

The Method, The Means And The Will: The Hallmarks Of Al-Qaida

By Rohan Gunaratna

Rohan Gunaratna is currently an Associate Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.

The recent attacks in Mombasa, Kenya, bears the hallmark of al-Qaida. First, al-Qaida is the only group with both the desire and ability to strike Israeli targets overseas.

Second, al-Qaida has a history of attempting to destroy Israeli targets. It mounted surveillance of Israeli diplomatic missions in Manila and Singapore in September and October last year. Mohammed Mansour Jabarah, a Canadian al-Qaida member, told his US interrogators while in detention that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, head of the network's military committee, had authorised the targets.

Third, al-Qaida has extensive infrastructure in the Horn of Africa. After Osama bin Laden relocated its headquarters to Sudan in December 1991, al-Qaida built a vast network in east Africa that was harnessed to mount several operations, including training Al-Ittihad al-Islami, a Somali Islamist group, to attack US troops in Somalia in 1993, killing 18, the attempted assassination of Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak in Ethiopia in 1995 and the attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, which killed 224.

Fourth, al-Qaida formed an umbrella organisation, the World Islamic Front for Jews and Crusaders, in 1998 with the specific intention of building support to strike Jewish and Israeli targets. In March 2002, an al-Qaida Tunisian suicide bomber struck the oldest Jewish synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, killing 21, including 14 German tourists.

Fifth, the modus operandi of al-Qaida is whenever possible to conduct coordinated and simultaneous attacks. Multiple attacks require long range planning and preparation, skills which al-Qaida singularly possessed.

What about the threat? Al-Qaida's attempt yesterday to fire two missiles at an Israeli passenger airliner has significantly escalated the threat to civil aviation worldwide. While most military aircraft possess anti-missile systems, commercial planes have no such protection.

Al-Qaida has a history of training its members to use SAMs. Since the US, allied and coalition troops intervened in Afghanistan, two recoveries suggest that al-Qaida trained both its members and its associate members to use surface to air missiles.

CNN's Nic Robertson recovered an al-Qaida training video where an al-Qaida trainer is demonstrating how to use a handheld SAM. A label marked "Abu Hafs Exclusive" was stuck on the video. Abu Hafs is another name for Mohammed Atef, the military commander of al-Qaida, who was killed in a US Predator attack in Afghanistan in November 2001.

After the US bombing of Afghanistan, al-Qaida transported an unknown number of SAMs into the Arabian peninsula and to the Horn of Africa. Since the campaign in Afghanistan began in October 2001, al-Qaida members remain concentrated in five geographical zones: the 1,520-mile Afghanistan-Pakistan border; south-east Asia, especially Indonesia; the Horn of Africa; Yemen, where only 35% is under government control; and the Caucasus, mostly the Pankisi gorge in Georgia and Chechnya.

Al-Qaida has maintained a robust network in the Horn of Africa even after the bombing of the US embassies. The network in Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea was particularly

strong. Al-Qaida's military commander, Abu Ubaidah Bانشiri, drowned in Lake Victoria in Kenya.

The al-Qaida member Mohammed Sadiq Odeh, alias Abu Yasser, alias Mohammed the fisherman, was permanently based in Mombasa to facilitate the movement of al-Qaida goods and operatives. In addition to infiltrating Arabs and other nationals into Kenya, al-Qaida recruited local Kenyan members. In Mombasa, al-Qaida opened several businesses, including a fish business run by Odeh, who was one of the two bombers of the US embassy in Kenya.

Al-Qaida owned at least one motorboat that transported cargo, clothes, fish and other commodities.

Khalfan Khamis Mohammed, one of the two al-Qaida members who participated in the bombing of the US embassy in Tanzania, visited Mombasa three times. Mombasa has remained both a base and a transit point for nearly a decade.

The attack in Mombasa demonstrates that despite the losses al-Qaida has suffered in Afghanistan, its cells overseas have moved from strength to strength.

Al-Qaida has widened the theatre of conflict to include not only US but also German, French, Australian and Israeli targets. Al-Qaida's leader announced on al-Jazeera on November 13 its intention to strike British, Canadian and Italian targets for their participation in the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan.

The attack in Saudi Arabia in May and the Mombasa attack suggest that al-Qaida has access to a SAM consignment. As a group with a shipping capability, it is not beyond them to transport SAMs beyond the Middle East and Africa into the west.

During the interrogation of Mohammed Sadiq Odeh, the Tanzania bomber, the FBI asked if he had any knowledge of how explosives could be smuggled into Kenya. Odeh, who used to ship lobsters for al-Qaida, said: "A good way would be to put explosives in boxes of lobsters."

That is a sign of how difficult it will be to combat the threat of a missile strike against a civilian plane - a threat far greater than the conventional terrorist method: hijacking. Yesterday's missiles missed. But as a learning organisation, al-Qaida is likely to succeed next time.