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The State of the Jihad

Military.com | Bill Roggio | January 06, 2007

The year of 2006 has seen some interesting developments in the fight against al-Qaeda and its allies across the globe. While the war against al-Qaeda is largely seen as a fight in Afghanistan supported by a police action in certain countries, there is a very hot war occurring in many countries. Al-Qaeda and its allies have initiated hot wars in lesser known countries such as the Philippines, Chechnya, Somalia, and Algeria. Thailand is fighting a serious insurgency against ill-defined groups of Muslim insurgents which haven't been definitively connected to al-Qaeda or the Southeast Asian powerhouse Jemaah Islamiyah, but we don't believe in coincidences.

Iraq, which is often dissociated from the war, is a major theater for al-Qaeda, as both Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have stated in numerous communications. Afghanistan has seen its bloodiest year since the U.S. invasion in late 2001. The Taliban and al-Qaeda have fought the Pakistani government to a standstill and have taken over portions of the country. The countries of Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Bangladesh simmer, and continue to serve as support bases for al-Qaeda's activities.

Below is a roundup of the major developments in the most active theaters across the globe in the Long War.

Pakistan: The Taliban and al-Qaeda have made startling gains in Pakistan during 2006. In the tribal areas along the Afghan border, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have officially taken control over North Waziristan with the signing of the Waziristan Accord in September, and unofficially taken control of South Waziristan after the Pakistani Army abandoned control of the agency. The Taliban has established offices, recruiting centers, a parallel governing administration, and allowed al-Qaeda and other foreign fighters to live in the region. Twenty-two known al-Qaeda training camps exist in the tribal areas. After the Waziristan Accord, Pakistan released over 2,500 Taliban, al-Qaeda and other jihadi prisoners, many of whom fled back to the tribal areas to rejoin or lead their units. The Taliban also maintain a command and control center in Quetta in the south. The Taliban and al-Qaeda recruit, arm, train, sortie and direct their attacks from the tribal area and Quetta.

The Pakistani government is exploring further 'peace accords' in the tribal agencies, and Bajaur would have been the next agency ceded to the Taliban and al-Qaeda had not a missile strike on a madrassa hosting an al-Qaeda training camp sabotaged the talks. The foiled London airliner plot was tracked back to Waziristan, as was the Mumbai, India bombing which killed over 200 railway commuters.

Afghanistan: The Taliban have stepped up military operations and suicide and bombing attacks in Afghanistan. While the Taliban continues to claim their movement is supported locally, the impetus of the Taliban offensive is provided from the Taliban and al-Qaeda support bases in western Pakistan. The overwhelming violence and Taliban activity in Afghanistan occurs on the eastern border with Pakistan. The Taliban have been attacking border outposts, police stations and district centers in formations as large as battalion sized (about 400 fighters). But massed Taliban have led to massive Taliban casualties at the hands of NATO forces. Over 4,000 have been killed in Afghanistan this year, but at least 3,500 are Taliban fighters. Afghan, Canadian, British and U.S. forces have been heavily engaged in the southern and eastern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Kunar, Khost, Paktia and Paktika. An al-Qaeda suicide cell in Kabul was broken up by Afghan police after a two month bombing campaign over the summer. Many military and political leaders predict 2007 will be a violent year in Afghanistan as the Taliban attempts to destabilize the Afghan government and sideline reconstruction projects.

Iraq: Since the destruction of the Golden Dome of the Al-Askaria Mosque in Samarra, the sectarian violence has risen dramatically. After the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, command of Al-Qaeda in Iraq was passed to Abu Ayyub al-Masri, a protege of Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Qaeda is attempting to create a political front and put an Iraqi face on the insurgency. Under the leadership of of Abu Omar al-Iraqi, al-Qaeda is attempting to unite the fractious insurgent groups in the Sunni areas, and has created an umbrella political organization called the Islamic State of Iraq. Some smaller Sunni insurgent groups, along with some leaders of Iraqi tribes, have been rolled under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq, along with al-Qaeda in Iraq's Mujahideen Shura Council.

Muqtada al-Sadr and his Iranian backed Mahdi Army continue to lead the sectarian violence in Baghdad

and efforts to sideline Sadr from political power have so far failed. An Iraqi government was formed after months of painful negotiations to create a ruling Shia coalition, and power was peacefully transferred. There are real concerns about the willingness of the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki to disarm the Shia militias. The Iraqi Army has made significant progress in taking control of the battlespace, yet is still heavily dependent on US forces. In general, the Iraqi police has a long way to go before approaching the effectiveness of the Army. The Baghdad police are said to be riddled with militias. Saddam Hussein was executed on December 30, 2006.

Somalia: After a year of seemingly wild success in Somalia, al-Qaeda has suffered a serious blow. The al-Qaeda backed Islamic Courts had taken control over all of central and southern Somalia by July, save for the central town of Baidoa, after defeating the U.S. backed Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism. Ethiopian forces poured into Baidoa and Puntland to reinforce the weak Transitional Federal Government. A five month standoff ensued, then in late December the two sides faced off outside Baidoa. The Islamic Courts conducted two suicide strikes against government targets, and successfully ambushed several Ethiopian armored columns. The Ethiopian Army then conducted a major offensive and drove the Islamic Courts from Mogadishu. The Islamic Courts have fled to the southern port of Kismayo and a training camp at Ras Kamboni, and the Ethiopian Army is currently heading south to engage them. The Islamic Courts have given all signs that it will begin to conduct an insurgency. Al-Qaeda has expended significant resources in funds, manpower, political and propaganda support, and in establishing training bases in Somalia.

Iran: The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to pursue its nuclear program, against the wishes of the United Nations. Iran still shelters over 100 al-Qaeda leaders, including Said bin Laden, Osama's son, and Saif al-Adel, al-Qaeda's strategic planner. Muqtada al-Sadr receives the support of Iran, which is working to destabilize the Iraqi government and foment civil war. Qods Force agents have been arrested in Iraq with "weapons lists, documents pertaining to shipments of weapons into Iraq, organizational charts, telephone records and maps, among other sensitive intelligence information... [and] information about importing modern, specially shaped explosive charges into Iraq." Hezbollah continues to be Iran's main terrorist proxy, and received significant aid in the form of sophisticated weapons systems, cash and political support. Iranian weapons were fielded during the Israel-Hezbollah War, including a cruise missile which disabled an Israeli warship, medium range rockets, and UAVs. Iran has also supported Somalia's Islamic Courts by providing arms and training to the organization.

North Africa/Algeria: Al-Qaeda consolidated the various Salafist terrorist groups and formed Al-Qaeda in North Africa. The organization consists of the Algerian based GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), the Moroccan Islamic Combat Group, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and the Tunisian Combatant Group. While the GSPC isn't a serious threat to the stability of Algeria, the group remains active, has maintained its size and operations, and has conducted attacks against government forces and civilian targets. Moroccan authorities disrupted a major terror plot against foreign targets, and arrested almost 60 in the conspiracy. Al-Qaeda in North Africa and the GSPC maintain an extensive support network in Europe and beyond.

Saudi Arabia: Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia attacked the ARAMCO run Abqaiq facility, the largest in Saudi Arabia. Saudi security forces continue to dismantle al-Qaeda's network of fighters in the country. Saudi Arabia has killed or captured nearly every terrorist on its most wanted lists. But Saudi Arabia continues to allow the support organizations to function. The "Golden Chain," a group of wealthy Saudis and other Gulf states financiers who funnel millions of dollars to Osama bin Laden, still remain free, despite their known identity. Imams and clerics supportive and sympathetic to al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations continue to preach hate and justification for jihad.

Chechnya: Al-Qaeda had a very bad year in Chechnya. Shamil Basayev, the leader of the Chechen jihad, along with a large contingent of the Chechen leadership, was killed by the Russian FSB in July. After Basayev's death, large numbers of Chechen rebels defected and accepted a government amnesty. In November, Doku Umarov, Basayev's successor, was wounded after Russian forces conducted an assault on his hideout. Just days later, Abu Hafs, al-Qaeda's Emir of Chechnya, was killed by Russian security services. Russian intelligence believed he was prepared to leave Chechnya... "given the lack of prospects for jihad in the North Caucasus."

The Philippines: The Filipino Army has made significant progress in its fight against al-Qaeda linked Abu Sayyaf and Indonesian based Jemaah Islamiyah operating in the southern Sulu archipelago. A force of about 6,000 Marines are fighting Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah on Jolo Island, and are highly confident. Khaddafy Janjalani, the leader of Abu Sayyaf, was killed during the operation. Jemaah Islamiyah leader Umar Patek was believed to have been wounded, and the wife of JI bomb expert Dulmatin was arrested and deported to Indonesia. Abu Sayyaf and JI have continued to conduct a low-level bombing campaign, largely in Mindanao. The Filipino government continues to conduct negotiations with the Muslim separatist group MILF.

Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah still remains active in Indonesia and throughout southeast Asia, although it has not conducted major attacks inside the country. The Indonesian Supreme Court overturned the conviction of Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual leader of al-Qaeda affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah who sanctioned the Bali bombings. Over 60 terrorists were released from jail, including several involved in the Bali bombing. Jemaah Islamiyah still maintains a support base and training camps inside Indonesia.

Bangladesh: Bangladesh was successful in decapitating the senior leadership of the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh during the spring. Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai, the two most senior leaders of JMB were captured. Abdur Rahman was an original signatory of al-Qaeda's 1998 fatwa against the West and the

establishment of the International Islamic Front. All together, five of the seven members of JMB's Majlis-e-Shura (central council) are now in custody. Bangladesh is still a haven for al-Qaeda and Pakistani based terrorist groups.

Thailand: Thailand's shadowy Muslim insurgency in the south has stepped up its campaign of terror. Teachers and schools have been the primary targets of insurgents, as 110 schools have been burned and 71 school teachers, administrators and school staff have been killed over the past year. On New Years Eve, a bombing campaign in the capital of Bangkok was successful in stopping Thailand's massive New Years Eve celebrations. Gerakan Mujahideen Pattani, a Muslim terrorist group in Thailand, has received backing from Jemaah Islamiyah and al-Qaeda.

Bill Roggio is one of the few bloggers to embed with U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. He blogs at The Fourth Rail (<http://www.billroggio.com>).

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