

Understanding and Responding to Islamic Terrorism

Lesson 4: Modern Islamic Terrorist Groups

Lesson Outline

- Introduction
- Al Qaeda
- The Taliban
- Boko Haram
- ISIS (ISIL)

Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the world has seen dramatic increases in the number of terrorist groups worldwide and the number of people killed or injured each year because of these groups.

- Just since the year 2000 there has been a staggering increase in the number of terrorism-related deaths, rising from 3,361 in 2000 to 17,958 in 2013.
- 2013 alone saw a 43% increase in the number of deaths.
- The number of Salafi jihadist groups worldwide is up from three in 1988 to forty-nine in 2013, with a 58% increase just since 2010.

Introduction

While there are dozens of jihadist groups responsible for many deaths, four groups in particular cause the majority of deaths worldwide.

- Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Boko Haram, and ISIS (ISIL) were responsible for 66% of all deaths claimed by terrorist attacks in 2013.
- For the period from 2000 to 2013 the groups are responsible for a combined total of 5,088 attacks, 31,140 injuries, and 23,899 deaths.

Each of the groups will now be examined to present their history, leadership, membership, funding, ideology, and activities.

Al Qaeda

Overview

- Al Qaeda (Arabic, “the base”) emerged in 1988 as a response to Soviet presence in Afghanistan.
- Formed by Usama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian, and Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian Sunni scholar, the group helped finance, recruit, transport, and train Sunni Islamist extremists during the Afghan resistance.
- Instead of a large, centralized structure, Al Qaeda operates through a system of small, regional cells. Regional cells make it more difficult to track Al Qaeda operations and allow for easier group movements.

Al Qaeda

Overview

- Following the death of bin Laden in 2011 and several other key leaders, leadership fell to Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was reportedly one of the architects of the 9/11 attacks and bin Laden’s physician in the 1980s.
- Al Qaeda also has several partner organizations, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Al Qaeda

Membership and Funding

- Current membership of Al Qaeda difficult to determine, but is estimated to have a core leadership group of 200-1,000.
- Believed that second tier membership lies in the thousands to tens of thousands; outer shell support could be up to 100,000.
- Impossible to calculate the worldwide numbers of Al Qaeda or Al Qaeda-influenced operatives.
- Funding originally came from bin Laden's personal wealth and fundraising. Now, funding primarily comes through hostage ransom payments, donations from supporters, and Islamic charitable organizations.

Al Qaeda

Ideology

- Al Qaeda is one of several Salafi jihadist groups inspired by the teachings of Wahhabism
- It is opposed to other forms of Islam including Shi'a Islam and other major world religions.
- In accordance with its emphasis on the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, Al Qaeda wants to get rid of all Western influence and establish an Islamic state under Shari'ah law.
- Al Qaeda also views the West as allies of Israel and determines this relationship to be responsible for the devastating poverty of many Muslim countries.

Al Qaeda

Violent Activities

- Each year Al Qaeda operatives commit a myriad of terrorist actions across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Suicide bombings, armed attacks, improved explosive devices (IEDs), and hijackings are some of their common activities.
- Some major attacks for which Al Qaeda was responsible are the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, the July 7, 2005 London bombings, the March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombings, and the October 2000 suicide attack on the USS Cole in the port of Aden, Yemen.
- In addition Al Qaeda has bombed the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam (1998; approx. 300 dead), a hotel in Mombasa, Kenya (2002; 15 dead), and the Danish embassy in Pakistan (2008; 6 dead).

The Taliban

Overview

- Like Al Qaeda, the Taliban (Arabic, “students”) was founded in 1994 by Mohamad Omar as a mixture of *Mujahedeen* (Ar. approx. “those engaged in *jihad*”) and Pashtun tribesmen to fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
- The Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996 and ruled until 2001 when they were defeated and pushed out by the American invasion.
- They are now considered an insurgency movement operating in several countries around Afghanistan.
- The current leader of the Taliban is thought to be Mullah Omar, although unconfirmed reports of his death have surfaced. His leadership is based in Quetta, Pakistan.

The Taliban

Membership and Funding

- The Taliban maintains an extensive network of fighters, with estimates of 25,000-35,000+ members worldwide.
- Some of their ranks even include fighters from Al Qaeda.
- Support for the Taliban's many terrorist activities comes from smuggling, drug trafficking, opium, and heroin production.
- In addition the United States has accused Iran of supplying the Taliban with weapons, including roadside bombs.

The Taliban

Ideology

- Like many other Islamist groups, the Taliban's ideology is based on Wahhabism, but it also includes influences from the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and Pushtun local tribe codes known as Pashtunwali.
- Their goal is to purify Islam by ridding it of Western influences and enforcing a strict interpretation of the Qur'an and Sharia.
- Mullah Wakil, a spokesman for the Taliban, said in a 1996 interview, "We want to live a life like the Prophet lived 1400 years ago, and jihad is our right. We want to recreate the time of the Prophet..."

The Taliban

Violent Activities

- Since the year 2000 the Taliban has been responsible for more terror-related deaths than any other Islamist group.
- Since 2010 the Taliban has been responsible for 75% of civilian casualties in Afghanistan.
- Its main targets are government administrative services, police and military personnel, and coalition and Afghan forces. Some of the tactics it uses include suicide bombs, roadside bombs, explosive devices (IEDs), and armed attacks.
- Most recently, the Taliban attacked a school in Peshawar, Pakistan, killing 132 children in addition to several staff members and soldiers.

Boko Haram

Overview

- Boko Haram (Arabic, approximately “Western education is forbidden”) is a Nigerian-based terrorist group formed in 2002.
- The founders were part of a mosque that tried to implement a separatist community under Wahhabi principles
- In 2009, the Sunni sect developed into a Salafist-jihadist group and became more violent
- The original leader of Boko Haram, Imam Mohamad Yusuf, died in 2009 while in police custody.
- His successor, Abubaker Shekau, was killed by Nigerian forces in September 2014.
- As a result Boko Haram is now largely decentralized and it is difficult to determine its leadership.

Boko Haram

Membership and Funding

- Higher estimates put the total membership of Boko Haram near 9,000
- Members are often recruited from among the homeless and youth in poor areas.
- Support for their endeavors comes from the sale of goods, extortion, and smuggling of arms and cash.
- It is also suspected that Boko Haram might have ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and is profiting from narcotics trafficking.

Boko Haram

Ideology

- Boko Haram is a Sunni Islamist terrorist group that wants to abolish the secular Nigerian government and establish Shariah law based on Wahhabi interpretations.
- It also seeks to increase hostilities between Muslims and Christians and the Nigerian government.
- Groups who oppose their rule and the religion of Islam, such as Christians, are told to “leave or die.”
- Boko Haram is particularly opposed to Western education, as its name suggests. Educational institutions are frequently attacked to highlight this opposition and in an attempt to stem the influence of the West upon Muslims.

Boko Haram

Violent Activities

- The activities of Boko Haram are divided into two main sections: one section focuses on discrediting the Nigerian government while another section commits increasingly lethal attacks.
- It is interesting that Boko Haram does not demonstrate a great desire to control areas of Nigeria, but instead it merely wants to enforce Sharia law.
- As a result Boko Haram fighters carry out shootings, bombings, and suicide bombings to disrupt society.
- They also attack churches and mosques to stir unrest between Christians and Muslims.
- Between 2009 and 2012 over 3,500 Nigerians were killed through shootings and bombings.

ISIS (ISIL)

Overview

- The Islamic State (IS) developed in Iraq in the early 2000s as part of the Iraqi insurgency movement.
- It has since developed into the largest Sunni terrorist organization in the Middle East, gaining considerable strength and size since 2012.
- Originally, the Islamic State was part of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), but when the head of AQI died, the group split over a disagreement regarding tactics. The militants who left AQI formed the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).
- Since the split the Islamic State group has become known for extreme violence as a major character in the Syrian civil war (2013-present) and expansions into Iraq (2014).
- In February 2014 Al-Qaeda officially broke ties with ISIL.

ISIS (ISIL)

Membership and Funding

- Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the current leader of ISIS and is referred to as “caliph,” an Arabic term that means “successor,” and which was originally applied to the men who succeeded Muhammad in leadership of the Islamic community.
- He exercises supreme rule over all areas under ISIS control and commands the entire membership of an estimated 30,000+ soldiers.
- Soldiers come from Syria and Iraq and are attracted in part by steady wages.
- Foreign fighters are recruited through social media campaigns and propaganda.

ISIS (ISIL)

Membership and Funding

- In addition to being the largest terrorist organization, ISIS is also one of the wealthiest organizations.
- Their primary source of funding comes from the sale of captured oil reserves, a precious commodity in strong demand by the Syrian regime, black market traders, and Turkey.
- ISIS also controls large portions of Iraq’s wheat growing land.
- Finally, ISIS receives funding from foreign investors, looting and controlling resources, kidnapping and extortion, charging of electricity, fines, and religious taxes.

ISIS (ISIL)

Ideology

- The Islamic State is a Salafist jihadi group that represents extreme Wahhabi ideology.
- It is an insurgency movement that wants to establish a regional caliphate, or state, under Salafist-oriented Islamic law. Unchecked, ISIS will continue its mission to control the entire Levant.
- ISIS militants promote violence to those who do not adhere to its interpretations, including both Muslims and non-Muslims.
- The leaders of ISIS claim to be fighting a holy war against Shi'a Muslims, Christians, and Yezidis, a Kurdish ethno-religious group in Iraq and Syria.
- The desired end result of this war is to spread ISIS's interpretation of Islam and eliminate other belief systems from the world.

ISIS (ISIL)

Violent Activities

- ISIS militants operate several training camps that prepare soldiers to carry out military incursions and terrorist activities.
- Militants utilize traditional bombs and suicide bombs to target private citizens, police, and businesses.
- Those who resist ISIS, or are believed to resist ISIS, face swift retribution and, if captured, often face execution by beheading.
- When ISIS joined the Syrian civil war its militants targeted government forces and other rebel groups, but quickly turned its focus to capturing land. It continues to target the Iraqi military, Shiite, and minority civilians when taking over land.

ISIS (ISIL)

Violent Activities

- Finally, ISIS frequently captures journalists and aid workers in order to ransom them for large sums of money. However, if ISIS determines that the hostage will not produce ransom money, it uses the hostage for publicity, even beheading them on video.
- In 2013 alone there were 350 terrorist attacks by ISIS which produced 1,400 deaths and 3,600 injuries.
- ISIS also conducted fifty suicide bombings which killed an average of nine people per attack.

Conclusion

Contemporary Islamic terrorism is a tragic reality. Thousands of extremists commit hundreds of attacks each year, resulting in thousands of deaths and injuries.

Motivated by zeal to purify Islam and establish “true” Muslim communities, groups such as the Taliban and ISIS are devastating entire communities, destroying centuries-old artifacts, killing countless Muslims and non-Muslims, and forcing upon thousands their jihadist, Salafi interpretations of Islamic sources.

Conclusion

The ideologies of al-Wahhāb and Sayyid Qutb have been adopted, expanded, and, in the minds of some, “distorted,” to establish a form of Islam that many see as un-Islamic.

Yet, regardless of the validity of Salafi jihadist ideology, the deadly impact is undeniable.

Questions and Comments