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Al-Qaeda Steps Up Propaganda as U.S. Claims Progress on Terror

By Daniel Williams

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June 18 (Bloomberg) -- [Osama bin Laden's](#) top aide, [Ayman Zawahiri](#), is spearheading a public-relations effort to restore [al-Qaeda's](#) credibility in the Muslim world as military pressure puts it on the defensive.

Zawahiri starred in his first Web forum in April, defending the terror group against charges that the killing of civilians is un-Islamic. Since then, he has used the

Internet to comment on disputes involving Gaza, Iran, Morocco and Spain, taking stands designed to broaden al-Qaeda's appeal.

Terrorism analysts say Zawahiri's outreach effort may reflect progress in the field against bin Laden -- the force behind the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington -- and an attempt to counter a decline in the group's popularity among Muslims. With the network's fight increasingly left to loose affiliates, especially in North Africa and Europe, the erosion could make al-Qaeda's central command more eager to carry out a major hit.

"These are signs of weakness," said [Martha Crenshaw](#), a senior fellow at Stanford University's [Center for International Security and Cooperation](#) in California. "Of course, sometimes a weak organization can be even more dangerous since it needs to lash out."

The Washington-based [Pew Research Center](#) says that "Muslim confidence" in bin Laden last year dropped to 20 percent among Jordanians from 56 percent in 2003; to 1 percent from 20 percent among Lebanese; to 57 percent from 72 percent among Palestinians; and 13 percent from 20 percent among Kuwaitis.

'Encouraging' Trend

"Any positive feelings about the leader of al-Qaeda are disturbing, but the trend on this question is encouraging," said the report, published in the May-June 2008 issue of [The National Interest](#) journal. The results were based on 14,937 face-to-face interviews in 16 Muslim countries.

In answers to questions posted online, Zawahiri, 56, denied in April that al-Qaeda kills innocent people. "We haven't killed the innocents, not in Baghdad, nor in Morocco, nor in Algeria, nor anywhere else," he said. If any non-combatant was killed, it was "either an unintentional error or out of necessity."

On April 19, the Egyptian-born physician criticized Iran for plotting to take over southern Iraq and eastern Saudi Arabia. On June 4, he issued an audio [statement](#) through [Al-Sahab](#), the group's media outlet, disparaging Egypt for keeping its side of the Gaza border closed while Israel seals the rest.

Trying to Stay Relevant

"Certainly al-Qaeda is weakening, and these statements reflect that; they are trying to stay relevant," said [Javier Jordan](#), a political science professor at Spain's [University of Granada](#) who has written books on Islamic terrorism. "They are also part of al-Qaeda's continuous effort to get recruits by tapping into local concerns."

Al-Qaeda is far from a spent force. Operating from bases in Pakistan, its guerrillas have made inroads against NATO forces in Afghanistan: On June 15, Afghan President [Hamid Karzai](#) warned that his forces would invade Pakistan if necessary "in self-defense." U.S. bombers have targeted the border region in recent weeks.

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Meanwhile, the network has remained active in North Africa, where local organizations pledge allegiance to bin Laden without being under his operational control.

A faction known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has carried out bomb attacks during the past year in energy-rich Algeria. The most recent, on June 8, killed 13 people at a train station in Beni Amrane, 60 kilometers east of Algiers, the capital. The group also operates in sub-Saharan Africa and sends recruits to Morocco, Tunisia and Spain.

Cracking Down

Authorities are cracking down on these groups too: On June 10, Spanish police arrested eight men they said had provided funds to the Islamic Maghreb affiliate.

In a May 30 interview with the [Washington Post](#), [Central Intelligence Agency](#) Director [Michael V. Hayden](#) said the U.S. is ``doing pretty well" against al-Qaeda. The organization is close to defeat in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, is under ideological assault from Muslims and has difficulty finding recruits, he said.

A March ``[National Security Strategy](#)" issued by U.K. [Prime Minister Gordon Brown](#) said that Western pressure has kept al-Qaeda from uniting the various groups targeting terror attacks, though threats may ``persist for many years."

Over the past two years, anti-U.S. insurgents formerly allied with al-Qaeda have begun to fight it, in part in reaction to civilian killings. The organization, which Crenshaw said has no more than 500 members in its core, also suffered recent losses of at least two major commanders.

In February, a U.S. air strike in Pakistan killed [Abu Laith Al-Libi](#), a field commander. In April, U.S. officials reported that [Abu Ubaida Al-Masri](#), who plotted bomb attacks in Europe, died in Pakistan.

``It's a receding threat, though that doesn't mean the threat is at an end," said Granada University's Jordan.

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