting for a new Muslim generation, more motivated and ready to lead the masses against western powers.

[5] Nasir Abdel Karim al-Wahayshi, aka Abu Basir, allegedly was personal secretary to Osama bin Laden during the al-Qaeda creation in Afghanistan. Ayman al-Zawahiri confirmed in a video message al-Wahayshi leadership of AQAP after its creation

[6] *Kuffar* (sing. *Kafir)* is the unbeliever, often translated also as "infidel"; *takfir* is one of the most serious charge according to Coranic law and it represent apostasy. It can be punished even with the offender death penalty.

[7] Improvised Explosive Device

Western law enforcement agencies are confronting this new terrorism philosophy, practically exploited by individuals usually with poor or no criminal record and therefore more difficult to detect; people melted in the social environment, who dress and behave like westerners, who do not regularly follow the Friday prayers and do not entertain publicly in political or religious discussions.

According to this context, the process that provides their *shahid*[8] "status" pass through the growing frustration and discomfort for their life quality in a social environment too often not as multicultural as proclaimed.

If in the past al-Qaeda recruited their trainees in the field, through teaching in the Afghan and Pakistani religious schools, or by proselytizing in mosques and cultural centers, now the group uses the web and its various sites, *fora* and blog to recruit future jihadists *shahid.*

The Yemeni wing of al-Qaeda, AQAP[9], following the goals of its leading ideologues, published in 2010 an online magazine called *Inspire*, the first English-language publication entirely dedicated to global *jihad*. The first issue, among others, included an article that outlined how anyone could build an homemade bomb "*at home, inside their mother's kitchen*" with supplies commonly available to anyone.

Website manager and prolific writer was *shaikh* Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen of Yemeni origin killed by a drone attack last September, who was mentor to Major Nidal Malik Hasan (responsible of the Fort Hood massacre in 2009) and to the Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (who tried to blow himself up on December 25, 2009 Amsterdam-Detroit flight), as well as having "prepared" at least three *shahid* who struck New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.

In Europe, especially after the recent events in Toulouse, the main name linked to al-Awlaki was the Algerian born French citizen Mohammed Merah; the young jihadist was responsible in different episodes for the killing of three soldiers, one Jewish teacher and three children before being killed by French special forces.

The killing of al-Awlaki then, beheaded Inspire magazine website and AQAP leadership from one of the most authoritative voices and certainly the most effective communicator, especially to the youngest generation of western Muslims.

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[8] *Shahid* is a martyr who die as a consequence of fighting, giving his life out for his beliefs
[9] Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula

With the al-Qaeda core still at large, internally confronting with the post bin Laden era, the terrorist threat evolution is today the western intelligence community top concern: there is a real possibility that anyone can conduct their own *jihad*, detached from planning and liaison with the main group, with obvious difficulty for law enforcement agencies to track and prevent such random actions. The classic intelligence activities is so just frustrated by the lack of "canonical" behavior by these individuals, who often have no communications (telephone or electronic) with other persons, do not have entry visas from "troubled" countries or other "markers" that can alert law enforcement agencies.

Moreover, Al-Qaeda effort to recruit single individuals for jihadist activities is continuous and take place at two different levels, one ideological and another practical.

Primarily al-Qaeda ideologues address the most educated circles of the Muslim community, trying to frustrate moderate policies proposed by prominent Muslim *ummah*[10] figures. Another article from the already mentioned Anwar al-Awlaki, who condemned the new Mardin declaration[11] as immoral, should in fact be read in this context.

As for the second level of recruitment, al-Qaeda turns to the Islamic communities most uneducated individuals, trying to convince them to conduct hostile actions against western states. In this framework, the various jihadist websites provide practical tips on how to conduct personal attacks without needing sophisticated weapons and a special paramilitary training.

On this purpose pro al-Qaeda blogs and *fora* are increasing on the web. Just to cite some examples, al-Emara[12] is one of the "official" *taliban* websites, which publishes conflicts updates as well as successful suicide attacks videos. Ansar al-Mujahideen[13] is instead an al-Qaeda web forum with thousands of posts on international events and geopolitical analysis, Islamic religion radical interpretation and terrorist operations updates.

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[10] The concept of Ummah indicates the Islamic community as a whole without territorial boundaries or countries distinction. The aim is the unification of the Islamic Ummah under God guidance.

[11] The Mardin declaration, is a fatwa issued by moderate Muslim jurists from around the world to de-legitimize extremism and violent *jihad* and promote values of tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims

[12] Al-Emara Jihadi Studio; audio and video department commission of cultural affairs, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

[13] www.ansar1.info their motto is "*in support of the struggle by pen and sword*"

But more than this "official" websites, the internet offers various chances to bump into jihadist groups on social network; those are the ultimate "fashion" that pro jihadist facilitators are using to exploit the *da'wa* amongst youngsters and alienated people. In the frame of a "closed group" many administrators are using the chance to exchange documents and scripts from radical Imams and jihad ideologues; more than that the same group provide a safe platform to discuss the same topic with different people who can add comments and share opinions, using their personal skills to make things easier for a person without knowledge.

According to several scholars, the radicalization process (the path that lead a person to commit acts of violence to achieve political/ideological/religious recognition) is the set of changes regarding beliefs, feelings and behaviors that point a person in the extremist direction. The course that ends with the birth of a new *shahid* has three main stages: the return to Islamic religion, an ideological radicalization and finally the jihadist militancy.

It should be noted however that these definitions are quite general and every individual has his own and unique story that trigger and feed this phenomenon. The preliminary personal and social situation are in fact the foundation on top of which a radical belief system is then fixed. An individual who takes the path to radicalization aiming to the *istishad*[14] needs strong ideological basis, provided through rhetoric now known and analyzed also in western countries.

If poverty and social marginalization are some radicalization main reasons, one must also take into account the presence of jihadist who come from wealthy, well integrated and socially significant families. In this case, the principles that leads a person to embrace *jihad* may be enhanced by the classic youth-parents conflicts; idealistic and imaginative youth spirits have to be compared with trade-offs, waivers and cynicism typical of adult and disenchanted life.

the desperate men who isolate themselves from everything, having a distorted vision of life, could exploit *jihad* as a request for help or as a social protest. Only integrated measures from public administration and a deeper knowledge of this

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[14] *Istishad* is the Islamic martyrdom as testimony of faith, deriving from *shahada,* one of the five Islamic religious pillars (declaration of beliefs in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad role as God's messenger)

problem by law enforcement agencies can prevent a worrying growth in this new trend, avoiding the feared "clash of civilizations[15]".

A higher level of awareness is then requested, especially in countries where, up to now, no casualties resulted from terrorist attacks; people in our society need to understand the real problem posed by jihadism, aside from preconceptions and political propaganda.

In Italy for example, two recent cases raised the attention to this phenomenon. The Italian citizen Mohamed Jarmoune[16] was arrested in Brescia, while planning a terrorist attack inside the Milan Sinagogue; Jarmoune used the internet to create a Facebook closed group in which he exchanged documents and software to assemble IED's. He also made a "virtual survey" of the synagogue and its surroundings to plan the attack. Following the same investigation Andrea Campione[17] was arrested a couple of months later, before fleeing from Italy to Morocco; Campione intended to reach Afghanistan to perform his *jihad*. The latter, who took the Islamic name of Abdul Wahid al-Siquili, translated documents and books from radical Imams while promoting jihad against western countries.

The examples highlighted are just few in a series of newborn jihadist that approach this "sacred effort on the path of Allah" in a different and completely new way; through the internet the ideas run faster and there is no need to interact at a personal level; youngsters with an avatar are able to reach all the world and can interact with radical Imams who can provide theological justification for a terrorist attack against civilians.

Because of the very nature of this threat, it can be predicted that also in the next future soft targets will be preferred by individuals, being the result of poor training and a simplest process of planning and execution. Public places and "ideological" targets will be the easier way to exploit personal *jihad* as demonstrated by the Frankfurt airport, Sarajevo U.S. embassy and Paris satirical

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[15] This idea was theorized by the renewed political scientist Samuel P. Huntington; according to this theory, people's cultural differences are the primary source of conflict in the modern world. Huntington proposed a different vision of the world, based on cultural beliefs instead of nations boundaries.

[16] Mohamed Jarmoune, of Moroccan origins is an Italian citizen of 20 years who radicalized himself with internet and the jihadist *fora,* never being inside a mosque.

[17] Andrea Campione is an Italian citizen of 29 years converted to Islam and engaged with a Moroccan girl; Campione and Jarmoune were in contact on the same groups and for a on the web and exchanged documents and software connected to jihad and to the guerrilla tactics.

newspaper[18] strikes last year.

The latest Mohammed Merah case and modus operandi comprise all the information above mentioned. French citizen with Algerian origins, Merah radicalized when he was eighteen, allegedly reaching Afghanistan to perform his jihad. His return to France and his radicalization development are still studied and also some mental narcissistic problem are allegedly part of his path to martyrdom. Small offences and a limited criminal record are part of his previous behavior; in prison Merah probably got even more radicalized and continued his course on the web where he decided to exploit jihad against soldiers (considered responsible of the killing of Muslims in Afghanistan) and Jewish people (one of the most used rhetoric symbols of jihadism).

What should be changed is then the perception of others actions in our environment; Individuals seeking to acquire small weapons and precursors to explosives will remain vulnerable to detection as well as people conducting surveillance on soft targets - public gatherings and mass transportation hubs.

buying hundred kilos of chemical fertilizer while living in a suburb apartment should be noted as well as receiving cash payment for costly electrical materials. The same can be said about chemical smells coming from private apartments, or unusual in-and-out house timetable, by a person who perform target surveillance.

paying attention to small details and being aware of our environment however, should not become an obsession or paranoia. Knowing the situation in the surrounding world and be familiar to spot abnormal behaviors should be part of our *"post 09.11 culture"* and is an awareness that can prevent serious strikes as the 2010 Times Square[19] example show us.

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[18] On March 2nd, the Kosovar Arid Uka, killed two US soldiers that were about to leave for Afghanistan, injuring other two servicemen; on October 28th, the Serbian Mevlid Jasarevic opened fire against the US embassy in Sarajevo, injuring a local police officer; on November 2nd "Charlie Hebdo" French newspaper offices were burned after the publication of Prophet Muhammad pictures.

[19] On May 1st, a street vendor spotted a blue SUV parked in Times Sqare with the engine running, gunpowder smoke coming from the vehicle and no driver around. After the police arrival, it was revealed that the vehicle contained two 20 liters gasoline tanks, three 80 liters propane tanks, 110 fertilizer kilos, plus 170 M88 fireckacers plugged to an electronic triggering device.