

# How To Hasten Al Qaeda's Demise

## Juan Zarate: Al Qaeda Is Down But Not Out. Here's How To Finish The Job



(CBS)

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With bombings in Iraq and Jakarta and the ongoing challenges from militants and terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is no doubt terrorism remains a serious global threat, even where counterterrorism efforts have been successful overall. This is precisely why we should

not let partisan debates about investigating post-9/11 policies inadvertently distract us from seizing a strategic opportunity: al Qaeda is on the ropes, and we must do everything we can to hasten its demise.

Al Qaeda is in decline because its senior leadership is being methodically destroyed, its primary safe haven is being undermined, its strategy is failing, and its ideology is being rejected within Muslim communities around the world. We must now hasten al Qaeda's demise while containing the post-al Qaeda terrorist threat and the violent ideology that it spawned. Imagining the end of al Qaeda is not foolhardy. It's a realistic way of ensuring that day arrives.

Though al Qaeda seemed resurgent from 2005 to 2007, and remains a dangerous threat to the Homeland and in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, it is losing the broader war.

- We are dismantling al Qaeda's hard-to-replace core leadership while its planners worry more about spies in their midst than launching the next strategic attack;
- Funding is sparse with a demoralized donor base, likely forcing al Qaeda to make tough budget decisions and shortchange long-term projects, like their WMD programs;
- Al Qaeda and its affiliates have failed to regain strategic footholds in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, East Asia, and the Levant;
- Its regional satellites in North Africa, Central Asia, and East Africa, though dangerous, have not become the strategic outposts that would threaten the West directly; and

- A number of al Qaeda's major strategic plots against the United States and Europe since 2006 have been disrupted through intense intelligence and law enforcement cooperation. Importantly, all quarters in Muslim communities are now openly challenging al Qaeda.

Some in the so-called jihadi community deconstruct the violent ideology and ask critically what al Qaeda's agenda has achieved. Ex-jihadis in the London-based Quilliam Foundation and Muslim scholars in Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group have organized to counteract the ideology and activities of violent extremists. Al Qaeda's radically exclusionary ideology and violent tactics, victimizing even Muslim civilians, have led to its rejection. The slaughter of civilians again in Jakarta's hotels will not endear violent extremists in the most populous Muslim society in the world.

This crisis of legitimacy matters, leading to reduced support and funding.

President Obama has a unique opportunity to put a dagger through the heart of al Qaeda's narrative that the West is at war with Islam, which most Muslims still believe. His very person breaks all the stereotypes of a racist and hypocritical United States Al Qaeda relies upon to sell their snake oil.

Al Qaeda's statements after the President's election - calling him a "house slave" leading a "Zionist conspiracy" responsible for perceived atrocities in Gaza and Pakistan -- prove it is worried. The battle of ideas manifested itself vividly when bin Laden and Zawahiri each came out with statements right before the President's Cairo speech intended to taint him and his message. President Obama has a chance to undermine the most fundamental dimension of the extremists' narrative upon which their strategy is based.

In Iraq, which bin Laden once called the "golden and unique opportunity" to wage a central battle against the United States, al Qaeda is in retreat. Its dream of an "Islamic State of Iraq" to serve as a platform for regional expansion was repulsed by its supposed core constituency - Sunni Arabs in the heart of the Middle East. Al Qaeda's senior leadership no longer mentions Iraq, where local resistance with American backing has it in retreat.

Al Qaeda's focus has shifted to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the core leadership will make its last stand. Yet the Pakistani government and people have awoken to the threat of Talebanization and al Qaeda in their midst. With the American surge in Afghanistan, the long anticipated Pakistani military campaign in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) will add directly to al Qaeda's woes.

Given the history of al Qaeda's patience and resilience, these trends can change without continued focus. We must pressure al Qaeda on all fronts now: disrupting plots; destroying its core leadership; pressuring Iran to hold the al Qaeda leadership in its custody; regaining momentum in Afghanistan; supporting Pakistanis and Iraqis' denial of safe haven; and empowering regional and credible actors to contain al Qaeda's nodes.

Ensuring the end of al Qaeda requires that we not allow the growing penchant for second-guessing and politics regarding post-9/11 policies to chill our counterterrorism operations and cooperation with foreign counterparts. Now is not the time to do lasting damage to our efforts to dismantle al Qaeda while we attempt to expiate perceived sins of the past.

A world without al Qaeda is undeniably safer. Al Qaeda is the heart of the global Sunni terrorist movement focused on attacking the West and developing WMD. While the end of al Qaeda will not end terrorism or the allure of its ideology, it is a necessary step to disable the global terrorist movement.

The great danger in what transpired recently in Jakarta is that it portend an attempted resurrection of the ties between Southeast Asian terror networks and al Qaeda. It is time to finish the job of destroying our common enemy when al Qaeda is down but not yet out.

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By Juan Zarate:

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