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## U.S. Officials See Rise in Al Qaeda Activity in Afghanistan

By [THOM SHANKER](#)

KABUL, [Afghanistan](#), Dec. 3 — American military and intelligence officials are seeing early signs that [Al Qaeda](#) may be increasing its activities in Afghanistan, perhaps even seeking to return to its former base of operations, a senior Defense Department official said Monday.

Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) arrived in Kabul late Monday for meetings with government leaders and military commanders to discuss how to speed economic and political development at a time of increasing violence.

“We are seeing early indicators that there may be some stepped-up activity by Al Qaeda,” the senior Defense Department official said aboard Mr. Gates’s plane. No details were offered.

The official cautioned that “it’s pretty hard to pull trends out of a few indications,” but added that even tentative evidence of increased Qaeda activity in Afghanistan “is something we are concerned with.”

The official spoke on standard rules of anonymity to discuss intelligence on Al Qaeda and Mr. Gates’s agenda ahead of the secretary’s third trip to Afghanistan in his first year in office.

Mr. Gates, in brief comments before landing in Kabul, said he was interested in how combat operations could be better woven into a “comprehensive development strategy” to include accelerated economic and political development.

“One of the clear concerns we all have is that in the last two or three years there has been an increase in the overall level of violence,” Mr. Gates said, noting that the rise in attacks and bombings was notable in southern Afghanistan, which had served as the [Taliban](#)’s spiritual base.

“I am not worried about a backslide as much as I am about how we continue the momentum going forward,” he added.

Officials said Mr. Gates also planned to assess whether the recent political turmoil in neighboring Pakistan had given greater freedom of movement to Taliban and Qaeda forces in tribal areas along the Afghan border.

Pentagon and military officials said the higher number of attacks and roadside bombings could be attributed to increased money for the insurgency from foreign sources and profits from domestic poppy production. The officials also attribute the increase in violence to the sanctuary provided in tribal areas of Pakistan that has allowed the Taliban and Al Qaeda to regroup.

Mr. Gates spent most of Monday in Djibouti to inspect one of the most unusual missions in the American military. The operation, called Task Force Horn of Africa, has not captured or killed a single terrorist or foreign fighter, yet it is viewed by Pentagon officials as a model military deployment.

The mission of the task force is to apply the "soft power" Mr. Gates advocated in a Nov. 26 speech, when he told an audience at [Kansas State University](#) that American counterterrorism efforts require not just combat operations, but also a broader range of economic development and diplomacy.

American combat personnel in Djibouti train regional armed forces to strengthen their own counterterrorism abilities. Combat engineers build schools and hospitals and dig wells in an effort to promote social stability and prevent terrorists from taking root.

In his first trip to Djibouti, Mr. Gates visited Camp Lemonier, a former French Foreign Legion compound that is home to the 2,000 troops in the task force and support missions. It is an operation that already is shaping how the Pentagon will organize its efforts in coming years.

The American military is organizing a new Africa Command, the first American combatant command dedicated solely to Africa. The lessons learned from the operation in Djibouti will shape the new command's emphasis on defense as well as diplomacy and development, according to senior Pentagon officials.

The mission initially was designed to trap terrorists expected to flee Afghanistan along traditional smugglers' routes down the Persian Gulf, into the Arabian Sea and past the Horn of Africa.

But the overlapping ground, maritime and air patrols across the region appear to have deterred the use of that route.

American intelligence and military officers say Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups continue to move through the region, with small numbers believed to be operating in ungoverned corners of Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Yemen.

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