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Global Forecast by American Intelligence Expects Al Qaeda's Appeal to Falter

By SCOTT SHANE NOV. 21, 2008

WASHINGTON — A new study of the global future by American intelligence agencies suggests that [Al Qaeda](#) could soon be on the decline, having alienated Muslim supporters with indiscriminate killing and inattention to the practical problems of poverty, unemployment and education.

While not contradicting intelligence assessments suggesting that Al Qaeda remains a major threat with a strong presence in the tribal areas of [Pakistan](#), the report says that the group “may decay sooner” than many experts have assumed because of severe weaknesses: “unachievable strategic objectives, inability to attract broad-based support and self-destructive actions.”

“The appeal of terrorism is waning,” said Mathew J. Burrows, head of long-range analysis in the office of the director of national intelligence and a lead author of “Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World.” Mr. Burrows said polls and anecdotal evidence strongly suggested disillusionment among Muslims with Al Qaeda and its methods and goals since the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The predicted decline of Al Qaeda is one of the few bright spots in the generally gloomy report, which describes a decline in the United States’ world dominance as [China](#), [India](#) and other powers assert themselves.

“Although the United States is likely to remain the single most powerful actor, the United States’ relative strength — even in the military realm — will decline and U.S. leverage will become more constrained,” the report said.

By 2025, it predicted, “the U.S. will find itself as one of a number of important actors on the world stage,” playing “a prominent role in global events” but not a decisive one as in the past.

The report said the global shift from West to East in terms of wealth and economic power “is without precedent in

modern history.” Of a projected population increase of 1.2 billion worldwide by 2025, Western countries would account for only 3 percent, it said.

“We’re projecting a multipolar world,” C. Thomas Fingar, chairman of the National Intelligence Council and the government’s top intelligence analyst, said Thursday at a briefing on the report. “The unipolar moment is over, or certainly will be over by 2025.”

The previous report in the Global Trends series, completed in 2004, anticipated continued American dominance through 2020, though it recognized that the emergence of China and India as powers would transform the geopolitical landscape.

A gloomy report over all projects waning U.S. power.

The new report describes a world riven by increased conflict over scarce food and water supplies and threatened by so-called rogue states and terrorists, widening gaps between rich and poor and an uneven impact of [global warming](#). It said the chance of the use of nuclear weapons, while remaining “very low,” would rise in the next two decades as nuclear technology spreads.

The report said [Russia](#)’s emergence as a world power was “clouded” by persistent corruption and lagging investment in its critical energy industry. It also noted, without naming a specific country, that a government in Eastern Europe “could be effectively taken over and run by organized crime.”

Mr. Fingar acknowledged that the report, in the works for months, did not fully reflect the severity of the global economic crisis. But he said intelligence officials chose not to delay the report, judging that the long-term impact of the

economic downturn would not be clear for months.

The Global Trends reports are produced every four years by the National Intelligence Council, which represents all 16 American intelligence agencies, in part to inform long-term thinking by new administrations. The reports project various possible sequences of events in the future; the new publication notes, between dire forecasts, that “bad outcomes are not inevitable.”

Even if Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups gradually lose support, the remaining violent extremists may have access to increasingly lethal technology, including biological weapons, the report found.

The comments on Al Qaeda’s future are based in part on the work of David C. Rapoport, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has studied the cycles of terrorist activity in the past, including those associated with anarchism, Marxism and nationalism.

The report said the global Islamic terrorist movement was likely to outlast Al Qaeda itself, with other groups likely to emerge and supplant it. But it expects a future of frustration and attrition for Al Qaeda, which [Osama bin Laden](#) built during the 1990s.

The intelligence agencies noted that Al Qaeda had focused almost exclusively on terrorism, a contrast with groups like [Hezbollah](#) and [Hamas](#), which have transformed themselves into political movements.

“Al Qaeda has not achieved broad support in the Islamic world,” the report said. “Its harsh pan-Islamist ideology and policies appeal only to a tiny minority of Muslims.” ■