

JAPAN IN AL-QAEDA'S SIGHTS *Hagai Segal*

Facing up to the terrorist threat

The risk of attack by radical Islamists against a state like Japan – having no history of conflict with the Islamic world or any theological importance to the Islamic faith – has always seemed low. Times and priorities change, however, and today the Asian economic powerhouse is squarely in al-Qaeda's sights.

Ever since its "pacifist" constitution was imposed by the United States after the second world war, Japan has faithfully adhered to the principles of war-renouncing Article 9: it prohibits the state from threatening, or using, military force. Now, however, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party is forging ahead, proposing radical changes to this until-now sacrosanct constitutional provision.

The desire for change has been motivated by various factors, including the importance that the LDP places on securing a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and growing concerns over the threat posed by North Korea and China.

The most pressing factor, however, is al-Qaeda, and Japan's determination to stand shoulder to shoulder with the US in the global fight against it.

Japan already interprets its constitution to permit a 255,000-strong military – the world's 9th largest (if strictly self-defensive in posture). It has provided logistical support to the US-led coalition in Afghanistan since November 2001, has 550 troops in Iraq and is providing over US\$5 billion for its reconstruction.

It was no great surprise then, when al-Qaeda added Japan to its list of target states. Osama bin Laden cited Japan for the first time in October 2003: the next month, al-Qaeda warned the country not to send troops to Iraq, or it would face attack.

The information about al-Qaeda activity related to Japan was made public, and it immediately became clear that the authorities had been concerned about a possible attack as early as 2001.

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, the Japanese Police Agency ordered its regional offices to keep

mosques under surveillance, alleging that some had been meeting places for Islamist extremists.

Arrests followed, most notably in November 2001, when an illegal bank – funnelling funds to Islamic militant groups in Pakistan – was uncovered.

Al-Qaeda considered attacking Japan during the 2002 World Cup soccer tournament, the Japanese media reported in 2004.

That information, they claimed, was revealed to his American captors by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed – the key al-Qaeda figure who has been in US custody since his capture in Pakistan in March 2004.

He said an attack did not occur because al-Qaeda did not have a network in Japan, according to the reports.

It has also emerged that, in 2003, a member of the al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan entered Japan on a visa for religious activities, and told Muslim worshippers in Tokyo that he intended to establish cells there.

In a similar development in May 2004, police arrested several foreign nationals in an investigation of French al-Qaeda suspect Lionel Dumont, who had spent more than a year in Japan on false papers.

A multi-state probe also continued into whether other Pakistani radicals were planning to target Japanese elections last September, in what is feared was an attempt to replicate the so-called "Madrid

effect": namely, target a state allied with the US, strike before an upcoming general election, and hope that the backlash results in the election of a new government dedicated to ending support for the US and its foreign military operations.

The good news is that, in attempting to avert an attack, Japan has certain factors in its favour. Its population is about 99 per cent ethnic Japanese, and the number of Muslims in the country – estimated at 70,000 to 100,000, in a nation of over 127 million – is less than 0.1 per cent of the population.

It is thus a very easily identifiable community, predominantly from Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Iran and Turkey, and in-

cludes relatively few ethnic Japanese. It is thus difficult for al-Qaeda terrorists to blend in and remain undetected, as they have done with devastating effect elsewhere.

The Japanese also have some experience with the kind of violence al-Qaeda perpetrates. The sarin gas strike on the Tokyo subway system, in March 1995, has given authorities 11 years to develop a defence against the mode of attack used in Madrid and London. A number of measures have also been instituted to avert strikes on ports and shipping infrastructure.

What is most likely in the short term is an attack on Japanese interests abroad, carried out by groups in countries where they already operate.

In December 2002 – the only incident of this kind so far – a Toyota showroom was bombed in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Similar strikes on the big names of Japanese industry and commerce are likely to

follow in the future. Today, al-Qaeda's scope and resources are far more limited than they were a few years ago, and this kind of attack is far easier to execute than complex, risky operations within Japan itself.

Expert opinion is divided on how likely an attack on Japan might be. Some warn that it is a matter of "when", not "if", an atrocity will be perpetrated on Japanese soil; others characterise the threat level as "yellow", not "red".

What is not in dispute, however, is that Japan is now on al-Qaeda's radar, and that the threat is likely to grow in the coming years as Tokyo and Washington's strategic interests grow ever closer.

The Japanese authorities, quietly and out of the public eye, are preparing for the worst.

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