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The al-Qaeda franchise
By Richard Giragosian

Although the investigation into the recent bombings in Spain is still underway, three different scenarios have emerged, each of which suggests a number of worrisome issues, particularly in the context of the US-led "war on terror". The first scenario, pointing to the Basque ETA separatist organization as the culprits, was the initial reaction that emerged from Spanish authorities and remained firmly entrenched as Madrid's official position for some time.

Despite the fact that this ETA scenario seems increasingly unlikely as the investigation proceeds, initial analysis was grounded in the fact that the explosives and detonators used in the bombings were allegedly linked to the ETA organization. But this factor was the only positive linkage, as the other elements were rooted in either the negative - such as clues pointing away from traditional ETA methods - to the speculative, mainly resting on the political choreography that the attacks were aimed at disrupting Spain's national election.

The second scenario under consideration focuses on al-Qaeda, with the assistance of local activists. Obviously, other factors moving the inquiry in this direction include the arrest and links to the bombings of three Moroccans with allegedly extensive ties to al-Qaeda, the discovery of a stolen van with Koranic tapes and the video release claiming al-Qaeda responsibility. According to this scenario, the bombings represent the al-Qaeda network's first major attack on Europe proper and pose several new troubling developments for the anti-terror movement.

The most notable development in this case includes a modification of tactics by al-Qaeda, moving away from its traditional use of suicide bombers and utilizing synchronized bombs triggered remotely, as well as a more sophisticated recognition of the political vulnerabilities of Western democracies and their inherent susceptibility to properly timed terrorist disruptions. The most interesting implication from this scenario is the suggestion that al-Qaeda has succeeded in using the attacks as its own form of "regime change", forging a role in bringing down a Western government.

The most intriguing analysis, however, is found in the third scenario, suggesting a new alliance between radical elements of the ETA and the al-Qaeda network. This scenario rests on several important, although still somewhat disparate, factors. The first link in this analytical ETA-al-Qaeda chain rests with an individual: Yusuf Galan, a Spanish national (and Islam convert) charged with ties to al-Qaeda back in November 2001. The second link is operational, stemming from a reported record of

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ETA supplying explosives to Islamic terrorists in general, and to the Palestinian militant group Hamas, in particular. Such a linkage also raises fears in neighboring France, which has its own recent history of ETA members operating on its territory.

Adding to the complexity of the investigation, there is also a deeper level of troubling trends in this possible ETA-al-Qaeda combination. Specifically, the revelation that some 80 radical ETA militants were reportedly in Iraq prior to the war and that some were allegedly implicated in the November 2003 killing of seven Spanish intelligence agents in Suwayrah raise new fears of a renewed terror threat. In fact, two of these 80 radical ETA members that were in Iraq were later arrested by the Spanish authorities as they attempted to transport some 500 kilograms of explosives to Madrid on February 29. Endowing ETA with a new global reach based on a tactical alliance with the al-Qaeda network and/or the Iraqi insurgency would significantly "raise the stakes" in the current round of the war on terrorism, with troubling implications for a Europe set to become only more vulnerable with the looming expansion of its visa-free borders.

Regardless of which scenario turns out to be the most accurate, there is perhaps an even more significant lesson that this speculation over the responsibility for the attacks has tended to obscure: what it reveals about the transformation of al-Qaeda. Even in the event that al-Qaeda itself is not directly involved in the bombings, the renewed focus on the group has demonstrated that it has substantially changed from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda of September 11, 2001. This transformation consists of a move from what is defined as al-Qaeda from the "corporate terrorism" structure under bin Laden's direct control to what has more recently been termed as a "terror franchise". The attacks in Morocco and Turkey, well before Spain, were what first revealed this "phased transition". The threat is now posed by "al-Qaeda the movement" and not "al-Qaeda the international terrorist organization". Such a decentralizing, broadening shift away from the original al-Qaeda organization into a new more diverse array of local, more distantly linked affiliates makes targeting its center of gravity, or even acquiring the target, especially difficult.

Moreover, this new al-Qaeda movement also incorporates the local offshoots of radical Islamic groups as more autonomous franchises throughout the periphery of the Islamic world. Matched by a more localized focus, this movement is marked by local operators acting on their own soil (local Turks involved with the attacks in Turkey, local Moroccans carrying out the attacks in Morocco, etc) with little or no global reach but using the tenets of al-Qaeda to enhance their standing within their own smaller arena of operations. And although arguably to bolster the global jihad, the priority is on promoting the image, appeal, and even the recruiting opportunities of home-grown groups in their home countries. This is also seen by the increased activity in peripheral states of Indonesia, the Philippines, and most recently even in the West African nation of Chad.

This also seems to be reflected in the current strategy of the remnants of the bin Laden al-Qaeda organization, still struggling to regroup and hindered by a greatly weakened command and control structure. For the al-Qaeda organization, its priorities are Iraq and its remaining refuge along the Pakistani-Afghan border. The attacks carried out under the banner of al-Qaeda by the local, but remote affiliates serve to uphold the broader struggle, an important element, but no longer exhibiting the extensive preparations and global ambitions of the previous al-Qaeda. Thus, it seems likely that attacks in the name of the al-Qaeda movement will continue and most likely spread, but will be limited

more to attacks of opportunity than of global strategy and increasingly isolated to the fringe areas of the periphery.

The course of this new al-Qaeda movement is not without historical parallel, however. In fact, there is an ironic similarity between the ideological justification and tactical support provided by the Soviet Union to the international communist movement of the 20th century, whereby so-called communists waged wars of national liberation and/or outright terrorism in the name of an overarching communist ideology in such remote places as small, isolated countries in Central America, Africa or even in parts of Europe through urban terrorism. But in the case of these operatives, including such urban-focused terrorist groups as the Red Brigades, Action Directe, Baader-Meinhoff and others, their viability proved short-lived, with an intensity so destructive that it eventually turned on itself. It remains to be seen whether the al-Qaeda movement will meet the same demise.

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