

Al-Qaeda's Operational Strategies – The attempt to revive the debate surrounding the Seven Stages Plan

Background

On September 11, 2008, the Al-Faloja forum published Al-Qaeda's "Seven Stages Plan" – an operational strategy plan, comprising a number of stages with a defined time-table. The plan is divided into seven stages, and spread over a period of 20 years. It commenced in 2000, with the preparations for the September 11 attacks, and is meant to end in 2020.¹

It is important to stress that this is not the first time that this operational strategy framework has been presented publicly. In the book written by Jordanian reporter Fuad Hasnin, "Al-Zarqawi: Al-Qaeda's Second Generation", which was published in 2005, the Seven Stages Plan was presented for the first time. It referred to interviews the reporter held with Al-Zarqawi and a group of Al-Qaeda senior members, including Saif Al-Adel. This strategy plan was widely published in the media.²

It seems that following the wish to renew the discussion surrounding the plan and circulating it to the various target communities, it was raised for discussion on the forum in September 2008.

Stages 1-5 of the plan deal with the steps which should be taken to establish Islamic Caliphates throughout the Arab world. When this is accomplished, they will move on to stages 6-7, which are to confront the international community, within the framework of the war between the "powers of faith" and the "powers of the heretics", as defined by Bin Laden, with the intention of imposing Islam on them. This plan is destined to end in 2020.

Hereunder are the stages according to their appearance on the forum:

¹ <http://al-faloja.info/vb/showthread.php?t=34159>

² <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,369448,00.html>

1. The stage of awakening

The proponents of Al-Qaeda discerned the deep inertia that had gripped the Islamic nation – which commenced in the 19th century and continued into the 20th century. One of the manifestations of this lethargy was the lack of sufficient capability to respond to the enemy's provocations, which caused the Islamic nation's woes. The Al-Qaeda leaders therefore understood that “they needed to prepare a plan, based on a hard strike to the head of the twisting serpent, to antagonize it and force it to respond hastily, without weighing its decision carefully.”

This “serpent's head” is the United States. The 9/11 attacks were intended to “force the Americans to expose their real intentions” openly towards the Islamic nation.

George Bush's declaration of “a crusade, and his call for the establishment of an international alliance to confront terrorism, in order to eradicate it”, which commenced with the “invasion of Afghanistan and thereafter of Iraq”, were considered a success of the first stage, from the Al-Qaeda leaders' point of view. In other words, the September 11 attacks were a kind of bait, which was swallowed by Washington and, as a result, they were drawn into a campaign against the Islamic nation “which would awaken it from its lethargy”. The United States' response to this provocation was a “strategic error, made by the Jewish Anglo-Saxon alliance headed by the Americans.”

The start of this stage was the preparation for the September 11 attacks at the beginning of 2000, and its finale was the entry of the Americans into Iraq on April 9, 2003. The results, according to the estimation of Al-Qaeda's strategic experts, “were very good, as the Americans were obliged to leave their traditional bases, which widened the campaign arena. This made the Americans and their allies close and easy targets [...] and an increasing attrition stage started against this super power”. In addition, Al-Qaeda emphasizes its success in spreading its credo everywhere and to changing from an organization with limited capabilities, into a “wide main stream”, which succeeded in expanding its material and

human resources. Moreover, the Islamic nation started awakening from its stupor and became "aware of its bitter reality".

2. The Eye-opening Stage

The Al-Qaeda leadership perceived this stage as starting with the occupation of Baghdad on 9 April 2003. As a result, the nation awakened from its stupor and realized that it was facing a severe and painful reality – its resources were being embezzled by its enemies, leaders who had no affinity with the nation were appearing, corrupt governments were elected, torture and repression were carried out by the governments and so on. "The corruption, the theft, the inferior governments and the scheming with foreigners, led to the downfall and the digression".

According to Al-Qaeda's estimations, this stage should last three years and should end towards the end of 2006. "This stage will enable the nation to discover the truth, the hidden and to expose the games and plots". This stage is based on constant confrontations with the enemy. Al-Qaeda and its leadership represent a new way, which is different from that of the Arab leaders which is expressed by bowing and capitulation before the West, or by making peace with the Jews out of strategic considerations. "The eye-opening stage provided new impetus to Al-Qaeda and changed it from an organization to a school of thought which is difficult to eradicate".

This stage was designed to pave the way for the realization of the following goals:

- Direct confrontation with the state of the Jews in Palestine.
- Burning the Arab oil and preventing the west and the collaborating regimes from benefiting from it.

- Preparing the ground for the electronic jihad via the internet. This must be given a great deal of thought, as its influence will already be considerable at the beginning of the third stage.
- Continuation of quietly and constructively preparing leaders from Al-Qaeda's second generation, in important areas in the Arab and Islamic world, to take over the leadership.
- With the start of the third stage, choosing Iraq as the base for building an army of Muslims, who arrive for the purpose of spreading jihad to neighboring countries, in order to act within the framework of a defined agenda.
- Preparation and dissemination of lessons in religious law, to encourage Muslims to give money to the jihadi people, in order to assist them to purchase arms for their plan and as a "response to American policies to dry up their financial resources".

"When their eyes are opened and the stream becomes larger and stronger, the confrontation with the Jewish state in Palestine will begin. All this is a preface to the beginning of the third stage".

3. The stage of arising and standing on our own two feet

This stage will commence in 2007 and will end at the beginning of 2010.

Moving the focus of the Jihadi operations from Iraq to its neighbors, initially to the region of Al-Sham, i.e. Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. The choice of Al-Sham was not made randomly, but rather because of the Al-Qaeda proponents' reliance on prophetic hadiths made by the Prophet Muhammad, which point to surrounding this area after Iraq. This notion is based on "the Jews' plans to divide the area of Al-Sham – Syria, Lebanon and Northern Jordan, into small ethnic states, as well as the American-European-Jewish attack against the present Syrian regime, in order to crush every power bordering the State of Israel", so as to benefit Israel's

security interests. "This attack, according to Al-Qaeda's view, will weaken the Syrian regime and make it lose its ability to govern internally."

Al-Qaeda's perception is based on opportunistic observation, according to which they must take advantage of every situation where there is a loss of security control, in the knowledge that they have fighters at their disposal, who returned from the war in Afghanistan to Iraq, Syria and Jordan, and who are willing to put this concept into practice, as transpired in Lebanon and which will soon occur in Syria.

At the end of the stage and after concluding the preparations, there will be a direct confrontation with the Jews inside Palestine and its borders. The attack on the Jews is not intended to be in Palestine alone, but also in areas where they have considerable influence on Muslim states "the reference here is to Turkey". The aim of putting an end to the Jewish control of the Turkish economy and army, "will return to the Islamic nation the ability to control their army and this should not be disparaged". During this stage, Al-Qaeda will earn the educated youth's admiration and feed-back, which will be a source of strength and by utilizing this strength, it will be possible to move on to the fourth stage.

4. The healing stage and gathering strength for change

This stage is destined to commence at the beginning of 2010 and end at the beginning of 2013. During this stage, efforts will be made to overthrow regimes through a direct and aggressive confrontation. The Al-Qaeda proponents understand that American policy towards the Arab states "will expose all the cards of the ruling regimes", and this will harm the latter's image, i.e. "the Arab regimes will lose their right to exist, they will gradually become weaker and the Al-Qaeda and Islamic Jihad stream will grow, in addition to an ongoing war of attrition conducted by the Americans, by widening the circle of confrontation, which will prevent the Americans from continuing to support the regimes as they do today". At this stage, Al-Qaeda will have the capability to strike at the oil resources

and burn them, which will harm one of the most important American economic foundations. This will add to the decline of the regimes, which mainly rely on the oil.

In addition, Al-Qaeda's option for an electronic war will have matured and will be utilized against the United States' economy in order to weaken it. The goal to weaken the United States' economy is the brain-child of the Hizb Al-Tahrir Al-Islami party³, which was adopted by the Al-Qaeda proponents.

Al-Qaeda believes that harming the United States' economy will alienate the American people against the American Jews, as it is a known fact that the Jews play a considerable role in the difficult situation of the American economy. This situation will force American public opinion to pressure the American government to reduce its support for Israel. Halting support of the Jews, or reducing it, will weaken the State of Israel in the region.

The results of this stage will serve Al-Qaeda's interests: the attrition campaign against the United States and its deterioration will make it difficult for them to continue being the custodian of the global order; Israel will become weaker, due to the armed confrontation waged against it by the Jihadis in the region and because of the United States' decline and the change in its positions, and the regimes will lose their ability to defend themselves.

5. Proclaiming the State

This stage will begin in 2013 and will end in 2016. At this stage, the face of the international arena will have changed: The United States' hold on the Arab regions will have been weakened, Israel will no longer be able to

³ The Islamic Liberation Party was established in Jerusalem in 1953 by Taqi Al-Din Al-Nabhani a senior Palestinian cleric. The party's goal was to resurrect the Islamic Caliphates which were annulled in 1924, and to impose the Islamic religious commandments (the Sharia) on its inhabitants. This will be done by carrying out revolutions of the elites (by army officers) against Islamic secular regimes or by assassinated the leaders. see:

http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/html/final/sp/sib2_04/is_02_04.htm

execute assassinations, Indo-China will rise as new powers, the process of Europe's union will discontinue owing to the United Kingdom's opposition. The change in the international arena will serve the interests of the global Islamic Jihad and enable it to declare the establishment of Islamic Caliphates. This declaration will correspond with the strategic goal of Al-Qaeda:

- a. Ability to control and command.
- b. Opportunity for renewed and genuine building.
- c. The ability to protect the nation's energy and its human and material capabilities.
- d. Creation of an international power balance.
- e. Fulfillment of the truth, dissemination of justice, freedom and equality worldwide.
- f. Fulfillment of God's promise.
- g. Bringing down corrupt regimes in Islamic countries and causing their demise.

6. The Total Confrontation Stage

Al-Qaeda proponents believe that 2016 will commence with a total confrontation between the "forces of the faith" and "the forces of international heresy". This confrontation will start after the establishment of the Islamic state. "The world at that stage will be divided into two camps – the camp of the faith and the camp of the infidels, as represented by Bin Laden in his many messages".

Al-Qaeda bases itself on the following passage in the Koran: "and say: Truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Surely, falsehood is ever bound to vanish" (Surah 17, Al-Israa 81). The state of Islam represents the truth and it will conduct a war against the forces which represent deceit. At the end of the confrontation, "the Islamic state will lead mankind once again to safe shores, happiness and tranquility."

7. The Final Victory Stage

According to the Al-Qaeda proponents, the total confrontation against the forces of deceit will continue for a number of years. The power of the Muslims at that time will be great, more than one and a half billion people, and will terrorize their enemies, particularly Israel, which "will be unable to subsist".

After presentation of the program, the correspondence stresses Al-Qaeda leadership as a necessary and legitimate alternative to all those regimes, organizations and political parties which failed to rehabilitate Islam:

The reality of the Islamic nation

The situation of the Islamic nation is very bad owing to the Arab regimes' efforts to perpetuate the Muslims' faltering and their cooperation with the "foreigner" in order to plunder their resources. Therefore, Al-Qaeda perceives itself as the nation's alternative leadership.

The reality of the Arab organizations and political parties

The organizations and political parties failed in their attempt to realize the nation's aspirations. Most of them have no clear-cut plan and some of them are cooperating with the regimes without endeavoring to change them. In light of this reality, Al-Qaeda wishes to present itself as the nation's new future.

The ongoing and renewed aggression

Al-Qaeda wishes to confront the enemy in its unique style and manner, in order to put an end to the latter's taunting, which manifests itself in harming the Islamic nation's honor and the looting of its resources.

Achieving victories

Al-Qaeda's perception of achieving victory is based on the following Koran verse: "When there comes the help of Allah and the conquest. And you see that the people enter Allah's religion in crowds. So glorify the praises of your Lord and ask his forgiveness. Verily he is the one who accepts the repentance and who forgives" (Surah 100, An-Nasr, 1-3).

Each Al-Qaeda victory, whether large or small, will draw many youngsters into its ranks. Also, the spreading out of the Americans all over the Arab world will enable a direct confrontation between them and the Mujahideen. "Al-Qaeda's strategy, as we have seen, is based on a clear-cut plan with definite states. Its goals are defined and its resources are open. The plan is built on a good understanding of history, and is based on ongoing realistic forecasts. One of its action measures is timely planning which is intended to deal with the next incident [...]. Al-Qaeda's power leans on its ability to activate the nation's hidden capabilities. Its only option is to continue the struggle until the end. Continuation of the struggle will wear down the capabilities of the enemy and will weaken them. Its vision is based on action, initiative, creating an incident and taking advantage of it."