Effectiveness of al-Qaeda's Terror

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INTRODUCTION

The terrorist organization al-Qaeda is infamous for perpetrating the 9/11 attacks on the US and for giving rise to offshoot terrorist groups such as ISIS. Most people know of Osama Bin-Laden, but how many know al-Qaeda's history, what methods of terror it employs, or how effective its brand of terror is? This project analyses the effectiveness of tactics employed by al-Qaeda, with a focus on how much domestic or international resistance they generate and how well they work to achieve al-Qaeda's goals.

BACKGROUND

Al-Qaeda: founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden; currently headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri in Northwest Pakistan; designated as a terrorist group by the UN Security Council, NATO, EU, and 17 countries

➤ Founded following Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979-1989)
  ○ Perfect storm of ideology, money, and eager warriors
➤ 21 official sub-groups; unknown number of cells on every continent
➤ Ideology: Salafism, Salafist Jihadism, Qutbism, and Pan-Islamism
  ○ Respectively: "pure" Islam, war against infidels, conquestional jihad, single all-consuming Islamic state

The ultimate goal of al-Qaeda is to re-establish an Islamic Caliphate as existed from the 7th to 13th century. In order to to this, the group must:

➤ Expel Westerners and repel foreign intervention
  ○ End U.S. influence and soft power in planned caliphate lands
  ○ End U.S. stationing of troops in planned caliphate lands
➤ Advance Islamic revolutions throughout the Muslim World
  ○ Dethrone Saudi royal family and install "true Islamic regime"
    ■ Disagreement over ideology, policy, and relations with West
➤ Annihilate the Jews, Jewish influence, and Israel; convert Christians

"An Islamic Group, **its only mission is Jihad**, because Jihad is one of the basic purposes for which Al Qaeda personnel come together. In addition, they perform other Islamic duties if possible. **Jihad will take precedence** over other duties in case of interference." -Al-Qaeda Constitutional Charter

Notional Map of Ayman al-Zawahiri's Envisioned Caliphate

AL-QAEDA'S REACH

Al-Qaeda Membership

Figure 1: This image depicts al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden and current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri
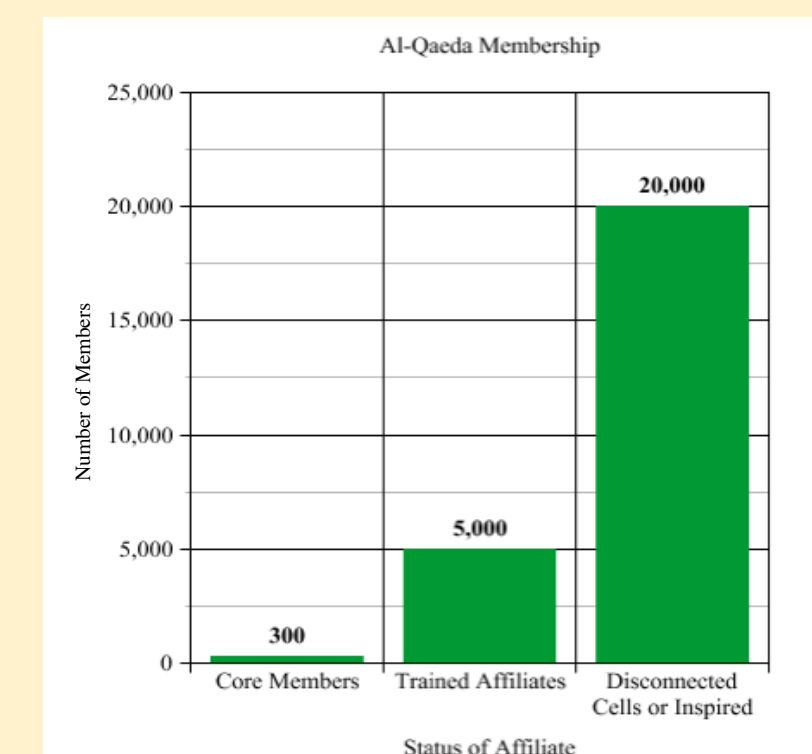
Figure 2: This chart details the numbers of al-Qaeda affiliates who have communication with the leadership.

Figure 3: This image is a cover page of an al-Qaeda "Martyrdom Tape," a form of recruitment propaganda

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Tactic or Strategy	Effectiveness (+ or -)
1. Using cells and home-grown radicals	+: dispersed, under the radar, decentralized, difficult to catch, protects others' identities
2. Drawn out campaigns to exhaust and overwhelm opposing military forces	+: image of underdog struggle, inspires jihadist, weakens enemy and lowers resolve -: depletes manpower and resources
3. Terror attacks internationally and domestically	+: inspire terror, kill enemy (int'l attacks) -: alienate potential supporters (domestic)
4. Filling power vacuums	+: gov't-like role, maintain order -: lose old regime supporters; competition from other groups
5. Incitement to draw media coverage	+: increase audience size, recruitment, spread ideology, inspire terror -: strengthen resolve of "enemy" to fight
6. Usage of cyberspace and the internet	+: large audience, few laws, anonymous, work from anywhere, difficult to stop -: communications can be compromised
7. Assassinations	+: gain supporters, increase attention, create power vacuums (if done well) -: cause condemnation, civil unrest

SIGNIFICANCE

Determining the effectiveness of various terrorism tactics is essential because if the effectiveness is not known, then determining where to increase resistance to oppose these tactics is impossible. For example, since 9/11, much of the United States' counterterrorism policy has revolved around military action and the screening of travelers. But overall, the existence of autonomous or semi-autonomous cells and homegrown radicals, as well as internet usage for recruitment and propaganda, are actually the most effective techniques employed by terrorists. Though 9/11 was a spectacular success for al-Qaeda, that type of event is unlikely to be repeated, while cell- or individual-driven acts of terrorism are likely to increase. If, for example, resistance to al-Qaeda's internet presence were to be increased, then it is possible that significant damage could be done to it. Similarly, determining how to root out home-grown radicals and cells could have a strong deterrent effect and save lives. This requires that the US adopt a more three-dimensional view of al-Qaeda. Rather than viewing it as solely a militant group, the US should view it as a multi-faceted group that relies on many more methods than terror alone to support its mission and expansion.

Developing a more effective counterterrorism policy is essential for the safety and well-being of everyone in the world. Although terrorism can feel far away at times, and like something that happens to other people in other countries, it has the potential to affect us all. If one day al-Qaeda manages to achieve its goal of establishing a caliphate, nearly half the world's population would live within it. It is highly improbable that this will occur, but not impossible. Numerous terror organizations, nearly all of which are offshoots of al-Qaeda if not al-Qaeda proper, are wreaking havoc in the Middle East and parts of North Africa. The resultant civil unrest and political instability create a climate, especially in poor countries with corrupt leaders, where a well-organized group, even a terror group, could attain a leadership role. In addition to turning the clock back to the Dark Ages in those countries, Western and other modern societies could be under intense threat from a powerful caliphate.
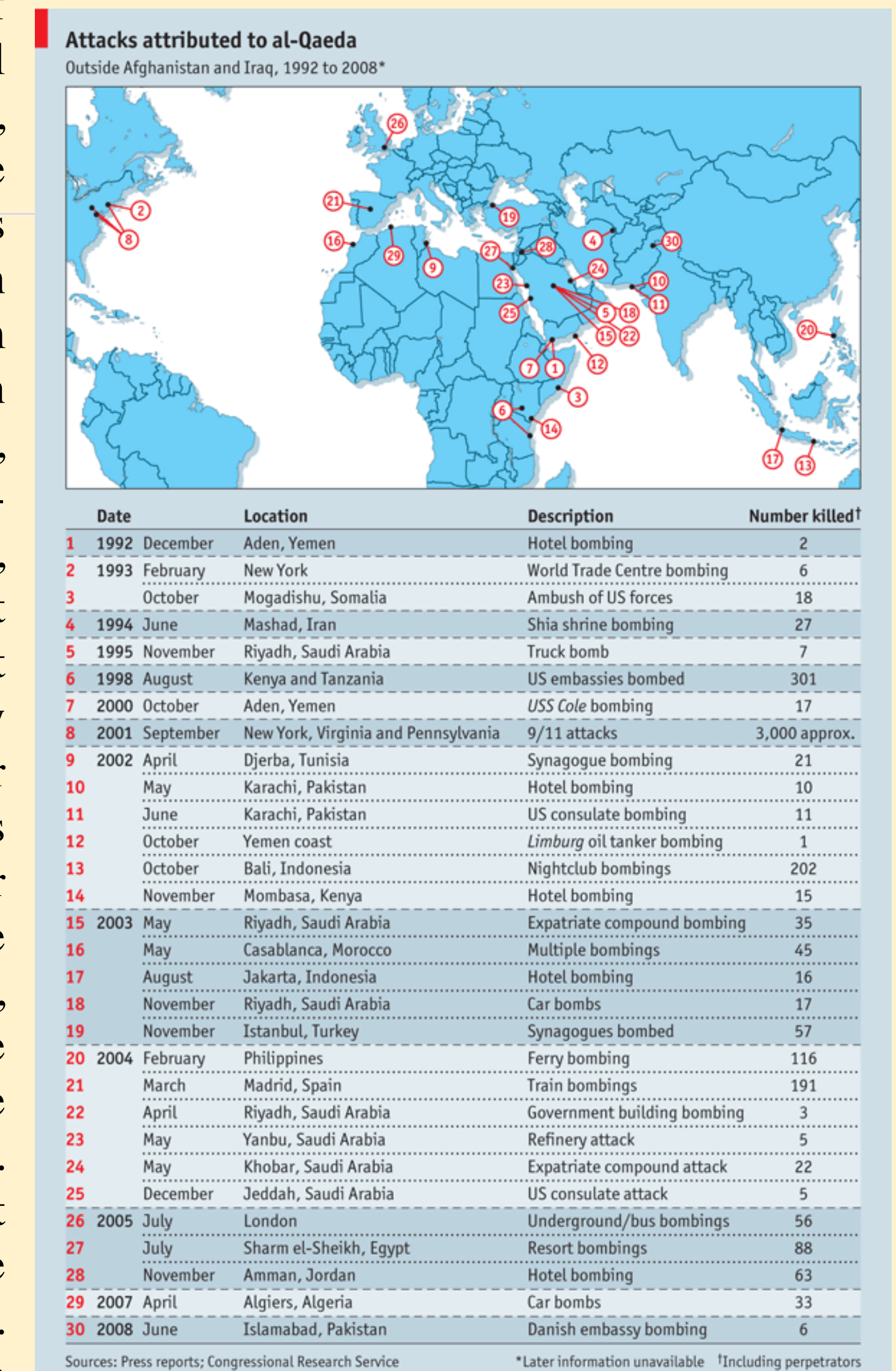

Figure 4: Compilation of all major al-Qaeda attacks (1992-2008), demonstrating the group's broad reach. Many are located within the envisioned caliphate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / REFERENCES

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