



**Woodrow Wilson
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“Al Qaeda Network in Iran and Iraq”

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Speaker: **Rohan Gunaratna**, Head of Terrorism Research, Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore; author of *Inside Al Qaeda*

This meeting, jointly sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Division of International Security Studies and Middle East Program, the RAND Corporation, and the U.S. Army’s Eisenhower National Security Series, was part of an ongoing series on terrorism and homeland security.

Dr. Gunaratna observed that the al Qaeda organization that existed before 9/11 – a top-down, structured organization led by Osama bin Laden – has now morphed into a global movement. Thirty to forty groups inspired by al Qaeda’s ideology and terrorist operations now exist worldwide. *Local* jihadi groups, whose previous struggle had been against their own country’s ruling regime, now see themselves as part of a *global* jihad against the United States and its allies.

Another important development is the shift in the “center of gravity of international terrorism” from Afghanistan to Iraq. This process has been driven by two events – the dismantling of al Qaeda’s infrastructure in Afghanistan and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Gunaratna cited an estimate that the number of operatives in Osama bin Laden’s organization is now below 500. This remnant of the main al Qaeda organization that existed in Afghanistan lacks an effective command and control structure. Without the sanctuary of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, al Qaeda split into two groups – one in Pakistan (headed by the now-captured Khalid Sheikh Muhammed), the second in Iran (under Saif al Adel, a former Egyptian military officer). The clerical regime in Tehran initially permitted the passage of al Qaeda operatives through Iran, but eventually clamped down and rejected al Qaeda’s request for safe haven. Some 100 al Qaeda operatives and their families (including four sons and two wives of bin Laden) are in Iran under house arrest.

Turning to Iraq, Gunaratna stated that no credible evidence connects the Saddam Hussein regime to al Qaeda. His terrorist links were primarily to Palestinian groups, such as Fatah’s al-Aqsa Brigade. Those al Qaeda-linked groups present in Iraq before the war (e.g., Ansar al Aslam) were in the Kurdish zone outside Saddam Hussein’s control. Assessing current conditions, Gunaratna concludes that the Iraq war has exacerbated the problem of Islamic extremist terrorism by precipitating an influx of new recruits, a resurgence of militant Sunni ideology, and greater unity among Sunni extremists. Jordanian-born Musab al-Zarqawi, who took an oath of allegiance to bin Laden, heads al Qaeda in Iraq, which has conducted the bulk of the suicide

attacks and beheadings of kidnapped foreign workers. While many Arab youth admire Zarqawi, his group has become somewhat marginalized, with many Sunni groups distancing themselves from him because of his extreme violence and rabid anti-Shia views. Despite the negative consequences of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Gunaratna stated that a premature withdrawal would be disastrous for Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The fact that al Qaeda's top leadership is now predominantly Egyptian does not auger well for stability in that country.

He concluded with the grim prediction of a new wave of terrorism as European and Canadian Muslims who went to Iraq to participate in jihad against the American Crusaders now return and decide to continue the jihad through terrorist activities in their adopted home countries.