

By Scott Stewart

Last week, rumours that Adam Gadahn had been arrested in Karachi, Pakistan, quickly swept through the global media. When the dust settled, it turned out that the rumours were incorrect; the person arrested was not the American-born al Qaeda spokesman. The excitement generated by the rumours overshadowed a message from Gadahn that the al Qaeda media arm as Sahab had released on March 7, the same day as the reported arrest. While many of the messages from al Qaeda figures that as Sahab has released over the past several years have been repetitive and quite unremarkable, after watching Gadahn's March 7 message, we believe that it is a message too interesting to ignore.

The Message

In the message, which was titled "A Call to Arms," Gadahn starts by telling jihadists to strike targets that are close to them. He repeats the al Qaeda doctrinal position that jihad is a personal, religiously mandated duty for every able-bodied Muslim. He then tells his audience that "it is for you, like your heroic Mujahid brother Nidal Hasan, to decide how, when and where you discharge this duty. But whatever you do, don't wait for tomorrow to do what can be done today, and don't wait for others to do what you can do yourself."

As the message progresses, Gadahn's praise of Fort Hood shooter Hasan continues. Gadahn lifts up Hasan as an example for other Muslims to emulate: "the Mujahid brother Nidal Hasan is a pioneer, a trailblazer and a role-model who has opened a door, lit a path and shown the way forward for every Muslim who finds himself among the unbelievers and yearns to discharge his duty to Allah." He adds that Hasan was the "ideal role model" for Muslims serving in the armed forces of Western countries and of their Muslim allies. Gadahn's message is clearly intended to encourage more jihadists to emulate Hasan and conduct lone wolf terrorist attacks.

Regarding the planning of such attacks, Gadahn praises Hasan for being a careful planner and for not engaging in a hasty, reckless or poorly planned operation. He states that Hasan clearly learned from the mistakes of others and did not repeat them. Although Gadahn does not specify particular plots in which he believes mistakes were made by grassroots jihadists, he is undoubtedly referring to cases such as the May 2009 arrest of a group of grassroots jihadists in White Plains, N.Y., who came to the attention of authorities when they sought help from a man who turned out to be an FBI informant. Gadahn praises Hasan for practicing careful operational security by keeping his plans to himself and for not discussing them over the phone or Internet. He also notes that Hasan did not make the mistake of confiding in a person who might have been an FBI informant, as several other plotters have done. Gadahn also says Hasan "didn't unnecessarily raise his security profile or waste money better spent on the operation itself by travelling abroad to acquire skills and instructions which could easily be acquired at home, or indeed, deduced by using one's own powers of logic and reasoning."

When discussing methods lone wolf jihadists can use to conduct their attacks, Gadahn notes that while Hasan used firearms in his assault at Fort Hood, jihadists are "no longer limited to bullets and bombs" when it comes to weapons. "As the blessed operations of September 11th showed, a little imagination and planning and a minimal budget can turn almost anything into a deadly, effective and convenient weapon which can take the enemy by surprise and deprive him of sleep for years on end."

Gadahn then turns his attention to targeting. He counsels lone wolf jihadists to follow a three-pronged target selection process. They should choose a target with which they are well acquainted, a target that is feasible to hit and a target that, when struck, will have a major impact. He notes that Hasan's choice of Fort Hood fit all three criteria, but that jihadists should not think that military bases are the only high-value targets in the United States or other Western countries. "On the contrary," Gadahn insists, "there are countless other strategic places, institutions and installations which, by striking, the Muslim can do major damage."

He then relates that jihadists must attempt to "further undermine the West's already-struggling economies" by carefully timed and targeted attacks against symbols of capitalism in an effort to "shake consumer confidence and stifle spending." (In this way, Gadahn's message tracks with past messages of Osama bin Laden pertaining to economic jihad.) Gadahn notes that even apparently unsuccessful attacks on Western mass-transportation systems can bring major cities to a halt, cost billions of dollars and send corporations into bankruptcy. He also calls upon jihadists to kill or capture "leading Crusaders and Zionists in government, industry and media."

To summarize his lessons on targeting, Gadahn urges jihadists to "look for targets which epitomize Western decadence, depravity, immorality and atheism — targets which the enemy and his mouthpieces will have trouble trying to pass off to the conservative Muslim majority as illegitimate targets full of innocent people."

Implications

First, it is significant that Gadahn, a representative of the core al Qaeda group, is openly advocating a tactical approach to terrorist attacks that was first publicly laid out by the leader of one of the al Qaeda franchise groups. Nasir al-Wahayshi, head of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), authored an article that appeared in AQAP's Sada al-Malahim online magazine in October 2009 that encouraged jihadists to conduct simple attacks with readily available weapons. Since that time, al-Wahayshi's group has been linked to Hasan and the Fort Hood shooting, the attempt to destroy Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009 and the June 1, 2009, attack against an armed forces recruitment centre in Little Rock, Ark. Normally it is the al Qaeda core group that sets the agenda in the jihadist realm, but the success of AQAP has apparently caused the core group to jump on the AQAP bandwagon and endorse al-Wahayshi's approach.

It is also telling that the core al Qaeda group chose to produce this particular video message using Gadahn as the spokesman and not one of their other talking heads like Ayman al-Zawahiri or Abu Yahya al-Libi. Gadahn, an American, is often used by the group to address

the West, and English speaking-people in particular, so it is clear that the intended audience for his message was aspiring grassroots jihadists in the West. Indeed, Gadahn says in the video that his message is meant particularly for jihadists in the United States, United Kingdom and Israel. Presented in English, Gadahn's video is more easily accessible to English-speakers than al-Wahayshi's article, which was written in Arabic. Even though the al Qaeda core has been marginalized on the physical battlefield, when it comes to areas like militant philosophy, the pronouncements of the core group carry more influence with the wider jihadist world than statements from a regional franchise such as AQAP. When these two factors are combined, it is reasonable to assume that more people in the English-speaking world may pay attention to this call to simple attacks than they did to al-Wahayshi's call in October 2009. Video is also a more viral type of media than the printed word, and video messages are known to be very appealing to aspiring jihadists.

Another thing this video reveals is the continued weakening of the core al Qaeda group. It has come a long way from the early days of as Sahab, when bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders issued defiant threats of launching a follow-on attack against the United States that was going to be even more destructive than 9/11. The group is now asking individual Muslims to conduct lone-wolf terrorist attacks and to follow the examples of Hasan and Mir Amal Kanshi, the Pakistani citizen who conducted a shooting at a stoplight outside CIA headquarters in January 1993 that killed two CIA employees. STRATFOR has long been tracking the devolution of the jihadist threat from one primarily based upon al Qaeda the group to one based upon a wider jihadist movement, and this video is a clear indication that the trend toward decentralization is continuing.

This decentralization means grassroots operatives will continue to be a concern. The problems posed by such operatives are illustrated by recent cases involving American citizens like Colleen LaRose (aka Jihad Jane), Jamie Paulin-Ramirez and Sharif Mobley, who are all alleged to have been involved in recent jihadist plots. As blonde Caucasian women, LaRose and Paulin-Ramirez, in particular, do not fit the jihadist operative stereotype in most people's minds and serve to illustrate the difficulty of creating a terrorist profile based on race, ethnicity or gender.

But decentralization can also mean diminished capability. Counselling jihadists against travelling to training camps in places like Pakistan or Yemen and advising them not to coordinate their attacks with others will increase a group's operational security, but it can also have a serious impact on its operational effectiveness. Traditionally, one of the biggest problems for lone-wolf operators is acquiring the skills necessary to conduct a successful terrorist attack. Even though many Web sites and military manuals can provide instruction on such things as hand-to-hand combat and marksmanship, there is no substitute for hands-on experience in the real world. This is especially true when it comes to the more subtle skills required to conduct a complex terrorist attack, such as planning, surveillance and bomb making. This difficulty in translating intent into effective action explains why so few lone-wolf militants have been able to pull off spectacular, mass-casualty attacks.

Not putting their recruits through a more formal training regimen also makes it more difficult for groups to thoroughly indoctrinate recruits with jihadist ideology. In addition to physical training,

individuals attending jihadist training camps typically receive hours of theological instruction every day that is intended to ground them in jihadist doctrine and motivate them to follow through with their plans to engage in attacks.

All that said, while the threat posed by grassroots jihadists is less severe than that posed by trained militant operatives from the core al Qaeda group or the regional franchises, grassroots operatives can still kill people — and they most certainly will continue to do so. Because of this, it is important to pay careful attention to the targeting criteria that Gadhafi lays out. His focus on mass transportation targets means that historical jihadist targets such as airliners and subways continue to be at risk. For corporate security directors and the protective security details assigned to safeguard high-profile government officials and private individuals, the video should also serve as a reminder of the need to be vigilant. This is doubly true for those assigned to protect individuals of the Jewish faith, who could be thought to fit both the "Crusader" and "Zionist" labels in the mind of a prospective attacker.

For security personnel, the silver lining in all this is that grassroots operatives are often lacking in street skills and tend to be very sloppy when conducting preoperational surveillance. This means that, while these individuals are in many ways more difficult to identify before an attack than operatives who communicate with, or are somehow connected to, jihadist groups (indeed, lone wolves can seemingly appear out of nowhere), their amateurish methods tend to make them more vulnerable to detection than their better-trained counterparts. This is the paradox presented by this class of militant operative — and it is a paradox that will confront security, intelligence and law enforcement officers for many years to come.

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