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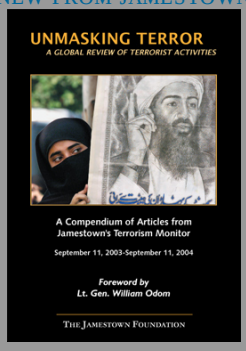
GLOBAL TERRORISM ANALYSIS



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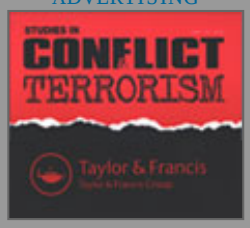

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The 'Virtual Hand' of Jihad

By Scott Atran

The presidential commission on WMDs and the 9/11 commission have condemned the status quo mentality of the intelligence community, which they see as being preoccupied with today's "current operations" and tactical requirements, and inattentive to tomorrow's far-ranging problems and strategic solutions. Both commissions call for steps to improve analysis and encourage diversity, including routine critiques of finished intelligence and alternative assessments by outside experts. But the overriding emphasis in both commissions' reports is on further vertically integrating intelligence collection, analysis, and operations. Such proposals to centralize intelligence and unify command and control are not promising given recent transformations in Jihadist networks in the wake of al-Qaeda's operational demise.

'Born-Again' Islam: Apocalyptic, Not Nihilistic

Notwithstanding some atavistic cultural elements, Jihadism is a thoroughly modern movement filling a significant portion of the popular political void in Islamic societies left in the wake of locally discredited western ideologies. Appeals to Muslim history and calls for a revival of the Caliphate are important and deeply heartfelt, yet to a considerable extent Jihadism is also a counter-movement to the ideological – and corresponding military - thrust ensconced in the National Security Strategy of the United States, which enshrines liberal democracy as the "single sustainable model of national development... right and true for every person, in every society - and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies."

As with most historical counter-movements, this one incorporates some of the main social and spiritual missions of its adversary. Indeed, perhaps more may be learned about Jihadism's apocalyptic yearnings and its "Born Again" vision of personal salvation through radical action from the New Testament's Book of Revelations than from the Qur'an. [1] Nor does Islam per se or "Muslim civilization" really have anything to do with terrorism – no more than some impossibly timeless or context-free notion of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism can be held responsible for the dead millions these religious traditions have been accused of.

One of the most important post 9/11 developments in global network Jihad is that surviving al-Qaeda offshoots and newly emerging Jihadist groups and cells no longer consider themselves to be territorially rooted in supporting populations. For example, although Egyptian Islamic Jihad (Al-Jamaat al-Islamiyya, EIJ) and Egyptian Islamic Group (Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, EIG) have common roots in Egyptian society, the EIJ leadership under Dr. Ayman Zawahiri left Egypt to join Bin Laden in Afghanistan whereas EIG remained behind, glued to its base of popular support in Upper Egypt. [2] The hostile reaction of the local population to the 1997 massacre of 58 tourists

in Luxor, and the subsequent government crackdown and economic downturn, effectively halted EIG's ability to mount military operations. By contrast, Zawahiri continues to urge Jihadists everywhere to inflict the greatest possible damage and cause the maximum casualties on the West, regardless of the immediate consequences.

Unconstrained by concrete concerns for what will happen to any population that supports them, uprooted Jihadists can seriously imagine fulfillment of their apocalyptic vision. But it is nonsense to claim that al-Qaeda and its sympathizers have no morality and simply want to annihilate Western civilization. In general, charges of "nihilism" against an adversary usually reflect the willful ignorance of those leveling the charge regarding their adversary's moral framework.

Current risk management approaches to countering terrorism often assume adversaries model the world on the basis of rational choices that are commensurable across cultures. But for the would-be martyrs I have interviewed it often doesn't matter that others will reap the rewards of their sacrifice. Neither does it seem to matter for those who issue religious edicts (fatwahs) condoning Jihadist martyrdom if the martyr kills thousands of foes or no one but himself – he will attain Paradise just the same. When I ask questions of the sort: "So what if your family were to be killed in retaliation for your action?" or "What if your father were dying and your mother found out your plans for a martyrdom attack and asked you to delay until the family could get back on its feet?" To a person the would-be suicide bombers I interview answer along the lines that there is duty to family and duty to God but duty to the latter cannot be postponed. Such answers, if sincere (and I have little doubt they are), suggest that devotional values are not very sensitive to standard calculations of cost and benefit, to quantity or to tradeoffs across different moral and cultural frameworks. This means that traditional calculations of how to defeat or deter an enemy (for example by eliminating top operatives or threatening destruction of supporting populations) may not succeed.

The Jihadist Diaspora: Rootless and Dynamic

Many of the most effective and enduring terrorist movements of modern times originated with, and have been sustained by, diaspora communities, often led by student immigrants who later import radical ideology and terrorist methods into the national movements of their home territories. Examples include the anarchist "Black Hand," the Boston-bred IRA, the PLO's exile leadership, and the British Commonwealth's Tamil Tiger support groups. Similarly, for al-Qaeda and the global Jihadist network that claims inspiration from it, over 80% of known activists live in diaspora communities. [3]

Arguably the greatest potential terrorist threat in the world today lies with uprooted and egalitarian Muslim young adults in European cities, who provided the manpower for both the 9/11 and Madrid train-bombing attacks. Immigrant integration into European societies has always been more difficult than in America, being more state-driven and "top down" than community-based and "bottom up." In Europe "multiculturalism" is taken not as valuing diversity but as a sign of withdrawal – an attempt to create alien entities between the individual and state. [4] There is no indication that any rival to Jihadism's uncompromising vision of a fair and just society – which debriefings show clearly motivate these people - is being conveyed to would-be Jihadist youth in Europe.

The European Union's increasingly open society is currently more favorable to far-flung networking among Jihadists than to an efficient coordination among different government services that remain hidebound to national territories and politics, and to professional hierarchies and traditional languages. The steep decline in birth rate among native Europeans, which is highest in southern European countries most accessible to immigration from North Africa and the Middle East, and rising need for immigrant labor will only exacerbate the problem.

'The Virtual Hand' of Global Jihad

Despite claims to the contrary, there is no longer the controlling agency of the al-Qaeda leadership to target, which seems to be operationally near dead: remnants of the mostly Egyptian hardcore around Bin Laden have not managed an attack in over two years, don't know who many of the new terrorists are, and can't communicate secretly with those they do know. Instead, groups of friends and family originating from the same area "back home" in North Africa or the Middle East, or from similar European housing projects and marginal neighborhoods, bond into action as they surf Jihadist websites on the internet to find direction from al-Qaeda's

inspiration.

Analyzing case studies of nearly 500 globally-networked Jihadists (again, over 80% live in diaspora communities) University of Pennsylvania forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman, a former intelligence case officer who ran operations during the Afghan-Soviet War, finds that the social networks of these hard-to-penetrate militant groups are composed of about 20% kin and 70% friends (who tend to become kin over time through intermarriage). [5] Most operational cells of Jihadists have only a few members – cells of eight members seem to be the mode. Although the members of each cell usually show remarkable in-group homogeneity (age, birthplace, residence, education, socio-economic status, food likings etc.) there is little homogeneity across the Jihadist diaspora (which renders attempts at profiling global Jihadists worthless). Cells are often spontaneously formed and self-mobilizing, with few direct physical contacts to other cells.

But radicalization usually requires outside input from, and interaction with, the larger Jihadist community. Radicalization is proceeding apace with exponential growth in internet connections (in the last five years active Jihadist websites has increased from 14 to over 4000). Personal bonds formed without physical contact on the internet appear to generate solid reputations for trustworthiness [6] and all the deep commitment that physical intimacy does, but often faster and over a wider set of personal relations.

Thus, a self-organized group of friends, like the would-be Madrid bomber plotters, may read an internet text, like "Iraqi Jihad" that suggests bombing Spanish trains to force that country's withdrawal from the US-led coalition in Iraq. Chatting with like-minded Jihadists on the web, the group of friends metamorphoses into a Jihadist cell and – in just a few weeks – an "amateur" plot is hatched and devastatingly executed (unlike the 5 years or so it took al-Qaeda to plan and execute 9-11). [7] The fact that all of the plotters are caught or blow themselves up may have no effect on the ability of other groups to self-organize and remain motivated for another attack.

A new and vibrant Jihadist "market" is emerging, which is decentralized, self-organizing and self-adjusting. How do we deal with the "virtual hand" that regulates this growing world exchange? Raw police force and military power likely won't do the trick but only generate more protean forms of the Jihadist hydra.

Responses from the intelligence community are also not encouraging. The CIA's new director Porter Goss, in his inaugural appearance before Congress, simply reaffirmed the misleading impression that some specific group called "al-Qaeda" is out there planning bigger and better attacks, with the inference that hammering al- Qaeda should remain the principal occupation of America's "war on terror." And the best that people who advise the intelligence community seem to come up with for preventing another 9/11 or Madrid attack is to better combine "the three methodologies" that are almost guaranteed failures for anticipating catastrophic events: pattern projection, frequency and probability. [8] Tinkering with broken pots is not the answer.

"It won't help matters to have a National Intelligence Director whose job is to prepare briefs to bring to the President every day or simply to coordinate intelligence products," former Attorney General Edwin Meese recently commented; "what we could use is a facilitator to bring people and ideas together, not another operative." [9] Indeed, given the novel and peculiar nature of the threat before us, what has been proposed and is currently being implemented – ever more hierarchical command and control - may be precisely the wrong way to go. What is needed is deployment of more diverse talent and flexible tools to grapple the variable and virtual hand of global network Jihad.

Scott Atran is director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, and Professor of anthropology and psychology at the University of Michigan.

Notes:

1. For an extreme example of convergence, compare Ayman al-Zawahiri's Knights Under the Prophet's Banner [trans. Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, London, December 2, 2001, available at www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ayman_bk.html] and the works of White Supremacist ideologue William Pierce: for example, The Turner Diaries (National Alliance, Washington, DC, 1978), which ends with the hero ploughing his jet into the Pentagon on a successful suicide mission; also Pierce's analysis of the 9/11 attacks being carried out for the right reasons by the wrong people, Free Speech 7, November 2001, available at www.natvan.com/free-speech/fs0111c.html.

2. Marc Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004).

3. Robert Leiken, Bearers of Global Jihad? Immigration and National Security after 9/11, Nixon Center Monograph, March 25, 2004, p. 6; available at www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/Leiken_Bearers_of_Global_Jihad.pdf.

4. Oliver Roy, Globalized Islam (Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 2004).

5. Marc Sageman, Presentation to the World Federation of Scientists Permanent Monitoring Panel on Terrorism, Erice, Sicily, and personal communication, May 7, 2005.

6. Paul Resnick, Richard Zeckhauser, "Trust among Strangers in Internet Interactions," In Michael Baye (ed.), Advances in Applied Microeconomics, Vol. 11 (Elsevier Science, Amsterdam, 2002).

7. Comisiones de investigación sobre el 11 de marzo de 2004, Congreso de los Deputados, Madrid, Session 13, 19 July 2004 and Session 30, 15 November 2004; available at www.losgenoveses.net/11M/CI_007.pdf and www.losgenoveses.net/11M/CI_017.pdf. Testimony before Spain's 11-M commission reveals failures of intelligence and imagination similar to those involved in 9/11.

8. Glen Segell, "Intelligence Methodologies Applicable to the Madrid Train Bombings, 2004," International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, vol. 18, pp. 221-238 (2005).

9. Edwin Meese, Remarks to the Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG), University of Virginia, Charlottesville, April 3, 2004; and personal communication, April 6, 2005.

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