

Are We Winning? Mid-Year Update New Indications of Progress and Lingering Concerns in the Fight against al Qaeda

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Key Points

- Global incidents of Islamist terrorism decreased in the last two quarters of 2009—the single largest decrease in attacks since the National Counter Terrorism Center began tracking them in 2004.
- Though attacks from al Qaeda and its associated movements have declined, self-radicalized terrorist cells and individuals are a growing risk.
- Yemen has emerged as both a potential launching pad for al Qaeda terrorist attacks and a locus of radicalization for foreigners traveling to Yemen from abroad.

In the months since we issued *Are We Winning? 2009*, (*AWW*) developments in Islamist terrorism have largely borne out our key findings. Specifically, the 2009 version of *AWW* argued that:

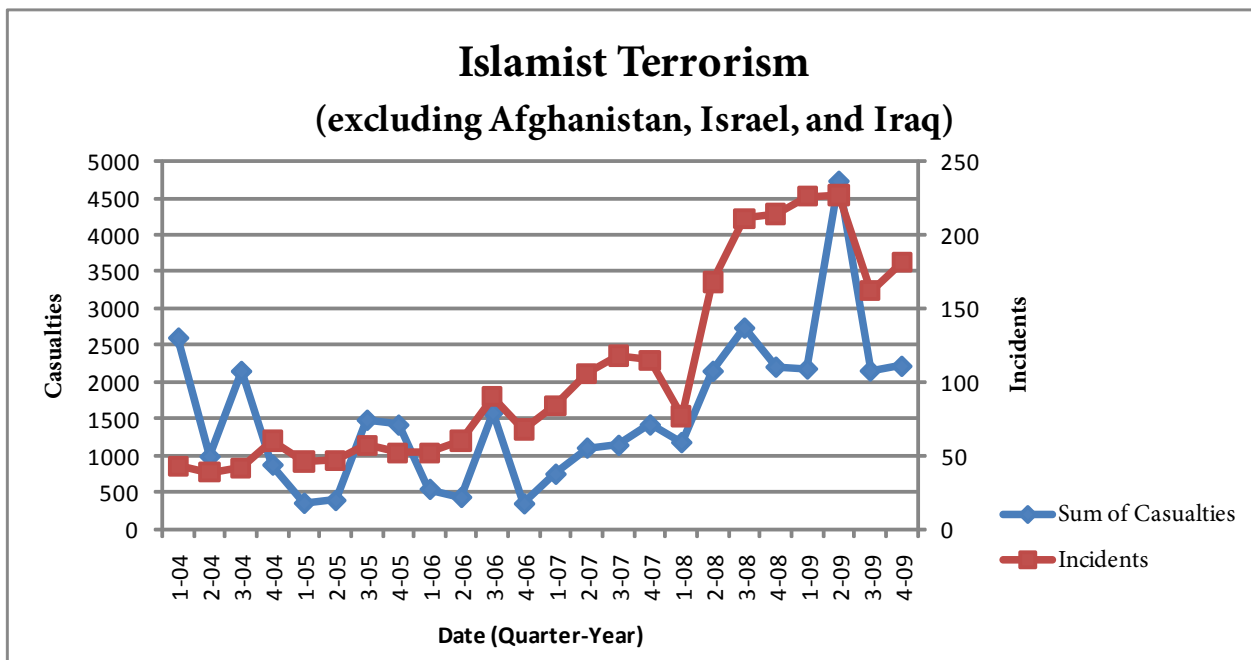
- Islamist violence is becoming more focused on local grievances.
- Al Qaeda is increasingly marginal to the broader radical Islamist movement, and remains under significant pressure due to drone strikes and other forms of military pressure.
- Somalia and adjacent areas, including Yemen, continue to present significant challenges.

These findings remain accurate and, indeed, recent developments have increased confidence in them. In this update we examine trends in Islamist violence worldwide; developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan; the Christmas bombing plot and the Yemen connection; and the challenge of “self radicalization.”

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Trends in Islamist Violence

Since its inception in 2006, the American Security Project has relied heavily on a consistent metric in assessing the overall level of global Islamist violence: the number of Islamist terror attacks world-wide. Using data from the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC),¹ we count only those attacks for which there is definitive evidence of an Islamist connection and we have consistently excluded attacks in the conflict zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as those that are part of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. In the 2009 report, we noted that Islamist attacks world-wide had leveled off, and we expressed cautious optimism that we were at a turning point regarding the overall strength of the movement. Six months of additional data seem to have borne out these assessments.



Incident rates had remained above 200 per quarter for four consecutive quarters from July 2008 to June 2009 before declining to 162 in the third quarter of 2009 and 181 in the fourth quarter of 2009. This is especially significant given that in every year since 2004, attacks have peaked in the second half of the year.

Obviously, these overall numbers represent an aggregation of numerous positive and negative trends, but we have long argued that the threat to the United States is at least in part a function of the overall level of violence. The larger the pool of extremists, the larger the risk that some will choose to attack American interests or be recruited into groups like al Qaeda with global aspirations.

1. National Counterterrorism Center, *Worldwide Incidents Tracking System*, wits.nctc.gov.

Much of this decline is due to decreasing violence in Pakistan. Though there have been several high profile attacks in Pakistan, Islamist violence in that country is down 60% from the first six months of 2009. There was also a marked decrease in Islamist violence in Russia in the last months of 2009, though several high-profile attacks in March 2010 call the durability of that change into question.² Somalia remains the most significant hotspot, with Islamist violence there continuing to increase. The Somali challenge is especially threatening because of the large Somali-American population in the United States that is at-risk for radicalization.³

Though the data highlighted above excludes attacks executed in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is worth noting that Iraq remains a violent land. The number of terrorist attacks by Islamist groups in Iraq has held steady at between 52 and 66 incidents per quarter since the fourth quarter of 2008. Afghanistan remains, by far, the most dangerous country in the world, with over 500 Islamist terrorist incidents in the last six months of 2009.

Developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan

The last six months have seen a continued uptick in military pressure on Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴ Though the long-term consequences remain unclear, in the short-run, military pressure seems to be having a significant disruptive effect on terrorist groups based in both countries. This finding is demonstrated both by direct evidence of successful attacks on “jihadist” leaders and by indirect evidence such as reports that al Qaeda members are fleeing South Asia for safer areas.⁵ Al Qaeda’s diminished media presence and decreased capacity for initiating and executing significant terrorist attacks also illustrate its institutional weakness and eroded operational capability.

Afghanistan has not been home to a significant, globally-oriented extremist movement since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 and the flight of remaining al Qaeda elements in 2002.⁶ As a result,

2. Clifford J. Levy, “Moscow Attack a Test for Putin and His Record against Terror,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/30/world/europe/30moscow.html> (accessed April 21, 2010).

3. Sara A. Carter, “Somalis with Terrorist Links Feared Headed to U.S. Border,” *Washington Examiner*, April 6, 2010, http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/world/Somalis-with-terrorist-links-feared-headed-to-U_S_-border-89954247.html (accessed April 21, 2010).

4. Andrew Buncombe and Omar Waraich, “Pakistan Starts Huge Offensive against Taliban,” *Independent*, October 18, 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/pakistan-starts-huge-offensive-against-taliban-1804872.html> (accessed April 21, 2010); Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “U.S. Launches Major Surge against Taliban in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, February 13, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/12/AR2010021203563.html> (accessed April 21, 2010).

5. Associated Press of Pakistan, “Pakistan no Longer a Sanctuary for Militants: Qureshi,” *Daily Times*, March 28, 2010, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010\03\28\story_28-3-2010_pg7_1 (accessed April 21, 2010).

6. Mike Corder, “McChrystal: No Major Al-Qaeda Signs in Afghanistan,” *Seattle Times*, September 11, 2009, http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2009847738_apeunetherlandsafghanistan.html (accessed April 21, 2010).

it is unlikely that the American military escalation in that country announced by President Barack Obama in December 2009 will have a significant impact on the overall threat from Islamist groups in the near-term. Nevertheless, the increase in American forces and the U.S. military's demonstrated capacity to "clear" insurgent areas quickly and at relatively low cost may have some secondary effects in turning the momentum. This escalation has certainly made it more difficult for radicals to claim they are moving toward an inevitable victory. While invalidating that claim might not be worth the costs associated with tripling America's commitment to that country, the value of undermining extremist propaganda cannot be dismissed as wholly irrelevant either. We eagerly await data on the first quarter of 2010 with which to assess whether the American buildup is having a positive effect in terms of reducing terrorist violence in Afghanistan.

Though their connection to trends in Islamist violence appears relatively slight when taken alone, developments in Afghanistan gain a much greater measure of importance when considered in conjunction with developments across the border in Pakistan. Over the past year we have seen Pakistani forces engage in a large scale, effective military effort aimed at dislodging radical Islamist insurgents inside Pakistan—including Pakistani Taliban and Afghan Taliban leaders.⁷ The Pakistanis have yet to move in force against terrorist networks operating in the tribal areas of North Waziristan—where Osama bin Laden is presumed to be hiding—but recent developments have made the Pakistani "safe haven" notably less safe for at least some radicals.

It is possible to overstate the impact of these developments. After all, Pakistan continues to pursue an ambivalent policy toward Islamist terrorist groups, continuing tacit support for the anti-Indian group Lashkar-e-Taiba for instance. Despite Pakistan's recent aggressive moves against some Islamist elements, therefore, al Qaeda's safe havens in Pakistan ultimately remain more at risk from U.S. drones and other air assets than from direct Pakistani intervention.

Ultimately, radical groups in South Asia are currently under more pressure than at any time since September 11, 2001. They are being squeezed by Pakistani and American military action, under siege from American aerial assault, facing a continued loss of popularity due to association with indiscriminate violence, and are hard-pressed to argue that their victory is inevitable. While we often overestimate the benefits of additional pressure and underestimate the ability of these groups to operate even in the face of active suppression, the trends are on the whole beneficial and perhaps self-reinforcing.

Christmas Bombing and the Yemen Connection

Since we released *Are We Winning? 2009*, Yemen has come under intense focus as the next potential battleground in the U.S. struggle against Islamist extremism. Though Yemen received some U.S. attention as a possible terrorist haven in the past, that attention increased exponentially after

7. Mark Mazzetti and Dexter Filkins, "Secret Joint Raid Captures Taliban's Top Commander," *New York Times*, February 15, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/world/asia/16intel.html> (accessed April 21, 2010).

Christmas Day 2009, when an individual attempted to detonate explosives secreted in his underwear while aboard a U.S. airliner on its way to Detroit. The alleged perpetrator, 23-year-old Nigerian citizen Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, is thought to have travelled to Yemen for training from al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This has raised concern that Yemen could potentially become "the next Afghanistan," serving as both a locus of regional terrorist activity and a training ground for foreign recruits seeking to launch attacks abroad.

Al Qaeda's presence in Yemen is not a new phenomenon. The Yemeni government, with U.S. support, effectively dismantled al Qaeda's Yemeni cells in 2002. Between 2006 and late 2008, however, the government's weakness and inattention, largely the product of falling oil revenues and pre-occupation with multiple internal conflicts, allowed al Qaeda to regroup in Yemen's remote eastern regions.⁸

In January 2009, al Qaeda in Yemen (AQY) merged with another al Qaeda affiliate organization based in Saudi Arabia. The new group, which took the Saudi affiliate's name, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, conducted a number of increasingly audacious attacks in Yemen and Saudi Arabia in the months following the merger, demonstrating itself to be more ambitious and capable than either of its component organizations had been in years prior.⁹ The Christmas Day bombing attempt, AQAP's most ambitious effort to date, was the group's first attack attempted outside of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Christmas Day bombing attack re-affirms our 2009 finding that the global extremist movement is increasingly defined by regional affiliates rather than al Qaeda's core leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Where one might have previously assumed that sophisticated attacks on U.S. soil were within al Qaeda central's exclusive purview, the Christmas Day attack, which does not appear to have been connected to al Qaeda central, provides fairly substantial evidence to the contrary. This raises the possibility that despite U.S. military pressure having weakened and constrained senior al Qaeda figures, the threat of significant attacks planned and conducted independent of their leadership remains, and could be growing.

Recent developments also underscore the fact that ungoverned and poorly governed areas in countries such as Yemen and Somalia pose a danger not only as launching pads from which local extremists can conduct attacks, but also as recruiting and training grounds where foreigners are being radicalized and deployed to conduct attacks abroad. In the past six months there have been increasingly frequent reports of foreigners traveling to Yemen from Western countries for language instruction or religious training and becoming radicalized at conservative schools with jihadist leanings.¹⁰ Though Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's alleged attack is the only case in which this self-

8. Gregory Johnsen, "Waning Vigilance: Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Yemen," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 14, 2009, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3088> (accessed April 21, 2010).

9. Henry Meyer, "Al-Qaeda Increases Yemen Attacks as Government Control Weakens," *Bloomberg Online*, April 7, 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601109&sid=aPgZgIFoo6EE&refer=home> (accessed April 21, 2010).

10. Scott Shane, "Arrest Stokes Concerns about Radicalized Muslims," *New York Times*, March 12, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/world/middleeast/13terror.html> (accessed April 21, 2010). Scott Shane, "Ex-

initiated radicalization process has developed into a full-fledged attack on the United States, the attack's near success raises the possibility that AQAP, and potentially other groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, could increasingly use locally radicalized foreign recruits to conduct attacks abroad. This is particularly troubling given that foreign recruits, particularly those who hold valid passports from Western countries and do not fit typical terrorist profiles, could more easily avoid suspicion and be uniquely well-suited to conduct attacks against Western targets.

The Christmas Day attack and recent developments in Yemen make clear that while most al Qaeda affiliates are increasingly focused on local grievances and goals, others are becoming more active, more ambitious, and, at least in AQAP's case, more globally focused. In the months before the Christmas Day attempt, and increasingly since then, AQAP's public statements and rhetoric have made it clear that its operational focus has broadened to include the United States and the Western "far enemy," more generally, in addition to the Yemeni and Saudi governments.¹¹ It is possible that the group is targeting the United States, both literally and rhetorically, to provoke the United States into a military confrontation that will boost the group's local following and support. At this point, however, it is unclear why AQAP and other regional extremist movements, most notably al-Shabaab in Somalia, are proving to be exceptions to the larger downward trend in regional terrorist activity.

The Challenge of Self-Radicalization

The violent Islamist movement has never been monolithic. It is deeply grounded in a very traditional critique of politics in Muslim countries, and, as a result, these groups have evolved independently in numerous locales at various times. This is not to argue that there is anything inherent to Islam that makes such violence likely, but rather that the combination of poor governance, a strong tradition of political Islam, and government repression makes it all but inevitable that these groups will continue to exist.

Individuals are drawn into these groups, often, by a simple, universal impulse toward emotional fulfillment. Some terrorists are genuine religious fanatics, vigorously educated in particular, radical interpretations of Islam. Many others, however, are simply lonely, frustrated, insecure, or insane and are drawn to extremist organizations because they offer a sense of community and belonging.¹²

Convicts from U.S. Said to Join Yemen Radicals," *New York Times*, January 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/20/world/middleeast/20terror.html> (accessed April 21, 2010); Matthew Taylor et al., "Yemen Terror Camps Attract 'Stream of Britons,'" *The Guardian*, December 28, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/28/yemen-terror-camps-britons> (accessed April 21, 2010).

11. BBC News, "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Urges Jihad," *bbc.co.uk*, February 8, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8504855.stm (accessed April 21, 2010).

12. Germain Difo, "Lonely Heart terrorists," *Washington Times*, March 24, 2010, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/mar/24/lonely-heart-terrorists/> (accessed April 21, 2010).

The communications revolution in general, and the Internet in particular, have significantly enhanced individuals' ability to become "self-radicalized," particularly those individuals with either the ideological propensity toward radicalism or an emotional need that they have been otherwise unable to fulfill. Websites, chat-rooms, and even email chains are increasingly becoming sufficient conditions for individuals to translate some inchoate anger and frustration into an ability to actively plan and launch attacks.

Happily, thus far, self-radicalized actors have demonstrated limited capacity to launch sophisticated attacks. However, even very simple acts can have devastating consequences. In this sense, the Fort Hood attack¹³ represents perhaps a greater threat to the United States than the Christmas bombing plot. Major Nidal Malik Hasan was merely following in the well-trod footsteps of other "active shooter" scenarios, including Columbine and Virginia Tech. These types of attacks are tremendously difficult to thwart, largely because small arms are easy to acquire and these attacks require essentially no skill or training. In the very best case, the would-be shooter begins his shooting spree at a defended checkpoint—as in the cases of the attacks on the Holocaust Museum and Pentagon Metro.¹⁴ However, even a very rapid police response will be too late to prevent multiple casualties. Indeed, suicide before the arrival of the authorities is the most common way for these attacks to conclude.

Given that self-radicalized individuals often lack access to sophisticated training, they are highly vulnerable to "copy cat" dynamics. To date, the dominant mode of attack by Islamist extremist groups has been in the form of bombings. This has served as a self-limiting factor in self-radicalization: acquiring bomb-making information and expertise often requires engaging in activities that arouse the suspicions of law-enforcement agencies.

The real danger is the possibility that individuals might become convinced of the need for action by virtue of their passive participation in on-line fora but then choose to pursue a low-tech active-shooter style attack. Individuals thus radicalized would leave behind none of the "warning signs" of past conspirators—no travel for training, no requests for technical advice, no organizing of multiple individuals, and no suspicious purchase of industrial chemicals or bomb components.¹⁵ In this sense, a man with a bomb in his underwear on an airplane is a major source of concern, but as a matter of risk management, the bigger challenge is the potential for more violence following the Fort Hood model.

13. NBC News, "Gunman Kills 12, Wounds 31 at Fort Hood," November 5, 2009, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33678801/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/ (accessed April 21, 2010).

14. Allison Klein et al., "Shooting at Pentagon Entrance Leaves 2 Police Officers Hurt, Lone Gunman Dead," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/04/AR2010030405109.html> (accessed April 21, 2010).

15. Kevin Johnson, "Alleged Terror Threat Seen As 'most serious' Since 9/11 Attacks," *USA Today*, November 25, 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-09-24-terror-probe_N.htm (accessed April 21, 2010).

Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a bipartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



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