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"Everything has changed," says Scott Atran of the University of Michigan. US-led military action in Afghanistan deprived al-Qaeda of its operating headquarters soon after 9/11, along with much of its leadership. With them, the organisation led by Osama bin Laden and his chief ideologue, Ayman al-Zawahiri, lost much of its capability to plan and direct sophisticated terrorist attacks. Now, it is best understood, he says, as "a media-driven transnational movement that has excited young people all over the Muslim world".

Step one was to bring more recruits to the cause: the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania brought thousands to Afghanistan and led to "a surplus of suicide bombers", he says. Step two was to bring about a polarisation between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds: the heavy-handed US response to 9/11 has helped to encourage this, particularly since the invasion of Iraq, which he describes as "a gift that al-Qaeda never dreamed of".

Mr [Christopher Hiffelfinger] says that since it was deprived of its haven in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has become a "vanguard" organisation, an inspiration for Muslims rather than a driver of specific plots. So, as the phenomenon it set in train grows rapidly, "al-Qaeda itself becomes less and less relevant".

Full Text (895 words)*(Copyright Financial Times Ltd. 2006. All rights reserved.)*

What has become of al-Qaeda since September 11 2001?

"Everything has changed," says Scott Atran of the University of Michigan. US-led military action in Afghanistan deprived al-Qaeda of its operating headquarters soon after 9/11, along with much of its leadership. With them, the organisation led by Osama bin Laden and his chief ideologue, Ayman al-Zawahiri, lost much of its capability to plan and direct sophisticated terrorist attacks. Now, it is best understood, he says, as "a media-driven transnational movement that has excited young people all over the Muslim world".

Mr Atran is building a database of identified terrorists in south-east Asia and Europe in an effort to understand what drives a proportion of those excited young people to violence. Most who turn to terrorism are what his colleague on the database project, Marc Sageman of the [University of Pennsylvania](#), calls "groups of guys".

These are "action-oriented groups of young men" aged between 15 and 30 - most often gathered in groups of eight - who might originally have got together to play cricket or football.

Preliminary results from the database suggest more than 80 per cent of them are radicalised in the west. Some 70 per cent come to these groups through friends, 20 per cent through kin and just 10 per cent through the Islamic schools or madrassas located overwhelmingly in Indonesia and Pakistan. Eight per cent are Christian converts to Islam.

They are younger, too. The average age of people arrested in the past two years who are allegedly affiliated to al-Qaeda is 22 compared to 26 a few years earlier. Mr Atran says this is because the internet is drawing people together through chatrooms.

The internet is also drawing women to the cause - a potential new nightmare for security forces. Women can hide behind the anonymity the internet offers, says Louise Richardson, a terror expert and dean of [Harvard University's](#) Radcliffe Institute, adding: "This is increasing the number of potential recruits."

The image of al-Qaeda is of a crafty, intelligent, innovative adversary. But says Mr Atran, most of these groups are anything but innovative - recycling old tactics, as suggested by the alleged London airliner conspiracy uncovered last month, which replayed that of the so-called Bojinka plot of 1994-95. "Most of these people are a bunch of amateurs. But they are running rings around the most powerful military and intelligence organisations around the world," he says.

Bringing down decentralised networks such as these are hard for organisations arranged hierarchically, such as western governments and military establishments. Kathleen Carley at [Carnegie Mellon University](#), who has done modelling work on networks, says: "Trying to destabilise a cellular distributed network using tactics designed for hierarchies is likely to be ineffective."

Many analysts say part of al-Qaeda's increasingly sophisticated communications strategy - which includes internet-distributed video with a new al-Jazeera-style logo - is in part designed to make Mr Bin Laden and Mr al-Zawahiri appear to be at the centre of events that they do not control.

Yet some people who follow al-Qaeda closely say the two men would be content with developments since 9/11. Saad al-Fagih, a Saudi dissident who lives in London, says the two mapped out a three-stage strategy in 1997. The idea was "to drag America into the game".

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Step three was what he calls "the pacification of the single superpower": the idea that the US, because of divisions at home, would withdraw from the Middle East, leaving the jihadis to operate freely in the Muslim world and take over governments there. According to this analysis, the plan is currently between stages two and three.

(Mr al-Fagih has been designated by the United Nations, following a US request, as an individual belonging to or associated with al-Qaeda. He denies he supports terrorism.)

Christopher Hiffelfinger, an analyst of jihadi ideology at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, says Messrs Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have repeatedly suggested a strategy that has been described as "bleed-to-bankruptcy": to make it so costly to fight the jihadis that the US will eventually draw back from Muslim countries.

Some calculations suggest that al-Qaeda is doing pretty well on this score. Using the term employed by the Pentagon's latest four-yearly defence review to describe the war against terrorism, Mr Sageman observes: "So far the total (US) costs in the 'Long War' - if the costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iran are added to lost revenue from 9/11 and the added cost of defending the homeland - may come close to a trillion dollars. On the other hand, al-Qaeda's cost so far has been a few million dollars."

Mr Hiffelfinger says that since it was deprived of its haven in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has become a "vanguard" organisation, an inspiration for Muslims rather than a driver of specific plots. So, as the phenomenon it set in train grows rapidly, "al-Qaeda itself becomes less and less relevant".

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