

## **Chapter 4 – GOOD-BYE TO ALL THAT: THE END OF THE LEADER-LESS MILITANT JIHAD vs. LEADER-LED MILITANT JIHAD DEBATE**

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Among the fatalities of the tragic November 2008 attacks in Mumbai was the so-called “bunch of guys” theory. Like the scores of dead and hundreds of wounded, it too was the victim of a terrorist operation that was as planned and premeditated; executed by trained commando-like teams deployed as part of an evident command and control apparatus that orchestrated their deployment and coordinated their assaults. Schooled in the use of automatic weapons and apparently well-versed in close quarters combat tactics, the gunmen were able to stand their ground against furious security force response and counter-assault. The operation also showed detailed surveillance, directed intelligence gathering and meticulous logistical preparation. In sum, the fingerprints of an existing, identifiable terrorist organization, complete with the training camps needed to prepare the attackers, the operational headquarters to plan and direct the operation and the knowledge of surveillance tradecraft to successfully effect them, are literally all over the operation.

In contrast, the “bunch of guys” theory of leaderless jihad claimed that terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century had drifted from the provenance of top-down direction and implementation provided by established, existing organizations to an entirely bottom-up, loosely networked phenomenon of radicalized individuals gravitating towards one another with a shared penchant for violence. These collections of individuals were defined as the new threat we all had to prepare for: self-selected, self-radicalized, and mostly self-trained wannabes with a limited capacity for violence who were allegedly multiplying and spreading to challenge both the more traditional conceptions of terrorism and the attendant countermeasures and security force responses based upon this anachronistically organized style of terrorism. Indeed, with the rise of the leaderless jihad, it was argued, organizations had become as immaterial as they were superfluous. The main terrorist threat had now become decidedly low-level; easily addressed by local police forces with modest resources rather than by standing militaries and the vast array of kinetic instruments at their disposal.

A debate of sorts over the organizational vice leaderless nature of contemporary terrorism had arisen over the past year or so. At congressional hearings and conferences, in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* and the *New York Times*, among the variety of informed and distinctly uninformed blog and web sites arrayed across the Internet, as well in the corridors of power in the globe’s national capitals, the issue was discussed and contested. On 26 November 2008, however, it was resolved in Mumbai by the terrorists themselves. In a blaze of automatic weapons’ gunfire and hurled hand grenades, they settled the matter – and drove home their point over the course of a further 48 hours, ceasing only when Indian security forces had shot dead the last gunmen holed up in a waterfront, luxury hotel.

Mumbai saw the eclipse of leaderless jihad as the salient terrorist threat today as disciplined teams of well-armed, well-trained terrorists simultaneously spread throughout the city to execute their mission at least ten different targets. In each case, they stood their ground and inflicted the carnage and bloodshed they were trained to accomplish. And, at the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower and Oberoi hotels, the terrorists not only effectively resisted counterattack by Indian security forces, but impeded and inflicted serious losses on those same forces – including the deaths of the city’s top police counterterrorist commanders. The leader of an Indian Marine commando unit marveled as the fighting finally wound down how the terrorists were “very, very familiar with the hotel layout. . . . They were a very, very determined lot.

They were moving from one place to the other. . . . Not everybody can fire AK-47 weapons like that. They were trained somewhere.” Thus the delusional theories about the diminishing role of organizations in orchestrating terrorist violence were blown away, too.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that a continuing risk from home-grown extremists clearly still exists and cannot be dismissed or ignored. The 2007 plot by six self-identified Islamic militants to attack Fort Dix, New Jersey is a case in point. Another is the half-baked plot to attack two synagogues in The Bronx, New York that was foiled in May 2009 by the FBI after an informant penetrated the motley cell. But while authorities must continue to worry about attacks by “amateur” or wannabe terrorists like these, their focus – preparations and response capabilities – will inevitably have to be geared to the more “professional”, trained, disciplined and deployed terrorists as it is doubtful that home-grown terrorists could amass the numbers and have the requisite skill-set required to hit multiple target sites with the ferocity that the Mumbai attackers exhibited. Indeed, whether in Britain or in Germany, in recent years the more competent and ambitious indigenous terrorists have repeatedly found it necessary to take advantage of the training opportunities that only actual, existing terrorist organizations can provide in real life, and not Internet-enabled, so-called virtual, training camps.

#### **4.1 AN EMERGENT CONSENSUS**

One has to wonder in fact if there is any professional intelligence agency or senior official who still believes that the most consequential terrorist threat emanates from bunches of guys and not from established terrorist organizations like al Qaeda? In one of his last major public addresses before stepping down as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, in November 2008, Michael V. Hayden, variously explained how “al-Qa’ida [sic], operating from its safehaven in Pakistan’s tribal areas, remains the most clear and present danger to the United States today”; that, “If there is a major strike on this country, it will bear the fingerprints of al-Qa’ida”; and, that, “Today, virtually every major terrorist threat my Agency is aware of has threads back to the tribal areas.” Revealingly, Hayden did not even mention once the threat from “bunches of guys” or self-radicalized, self-selected individuals belonging to a social network rather than a bona fide terrorist organization. His words are all the more important, not only for their timing – coming just two weeks before the Mumbai attacks – but also because when the DCIA talks he is not speaking only for himself but is inevitably expressing the collective wisdom of the world’s most powerful intelligence service.

Nor were these conclusions exclusively the domain of allegedly “blinkered” American intelligence chiefs and their agencies who, critics often claim, “see al Qaeda everywhere and in every plot and attack”. The Netherlands’ General Intelligence and Security Service (*Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst*, or AIVD), for example, is among the most professional and prescient of the world’s intelligence and security agencies. Though far smaller than many of its Western counterparts, it is an elite and perspicacious service that is as impressive for its early identification and incisive analysis of emerging trends as it appears genuinely able to “think out of the box”.

The radicalization phenomenon, for instance – involving home-grown, domestic threats by organizationally unaffiliated militants – that is now so ingrained in our thinking and assessments of contemporary jihadi threats, was first publicly highlighted by the AIVD seven years ago in its *Annual Report 2002*. Thus, as far back as 2001, AIVD agents and analysts had detected increased terrorist recruitment efforts among Muslim youth living in the Netherlands whom it was previously assumed had been assimilated into Dutch society and culture. This assessment was proven tragically correct in November 2003 when a product precisely of this trend that the AIVD had correctly identified, a 17 year-old Dutch-Moroccan youth named Mohammad Bouyeri, brutally murdered the controversial film maker, Theo van Gogh, as he rode his bicycle along an Amsterdam street. Accordingly, any assessment of current jihadi trends by the AIVD is to be taken very seriously, indeed.

The 2007 AIVD *Annual Report 2007* highlighted five principal international developments in jihadi terrorism that are of enormous consequence to the security of the West and the U.S. as well as the Netherlands. The sober AIVD analysts took particular note of the following disquieting trends:

- 1) “There has been a shift in the source and nature of the threat”, the report argues. “Whereas it used to come principally from autonomous local networks, internationally-oriented local networks now also present a danger to the West.”
- 2) “From the known threats in neighbouring [sic] countries, the AIVD can discern a shift in the international orientation of these networks. In the past, they were concerned mainly with supporting and sometimes recruiting for the violent jihad in traditional conflict zones. Now, though, they also seem to be focusing upon traveling abroad for training before returning to pursue their struggle in the West. This appears to have added a new dimension to the jihadist threat.”
- 3) “The degree of influence on European jihadist networks and individuals from Pakistan and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border is increasing.”
- 4) **“The AIVD has discerned signs that core Al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan is recovering, and that its influence as one of the primary sources of inspiration for jihadists around the world has further increased”** [my emphasis].

The AIVD’s assessment is particularly noteworthy in that it dovetailed very closely with the publicly released key judgments of the seminal July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) produced by the U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC). This capstone document, representing the collective wisdom of the American intelligence community, had similarly concluded that the threat posed by al Qaeda to the U.S. homeland and elsewhere had increased as a result of the movement having re-grouped and re-organized along the lawless frontier spanning both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The 2007 NIE had forcefully argued that:

- “Al-Qa’ida [sic] is and will remain the most serious terrorist threat to the Homeland, as its central leadership continues to plan high-impact plots, while pushing others in extremist Sunni communities to mimic its efforts and to supplement its capabilities.”
- “[Al-Qa’ida] has protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including: a safe haven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), operational lieutenants, and its top leadership.”

And, the 2008 AIVD Annual Report both confirmed and reiterated these key trends. “An analysis conducted in 2008 by the AIVD and verified by fellow services”, it states:

“... indicates that core Al-Qaeda’s ability to carry out terrorist attacks has increased in recent years ... One development of particular concern is the growing evidence that people from Europe are undergoing military training at camps in the border region. As a result, the ability of (core) Al-Qaeda and its allies to commit or direct attacks in Europe could increase. Not only might the trainees themselves carry out such actions upon their return to Europe, but they could also guide or support others.”

## **4.2 A FUTURE OF MORE OF THE SAME**

Nor is there much likelihood of the organizational salience in terrorism changing in the future – at least not for the next 16 years. According to the U.S. National Intelligence Council’s authoritative assessment of global trends to the year 2025, “Terrorist and insurgent groups in 2025 will likely be a combination of descendants of long-established groups – that inherit organizational structures, command and control processes, and training procedures necessary to conduct sophisticated attacks . . . .” Admittedly, while the report also mentions the continuing threat posed by “newly emergent collections of the angry and

disenfranchised that become self-radicalized”, its emphasis clearly is on the continued predominance of, and the more serious threat posed by, organized terrorism and the operational entities that orchestrate it rather than by “bunches of guys”.

In this respect, the dramatically and tragically successful Mumbai attacks contrasted to the amateurish, botched Bronx synagogues plot is a timely and powerful reminder that in terrorism, organizations most certainly still matter.