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R. Kim Cragin. "A Recent History of al-Qa'ida." *The Historical Journal* 67:3 (September 2014): 803-824. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X14000065>

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The dangers of writing about terrorism and terrorist groups, most especially al-Qa'ida, are twofold. The first is that the field is so inundated with punditry and scholarship on the subject that new entrants easily can be lost in the noise; the second is that in order to avoid being lost in the noise the temptation is strong to exaggerate claims and to assert over-strenuously the importance of one's conclusions.

A long-time and sensitive observer, analyst, and chronicler of al-Qa'ida structure and behavior, R. Kim Cragin falls victim to neither hazard in "A Recent History of al-Qa'ida." Rather, Cragin takes a sober approach to presenting and interpreting new archival information about the group's state of being in the years between 2004 and 2013. The main thrust of the work – that depictions of post-9/11 al-Qa'ida as a rudderless and disaggregated collection of actors working roughly in concert but not in coordination are overstated and inaccurate – and the evidence the author presents to support it are worthy of being taken seriously.

Cragin's argument, however, falls somewhat short of being entirely convincing in asserting that the al-Qa'ida leadership cadre in Pakistan, including and especially Osama bin Laden, remained not just symbolically important, but indeed operated as an executive body developing and disseminating strategy. This outcome largely is the product of some confusion in the author's use of the concepts 'strategy' and 'tactics', and the respective alignment of evidence therewith. Nonetheless, this unevenness is outweighed by the contributions Cragin makes to our knowledge about and understanding of al-Qa'ida and its operations during this otherwise opaque period.

Cragin segments the progression of al-Qa'ida's strategic orientation between 2004 and 2013 into three phases. During the first, 2004-2006, she depicts al-Qa'ida's leadership as prioritizing the acquisition of new affiliates as it sought to expand its campaign beyond Afghanistan, and in particular "into the heart of the Arab world" (808). Cragin explains this interest in expansion in two ways. First, she argues that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was understood by al-Qa'ida, rightly as it turned out, to be a moment of opportunity. Second, she presents al-Qa'ida senior leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as personally invested in pushing revolution into the Arab world, and thus as a powerful and effective advocate for welcoming like-minded local elements under the al-Qa'ida umbrella.

These new additions, however, fairly quickly became troublesome, taking unwanted initiative and executing attacks that caused public backlash. Thus began the second of Cragin's phases, 2007-2009, during which she characterizes al-Qa'ida leadership as equivalently prioritizing expansion and reputation – specifically, the recovery of al-Qa'ida's standing amongst sympathetic populations both locally and globally. In practice this meant that although al-Qa'ida did not dissociate itself from problematic affiliates, its leaders did begin to seek more aggressively to assert their influence over them. Cragin offers clear documentary evidence of al-Qa'ida's efforts to guide more directly its affiliates' actions, sending explicit targeting lists and entreating attention to the optics of their activities. According to Cragin these efforts were met with a non-negligible degree of success. She highlights a number of changes in the behaviors of affiliate groups that are consistent with a newfound sensitivity to public perception: an al-Qa'ida in Iraq leader's apology to a Sheikh in Mosul for the death of local believers, for example, and overt statements by other affiliates of their exclusive focus on punishing and expelling non-Muslim influences, and not "innocent Muslim brothers" (813).

Nonetheless, Osama bin-Laden's focus had turned sufficiently toward protecting al-Qa'ida's global reputation that from 2010 until his death in 2011 expansion ceased to be a priority. This direction changed, Cragin submits, with the accession in his place of Ayman al-Zawahiri. In the third phase, al-Zawahiri, according to Cragin, has evidenced a considerable degree of risk-acceptance with affiliate groups, taking most if not all comers, refraining from reprimanding questionable behaviors, and seeming comfortable leaving al-Qa'ida vulnerable to public criticism and rebuke.

Throughout her accounting of al-Qa'ida's arc across these phases Cragin wields the documentary evidence well, and her own interpretations are sound. Her presentation of al-Qa'ida strategy, however, is incomplete, and her use of the terms 'strategy' and 'tactics' is imprecise. Within the context of an analysis intended to draw conclusions specifically about strategy and tactics these confusions are problematic.

Strategy is the purposeful alignment of means with ends – it is the identification of an objective and a plan describing how, and with what resources, that objective is to be achieved. Tactics are tools – they are discrete actions taken in service of achieving the defined ends. Operations are what link tactics to strategy. To wit, one fashioning of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States is as follows: the tactic was to use airplanes as

explosive devices; the operation was to attack symbolically and actually important buildings; and the strategy was to compel the United States to leave Saudi Arabia by making its presence there more costly than beneficial. Strategy answers ‘why;’ operations answer ‘how;’ and tactics answer ‘with what.’

Cragin’s analysis is inconsistent in aligning these elements, which has the effect of weakening portions of her argument. Her article’s primary concern is to present as strategic shifts in al-Qa’ida’s pursuit of geographic expansion and protection of al-Qa’ida’s reputation among a global network of sympathizers. This argument requires evidence that re-prioritizations reflect the assessments of leaders that achieving one objective will more efficiently promote this outcome than the other.

Cragin makes this case effectively in her discussion of al-Qa’ida’s efforts to rein in affiliates from 2007 until bin Laden’s death, noting that during that period its leaders appreciated the need to maintain a substantial base of sympathizers willing to contribute both blood and treasure to the cause. She is less successful in making the case after al-Zawahiri’s succession; here, the evidence Cragin presents seems to suggest that the emphasis on expansion reflects more personal preference than rational calculation.

The description of al-Qa’ida’s differences with affiliates generally as being based on matters of tactics rather than of strategy is similarly under-developed. Here, Cragin seems to accept bin Laden’s assessment that his affiliates were making ‘mistakes’ – attacks that killed not just Infidels but also Muslims, for example – as a product either of not understanding, or of not following, instructions. In the first instance, objections at this level are to operations – the chosen targets and locations of the attacks – and not to tactics, e.g., the use of bombs vs. guns. In the second instance, Cragin does not address sufficiently the possibility that affiliates were pursuing their own strategies, rather than that of al-Qa’ida. If this was the case, then the differences were certainly not tactical, and al-Qa’ida’s inability to appreciate this fact may go far in explaining the distance between their directives and the behavior of affiliates.

Overall, however, Cragin offers an interesting and empirically well-founded analysis that contributes to our historical knowledge of how and why al-Qa’ida sought to shape the modern international political landscape. As she aptly notes, by its very nature the study of terrorist groups is fraught with impediments, and opportunities to draw on primary source materials are few. That Cragin has done so, and has done so without exaggeration or excessive extrapolation, is laudable.

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