

The Protean Enemy

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WHAT'S NEXT FROM AL QAEDA?

Having suffered the destruction of its sanctuary in Afghanistan two years ago, al Qaeda's already decentralized organization has become more decentralized still. The group's leaders have largely dispersed to Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere around the world (only a few still remain in Afghanistan's lawless border regions). And with many of the planet's intelligence agencies now focusing on destroying its network, al Qaeda's ability to carry out large-scale attacks has been degraded.

Yet despite these setbacks, al Qaeda and its affiliates remain among the most significant threats to U.S. national security today. In fact, according to George Tenet, the CIA's director, they will continue to be this dangerous for the next two to five years. An alleged al Qaeda spokesperson has warned that the group is planning another strike similar to those of September 11. On May 12, simultaneous bombings of three housing complexes in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, killed at least 29 people and injured over 200, many of them Westerners. Intelligence officials in the United States, Europe, and Africa report that al Qaeda has stepped up its recruitment drive in response to the war in Iraq. And the target audience for its recruitment has also changed. They are now younger, with an even more "menacing attitude," as France's top investigative judge on terrorism-related cases, Jean-Louis Bruguiere, describes them. More of them are converts to Islam. And more of them are women.

What accounts for al Qaeda's ongoing effectiveness in the face of an unprecedented onslaught? The answer lies in the organization's remarkably protean nature. Over its life span, al Qaeda has constantly evolved and shown a surprising willingness to adapt its mission. This capacity for change has consistently made the group more appealing to recruits, attracted surprising new allies, and -- most worrisome from a Western perspective -- made it harder to detect and destroy. Unless Washington and its allies show a similar adaptability, the war on terrorism won't be won anytime soon, and the death toll is likely to mount.

MALLEABLE MISSIONS

Why do religious terrorists kill? In interviews over the last five years, many terrorists and their supporters have suggested to me that people first join such groups to make the world a better place -- at least for the particular populations they aim to serve. Over time, however, militants have told me, terrorism can become a career as much as a passion. Leaders harness humiliation and anomie and turn them into weapons. Jihad becomes addictive, militants report, and with some individuals or groups -- the "professional" terrorists -- grievances can evolve into greed: for money, political power, status, or attention.

In such "professional" terrorist groups, simply perpetuating their cadres becomes a central goal, and what started out as a moral crusade becomes a sophisticated organization. Ensuring the survival of the group demands flexibility in many areas, but especially in terms of mission. Objectives thus evolve in a variety of ways. Some groups find a new cause once their first one is achieved -- much as the March of Dimes broadened its mission from finding a cure for polio to fighting birth defects after the Salk vaccine was developed. Other groups broaden their goals in order to attract a wider variety of recruits. Still other organizations transform themselves into profit-driven organized criminals, or form alliances with groups that have ideologies different from their own, forcing both to adapt. Some terrorist groups hold fast to their original missions. But only the spry survive.

Consider, for example, Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). EIJ's original objective was to fight the oppressive, secular rulers of Egypt and turn the country into an Islamic state. But the group fell on hard times after its leader, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, was imprisoned in the United States and other EIJ leaders were killed or forced into exile. Thus in the early 1990s, Ayman al-Zawahiri decided to shift the group's sights from its "near enemy" -- the secular rulers of Egypt -- to the "far enemy," namely the United States and other Western countries. Switching goals in this way allowed the group to align itself with another terrorist aiming to attack the West and able to provide a significant influx of cash: Osama bin Laden. In return for bin Laden's financial assistance, Zawahiri provided some 200 loyal, disciplined, and well-trained followers, who became the core of al Qaeda's leadership.

A second group that has changed its mission over time to secure a more reliable source of funding is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which, like EIJ, eventually joined forces with the Taliban and al Qaeda. The IMU's original mission was to topple Uzbekistan's corrupt and repressive post-Soviet dictator, Islam Karimov. Once the IMU formed an alliance with the Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar, however, it began promoting the Taliban's anti-American and anti-Western agenda, also condemning music, cigarettes, sex, and alcohol. This new puritanism reduced its appeal among its original, less-ideological supporters in Uzbekistan -- one downside to switching missions.

Even Osama bin Laden himself has changed his objectives over time. The Saudi terrorist inherited an organization devoted to fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan. But he turned it into a flexible group of ruthless warriors ready to fight on behalf of multiple causes. His first call to holy war, issued in 1992, urged believers to kill American soldiers in Saudi Arabia and the Horn of Africa but barely mentioned Palestine. The second, issued in 1996, was a 40-page document listing atrocities and injustices committed against Muslims, mainly by Western powers. With the release of his third manifesto in February 1998, however, bin Laden began urging his followers to start deliberately targeting American civilians, rather than soldiers. (Some al Qaeda members were reportedly distressed by this shift to civilian targets and left the group.) Although this third declaration mentioned the Palestinian struggle, it was still only one among a litany of grievances. Only in bin Laden's fourth call to arms -- issued to the al Jazeera network on October 7, 2001, to coincide with the U.S. aerial bombardment of Afghanistan -- did he emphasize Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands and the suffering of Iraqi children under un sanctions, concerns broadly shared in the Islamic world. By extending his appeal, bin Laden sought to turn the war on terrorism into a war between all of Islam and the West. The events of September 11,

he charged, split the world into two camps -- believers and infidels -- and the time had come for "every Muslim to defend his religion."

One of the masterminds of the September 11 attacks, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, later described violence as "the tax" that Muslims must pay "for gaining authority on earth." This comment points to yet another way that al Qaeda's ends have mutated over the years. In his putative autobiography, Zawahiri calls the "New World Order" a source of humiliation for Muslims. It is better, he says, for the youth of Islam to carry arms and defend their religion with pride and dignity than to submit to this humiliation. One of al Qaeda's aims in fighting the West, in other words, has become to restore the dignity of humiliated young Muslims. This idea is similar to the anticolonialist theoretician Frantz Fanon's notion that violence is a "cleansing force" that frees oppressed youth from "inferiority complexes," "despair," and "inaction," making them fearless and restoring their self-respect. The real target audience of violent attacks is therefore not necessarily the victims and their sympathizers, but the perpetrators and their sympathizers. Violence becomes a way to bolster support for the organization and the movement it represents. Hence, among the justifications for "special operations" listed in al Qaeda's terrorist manual are "bringing new members to the organization's ranks" and "boosting Islamic morale and lowering that of the enemy." The United States may have become al Qaeda's principal enemy, but raising the morale of Islamist fighters and their sympathizers is now one of its principal goals.

FRIENDS OF CONVENIENCE

Apart from the flexibility of its mission, another explanation for al Qaeda's remarkable staying power is its willingness to forge broad -- and sometimes unlikely -- alliances. In an effort to expand his network, bin Laden created the International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders (IIF) in February 1998. In addition to bin Laden and EIJ's Zawahiri, members included the head of Egypt's Gama'a al Islamiya, the secretary-general of the Pakistani religious party known as the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (jui), and the head of Bangladesh's Jihad Movement. Later, the IIF was expanded to include the Pakistani jihadi organizations Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, the last an anti-Shi'a sectarian party. Senior al Qaeda lieutenant Abu Zubaydah was captured at a Lashkar-e-Taiba safe house in Faisalabad in March 2002, suggesting that some of Lashkar-e-Taiba's members are facilitating and assisting the movement of al Qaeda members in Pakistan. And Indian sources claim that Lashkar-e-Taiba is now trying to play a role similar to that once played by al Qaeda itself, coordinating and in some cases funding pro-bin Laden networks, especially in Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf.

In addition to its formal alliances through the IIF, bin Laden's organization has also nurtured ties and now works closely with a variety of still other groups around the world, including Ansar al Islam, based mainly in Iraq and Europe; Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia; Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines; and many Pakistani jihadi groups. In some cases, al Qaeda has provided these allies with funding and direction. In others, the groups have shared camps, operatives, and logistics. Some "franchise groups," such as Jemaah Islamiyah, have raised money for joint operations with al Qaeda.

Perhaps most surprising (and alarming) is the increasing evidence that al Qaeda, a Sunni organization, is now cooperating with the Shi'a group Hezbollah, considered to be the most sophisticated terrorist group in the world. Hezbollah, which enjoys backing from Syria and Iran, is based in southern Lebanon and in the lawless "triborder" region of South America, where Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina meet. The group has also maintained a fundraising presence in the United States since the 1980s. According to the CIA's Tenet, however, the group has lately stepped up its U.S. activities and was recently spotted "casing and surveilling American facilities." Although low-level cooperation between al Qaeda and Hezbollah has been evident for some time -- their logistical cooperation was revealed in the trial of al Qaeda operatives involved in the 1998 embassy bombing attacks in east Africa -- the two groups have formed a much closer relationship since al Qaeda was evicted from its base in Afghanistan. Representatives of the two groups have lately met up in Lebanon, Paraguay, and an unidentified African country. According to a report in Israel's Ha'aretz newspaper, Imad Mughniyah, who directs Hezbollah in the triborder area, has also been appointed by Iran to coordinate the group's activities with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The triborder region of South America has become the world's new Libya, a place where terrorists with widely disparate ideologies -- Marxist Colombian rebels, American white supremacists, Hamas, Hezbollah, and others -- meet to swap tradecraft. Authorities now worry that the more sophisticated groups will invite the American radicals to help them. Moneys raised for terrorist organizations in the United States are often funneled through Latin America, which has also become an important stopover point for operatives entering the United States. Reports that Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez is allowing Colombian rebels and militant Islamist groups to operate in his country are meanwhile becoming more credible, as are claims that Venezuela's Margarita Island has become a terrorist haven.

As these developments suggest and Tenet confirms, "mixing and matching of capabilities, swapping of training, and the use of common facilities" have become the hallmark of professional terrorists today. This fact has been borne out by the leader of a Pakistani jihadi group affiliated with al Qaeda, who recently told me that informal contacts between his group and Hezbollah, Hamas, and others have become common. Operatives with particular skills loan themselves out to different groups, with expenses being covered by the charities that formed to fund the fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration's claims that al Qaeda cooperated with the "infidel" (read: secular) Saddam Hussein while he was still in office are now also gaining support, and from a surprising source. Hamid Mir, bin Laden's "official biographer" and an analyst for al Jazeera, spent two weeks filming in Iraq during the war. Unlike most reporters, Mir wandered the country freely and was not embedded with U.S. troops. He reports that he has "personal knowledge" that one of Saddam's intelligence operatives, Farooq Hijazi, tried to contact bin Laden in Afghanistan as early as 1998. At that time, bin Laden was publicly still quite critical of the Iraqi leader, but he had become far more circumspect by November 2001, when Mir interviewed him for the third time. Mir also reports that he met a number of Hezbollah operatives while in Iraq and was taken to a recruitment center there.

NEW-STYLE NETWORKS

Al Qaeda seems to have learned that in order to evade detection in the West, it must adopt some of the qualities of a "virtual network": a style of organization used by American right-wing extremists for operating in environments (such as the United States) that have effective law enforcement agencies. American antigovernment groups refer to this style as "leaderless resistance." The idea was popularized by Louis Beam, the self-described ambassador-at-large, staff propagandist, and "computer terrorist to the Chosen" for Aryan Nations, an American neo-Nazi group. Beam writes that hierarchical organization is extremely dangerous for insurgents, especially in "technologically advanced societies where electronic surveillance can often penetrate the structure, revealing its chain of command." In leaderless organizations, however, "individuals and groups operate independently of each other, and never report to a central headquarters or single leader for direction or instruction, as would those who belong to a typical pyramid organization." Leaders do not issue orders or pay operatives; instead, they inspire small cells or individuals to take action on their own initiative.

Lone-wolf terrorists typically act out of a mixture of ideology and personal grievances. For example, Mir Aimal Kansi, the Pakistani national who shot several CIA employees in 1993, described his actions as "between jihad and tribal revenge" - jihad against America for its support of Israel and revenge against the CIA, which he apparently felt had mistreated his father during Afghanistan's war against the Soviets. Meanwhile, John Allen Muhammad, one of the alleged "Washington snipers," reportedly told a friend that he endorsed the September 11 attacks and disapproved of U.S. policy toward Muslim states, but he appears to have been principally motivated by anger at his ex-wife for keeping him from seeing their children, and some of his victims seem to have been personal enemies. As increasingly powerful weapons become more and more available, lone wolves, who face few political constraints, will become more of a threat, whatever their primary motivation.

The Internet has also greatly facilitated the spread of "virtual" subcultures and has substantially increased the capacity of loosely networked terrorist organizations. For example, Beam's essay on the virtues of "leaderless resistance" has long been available on the Web and, according to researcher Michael Reynolds, has been highlighted by radical Muslim sites. Islamist Web sites also offer on-line training courses in the production of explosives and urge visitors to take action on their own. The "encyclopedia of jihad," parts of which are available on-line, provides instructions for creating "clandestine activity cells," with units for intelligence, supply, planning and preparation, and implementation.

The obstacles these Web sites pose for Western law enforcement are obvious. In one article on the "culture of jihad" available on-line, a Saudi Islamist urges bin Laden's sympathizers to take action without waiting for instructions. "I do not need to meet the Sheikh and ask his permission to carry out some operation," he writes, "the same as I do not need permission to pray, or to think about killing the Jews and the Crusaders that gather on our lands." Nor does it make any difference whether bin Laden is alive or dead: "There are a thousand bin Ladens in this nation. We should not abandon our way, which the Sheikh has paved for you, regardless of the existence of the Sheikh or his absence." And according to U.S. government officials, al Qaeda now uses chat rooms to recruit Latino Muslims with U.S. passports, in the belief that they will arouse less suspicion as operatives than would Arab-Americans. Finally, as the late neo-Nazi William Pierce once told me, using the Web to recruit

"leaderless resisters" offers still another advantage: it attracts better-educated young people than do more traditional methods, such as radio programs.

Already the effects of these leaderless cells have been felt. In February 2002, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the British national who was recently sentenced to death for his involvement in the abduction and murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, warned his Pakistani interrogators that they would soon confront the threat of small cells, working independently of the known organizations that Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had vowed to shut down. Sure enough, soon after Omar Sheikh made this threat, unidentified terrorists killed 5 people in an Islamabad church known to be frequented by U.S. embassy personnel, and another group killed 11 French military personnel in Karachi in May. And in July, still other unidentified terrorists detonated a truck bomb at the entrance of the U.S. consulate in Karachi, killing 12 Pakistanis.

JOINING THE FAMILY

Virtual links are only part of the problem; terrorists, including members of bin Laden's IIF, have also started to forge ties with traditional organized crime groups, especially in India. One particularly troubling example is the relationship established between Omar Sheikh and an ambitious Indian gangster named Aftab Ansari. Asif Reza Khan, the "chief executive" for Ansari's Indian operations, told interrogators that he received military training at a camp in Khost, Afghanistan, belonging to Lashkar-e-Taiba, and that "leaders of different militant outfits in Pakistan were trying to use his network for the purpose of jihad, whereas [Ansari] was trying to use the militants' networks for underworld operations."

Khan told his interrogators that the don provided money and hideouts to his new partners, in one case transferring \$100,000 to Omar Sheikh -- money that Omar Sheikh, in turn, wired to Muhammad Atta, the lead hijacker in the September 11 attacks. According to Khan, Ansari viewed the \$100,000 gift as an "investment" in a valuable relationship.

Still another set of unlikely links has sprung up in American prisons, where Saudi charities now fund organizations that preach radical Islam. According to Warith Deen Umar, who hired most of the Muslim chaplains currently active in New York State prisons, prisoners who are recent Muslim converts are natural recruits for Islamist organizations. Umar, incidentally, told The Wall Street Journal that the September 11 hijackers should be honored as martyrs, and he traveled to Saudi Arabia twice as part of an outreach program designed to spread Salafism (a radical Muslim movement) in U.S. prisons.

Another organization now active in U.S. prisons is Jamaat ul-Fuqra, a terrorist group committed to purifying Islam through violence. (Daniel Pearl was abducted and murdered in Pakistan while attempting to interview the group's leader, Sheikh Gilani, to investigate the claim that Richard Reid -- who attempted to blow up an international flight with explosives hidden in his shoes -- was acting under Gilani's orders.) The group functions much like a cult in the United States; members live in poverty in compounds, some of which are heavily armed. Its members have been convicted of fraud, murder, and several bombings, but so far, most of their crimes have been relatively small scale. Clement Rodney Hampton-El, however, convicted of participating with Omar Abdel Rahman in a 1993 plot to blow up New York City

landmarks, was linked to the group, and U.S. law enforcement authorities worry that the Fuqra has since come under the influence of al Qaeda.

Still another surprising source of al Qaeda recruits is Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), a revivalist organization that aims at creating better Muslims through "spiritual jihad": good deeds, contemplation, and proselytizing. According to the historian Barbara Metcalf, TJ has traditionally functioned as a self-help group, much like Alcoholics Anonymous, and most specialists claim that it is no more prone to violence than are the Seventh-Day Adventists, with whom TJ is frequently compared. But several Americans known to have trained in al Qaeda camps were brought to Southwest Asia by TJ and appear to have been recruited into jihadi organizations while traveling under TJ auspices. For example, Jose Padilla (an American now being held as an "enemy combatant" for planning to set off a "dirty" radiological bomb in the United States) was a member of TJ, as were Richard Reid and John Walker Lindh (the so-called American Taliban). According to prosecutors, the "Lackawanna Six" group (an alleged al Qaeda sleeper cell from a Buffalo, New York, suburb) similarly first went to Pakistan to receive TJ religious training before proceeding to the al Farooq training camp in Afghanistan. A Pakistani TJ member told me that jihadi groups openly recruit at the organization's central headquarters in Raiwind, Pakistan, including at the mosque. And TJ members in Boston say that a lot of Muslims end up treating the group, which is now active in American inner cities and prisons, as a gateway to jihadi organizations.

As such evidence suggests, although it may have been founded to create better individuals, TJ has produced offshoots that have evolved into more militant outfits. In October 1995, Pakistani authorities uncovered a military plot to assassinate Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and establish a theocracy. Most of the officers involved in the attempted coup were members of TJ. The group is said to have been strongly influenced by retired Lieutenant General Javed Nasir, who served as Pakistan's intelligence chief from 1990 to 1993 but was sacked under pressure from the United States for his support of militant Islamists around the world.

Totalitarian Islamist revivalism has become the ideology of the dystopian new world order. In an earlier era, radicals might have described their grievances through other ideological lenses, perhaps anarchism, Marxism, or Nazism. Today they choose extreme Islamism.

Radical transnational Islam, divorced from its countries of origin, appeals to some jobless youths in depressed parts of Europe and the United States. As the French scholar Olivier Roy points out, leaders of radical Islamic groups often come from the middle classes, many of them having trained in technical fields, but their followers tend to be working-class dropouts.

Focusing on economic and social alienation may help explain why such a surprising array of groups has proved willing to join forces with al Qaeda. Some white supremacists and extremist Christians applaud al Qaeda's rejectionist goals and may eventually contribute to al Qaeda missions. Already a Swiss neo-Nazi named Albert Huber has called for his followers to join forces with Islamists. Indeed, Huber sat on the board of directors of the Bank al Taqwa, which the U.S. government accuses of being a major donor to al Qaeda. Meanwhile, Matt Hale, leader of the white-supremacist World Church of the Creator, has published a book indicting Jews and Israelis as the real culprits behind the attacks of September 11. These groups, along

with Horst Mahler (a founder of the radical leftist German group the Red Army Faction), view the September 11 attacks as the first shot in a war against globalization, a phenomenon that they fear will exterminate national cultures. Leaderless resisters drawn from the ranks of white supremacists or other groups are not currently capable of carrying out massive attacks on their own, but they may be if they join forces with al Qaeda.

MODERN METHODOLOGY

Al Qaeda has lately adopted innovative tactics as well as new alliances. Two new approaches are particularly alarming to intelligence officials: efforts to use surface-to-air missiles to shoot down aircraft and attempts to acquire chemical, nuclear, or biological weapons.

In November 2002, terrorists launched two shoulder-fired SA-7 missiles at an Israeli passenger jet taking off from Mombasa, Kenya, with 271 passengers on board. Investigators say that the missiles came from the same batch as those used in an earlier, also unsuccessful attack on a U.S. military jet in Saudi Arabia. And intelligence officials believe that Hezbollah contacts were used to smuggle the missiles into Kenya from Somalia.

Meanwhile, according to Barton Gellman of The Washington Post, documents seized in Pakistan in March 2003 reveal that al Qaeda has acquired the necessary materials for producing botulinum and salmonella toxins and the chemical agent cyanide -- and is close to developing a workable plan for producing anthrax, a far more lethal agent. Even more worrisome is the possibility that al Qaeda, perhaps working with Hezbollah or other terrorist groups, will recruit scientists with access to sophisticated nuclear or biological weapons programs, possibly, but not necessarily, ones that are state-run.

To fight such dangerous tactics, Western governments will also need to adapt. In addition to military, intelligence, and law enforcement responses, Washington should start thinking about how U.S. policies are perceived by potential recruits to terrorist organizations. The United States too often ignores the unintended consequences of its actions, disregarding, for example, the negative message sent by Washington's ongoing neglect of Afghanistan and of the chaos in postwar Iraq. If the United States allows Iraq to become another failed state, groups both inside and outside the country that support al Qaeda's goals will benefit.

Terrorists, after all, depend on the broader population for support, and the right U.S. policies could do much to diminish the appeal of rejectionist groups. It does not make sense in such an atmosphere to keep U.S. markets closed to Pakistani textiles or to insist on protecting intellectual property with regard to drugs that needy populations in developing countries cannot hope to afford.

In countries where extremist religious schools promote terrorism, Washington should help develop alternative schools rather than attempt to persuade the local government to shut down radical madrasahs. In Pakistan, many children end up at extremist schools because their parents cannot afford the alternatives; better funding for secular education could therefore make a positive difference.

The appeal of radical Islam to alienated youth living in the West is perhaps an even more difficult problem to address. Uneasiness with liberal values, discomfort with uncertain identities, and resentment of the privileged are perennial problems in modern societies. What is new today is that radical leaders are using the tools of globalization to construct new, transnational identities based on death cults, turning grievances and alienation into powerful weapons. To fight these tactics will require getting the input not just of moderate Muslims, but of radical Islamist revivalists who oppose violence.

To prevent terrorists from acquiring new weapons, meanwhile, Western governments must make it harder for radicals to get their hands on them. Especially important is the need to continue upgrading security at vulnerable nuclear sites, many of which, in Russia and other former Soviet states, are still vulnerable to theft. The global system of disease monitoring -- a system sorely tested during the sars epidemic - - should also be upgraded, since biological attacks may be difficult to distinguish from natural outbreaks. Only by matching the radical innovation shown by professional terrorists such as al Qaeda -- and by showing a similar willingness to adapt and adopt new methods and new ways of thinking -- can the United States and its allies make themselves safe from the ongoing threat of terrorist attack.