

International Terrorism

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Introduction

The attacks that were directed against the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11 graphically underscore the danger that terrorism poses to global stability and security, highlighting several pertinent features in the way this particular form of violence is evolving in the contemporary era. In particular, they reflect:

- a general trend towards greater lethality;
- bear in on al-Qaeda as a new model for international terrorism;
- bring renewed focus to weapons of mass destruction terrorism;
- and underscore the emergence of Afghanistan as one of the principal hubs of international terrorism during the last six years.

This article¹ briefly reviews each these facets, concluding with some of the main policy challenges that will confront the United States in seeking to control and mitigate the religious extremism currently emanating out of South Asia.

The growing Lethality of International Terrorism

The events of September 11 have, in the most dramatic of ways, highlight-

ed the growing lethality of contemporary international terrorism. Although there has been a steady decline in the number of attacks over the last decade, the *number of casualties per incident* has significantly increased. Between 1995 and 2000, for instance, global terrorism accounted for 19,422 deaths and injuries around the world. This figure equates to more than three quarters (78 percent) the total number of casualties recorded during the entire 22 year period from 1968 to 1989.²

One merely has to look at the scale and dimensions of some of the attacks that have occurred since the end of the Cold War to gain an appreciation of just how destructive international terrorism has become in the modern era. Prominent examples would include:

- The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York (6 dead, 1000 injured).
- The 1994: bombing of a Jewish community Center in Argentina (95 dead, over 200 injured).
- The 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers military housing complex in Saudi Arabia (19 dead, more than 500 injured).
- The 1996 bombing of the Sri Lankan Central Bank building in Colombo (100 dead, over 1400 wounded).
- The 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (240 dead, 1700 wounded).
- The 2001 suicide strikes against the World Trade Center and Pentagon in New York and Washington (over 4,000 killed).³

These attacks underscore one basic point: we can no longer rely on terrorists to draw the line at mass, indiscriminate murder, a lesson that became painfully clear with the 4000 plus people who were killed in the simultaneous assaults launched against the World Trade Center and Pentagon.⁴ Terrorists, it would seem, are no longer interested at merely securing a place at the negotiating table. Rather they want to blow the table up and seek to destroy everyone seated around it.

Al-Qaeda as a new model for International Terrorism

The strikes against New York and Washington have highlighted a new type of international terrorist 'actor' in the guise of *al-Qaeda* (literally the 'Base') – an amorphous network that operates both independently as well as through an interlocking complex of overseas terrorist organizations and cells that currently link extremists in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Although *al-Qaeda* is sustained out of Afghanistan, it has no territorial base per se, exhibiting an ability and willingness to act on a truly global level.

Indeed since 1998, the organization has been connected to bombings and attempted attacks in, amongst others, Kenya, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, the United States, Italy, Indonesia, the Philippines and South Africa.

Al-Qaeda makes extensive use of information technology (IT), includ-

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ing the internet, cell phones and satellite transmissions, both as a medium of communication and a tool of propaganda. It not only allows the organization to operate on a global scale, it also precludes the need for a physical structure. This latter aspect has greatly compounded the difficulty of actually tracking and monitoring *al-Qaeda*, which has undermined the ability of law enforcement and intelligence to gain an accurate picture of its true intentions, dimensions and capabilities. Arguably, this was reflected by the totally unexpected ferocity of the attacks on September 11.⁵

Virtually all of *al-Qaeda's* aggression is directed toward the United States, Washington's western allies and 'un-Islamic' regimes that are deemed as morally bankrupt and complicit in suppressing traditional Muslim values and culture. In 1998, *al-Qaeda* set

out in the most explicit of terms its anti-western agenda when, under the auspices of the International Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders, it issued a general *fatwa* affirming the

*killings of Americans and their civilian and military allies is a religious duty for each and every Muslim to be carried out in whichever country they are until Al Mosque has been liberated from their grasp and until their armies have left Muslim lands.*⁶

The operational modalities of *al-Qaeda* bear heavily on a number of prominent transnational issues, many of which constitute significant threats to national, regional and global stability in their own right. Notable examples include weapons trafficking, people smuggling, money laundering and drug smuggling (particularly

opium and refined heroin out of Afghanistan). This aspect of the *al-Qaeda* network is particularly important as it means that we can no longer view international terrorism as an issue in its own right – it has to be seen in a wider transnational context that bears in on, and contributes to a whole range of non-governmental processes and influences. Failing to appreciate this reality not only risks distorting the nature of international terrorism as it is developing in the modern era; more importantly, it risks severely under-estimating its true disruptive potential.

The question of Mass Destruction Terrorism

Concern about mass destruction terrorism has markedly increased since September 11 for three main reasons. First, the scale of the attacks is



1993: eerste aanslag op WTC



1998: aanslag op Amerikaanse ambassade in Nairobi

strongly indicative of a terrorist mindset that specifically seeks to kill en masse; chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) agents are perfectly suited to this purpose. Second, the nature and execution of the assaults exhibited both sophistication and innovation, two traits that are often emphasized as feeding into the operational predilections of groups to experiment with non-conventional weapons and tactics. Third, Bin Laden, himself, has repeatedly alluded to a desire to use CBRN as part of his global jihad against the west and has, indeed, explicitly sanctioned their acquisition as a religious duty.

Actually carrying out a true act of mass destruction terrorism, however, would be extremely difficult requiring expertise and finances that is almost certainly beyond the means of known terrorist groups, *al-Qaeda* included. The best indication of this is

provided by *Aum Shinriyko* – a group that was unprecedented in terrorist terms, both in the level of technological skill it could draw on and the fiscal assets at its disposal. *Aum* devoted five years and in excess of 30 million dollar to developing a viable chem-bio capability, yet failed on both counts. The most effective assault that it eventually managed to execute was the 1995 sarin nerve gas release in Tokyo, which resulted in the deaths of only 12 people despite being carried out on the world's busiest subway at the height of the morning rush hour.⁷

Terrorists, like bodies of running water, almost always opt for the course of least resistance, choosing tried and tested methods whose consequences are both known and can be easily reasonably accurately predicted. It is far easier and cheaper to kill en masse with improvised or augmented conventional means than try-

ing to do so with more exotic CBRN devices. Hence the operational track record of terrorists – the gun and the bomb – and the choice of tactics used on September 11.

This being said, one should not discount the possibility of lesser consequence CBRN attacks being carried out to cause mass panic and disruption. Small-scale bio assaults would suit this purpose, something that has been well exemplified by the post-September 11 anthrax cases in New York and Washington, as would the release of a viral agent against agricultural livestock. The 2001 foot and mouth outbreak in the United Kingdom certainly illustrates the enormous socio-economic and political damage that could result from an attack modality of this latter sort, the capability requirements for which are neither expensive nor particularly demanding.⁸

Afghanistan as a hub for International Terrorism

The attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon have graphically highlighted the critical role Afghanistan is currently playing as a hub for contemporary international terrorism. U.S. intelligence sources have identified at least a dozen prominent insurgent and terrorist training camps in Taliban-controlled territory, all of which have been the target of a sustained U.S. led bombing campaign initiated in reprisal for the strikes on September 11. Most of the facilities are located along the border with Pakistan, providing both refuge and subversive instruction. The main benefactors of these sites have been groups fighting in Kashmir, Central Asia and Iran although Chechens from Russia and Uighurs from China

are also thought to have passed through some of the camps. The Taliban has also actively engaged in a quasi-state form of power projection, supplying arms, money and other supplies in support of regional insurgencies in their own countries of origin.⁹

Afghanistan also constitutes the main operational headquarters of Bin Laden, who has been an official guest of the Taliban since 1996. This sanctuary has been critical to the development of the global *al-Qaeda* network, which the Saudi renegade heads in collaboration with two former leaders of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Ayman Zawahiri and Mohammed Atef.¹⁰ *Al-Qaeda* maintains at least six dedicated terrorist training camps in Afghanistan – at Khost, Mahavia, Kabul, Jalabad, Kunar and Kandahar – plus

two subsidiary depots in Tora Bora and Liza.¹¹

Several motivational factors appear to have encouraged Taliban backing for regional extremism and terrorism. Some of the more critical considerations in this regard appear to be:

- Self-interest – many of the groups that the Taliban supports provide fighters to assist in its on-going war effort against the Northern Alliance (NA), including, most notably, *al-Qaeda*,¹² the Islamic Movement for Uzbekistan (IMU)¹³ and several Kashmiri organizations such as *Laskar-e-Toiba* (LeT), *Harakat-ul-Mujahideen* (HuM) and *Jaish-e-Muhammad* (JeM).¹⁴
- Pan-Islamism, specifically the desire to propagate a fundamentalist



2001: aanslag op WTC

Wahabist-oriented revolution across South and Central Asia.¹⁵

- Revenge – the Taliban has been particularly active in backing militants in Iran, Russia, China and Uzbekistan, all states that have been in the forefront of resisting its claim to governance in Afghanistan.¹⁶
- Narcotics trafficking – a number of Taliban proxies play an important role in the international trafficking of Afghan heroin (profits from which constitute an important component of the movement's war chest), including the IMU, *Mujahideen-e-Kalq* (MEK), Chechens and Uighurs.¹⁷

For Bin Laden, support for international terrorism and extremism essentially reflects a desire to destroy Western hegemony and political leadership, both of which are viewed as evil aberrations that are preventing Islam from taking up its rightful position as the world's greatest and pre-eminent religious culture. Sponsoring global attacks against U.S. interests, Western allies and Muslim regimes infused with secular and modern values is regarded not only as necessary, but also a wholly just way of overcoming this adverse state of affairs.¹⁸

In pursuing this self-defined religious mission, Bin Laden has demonstrated a remarkable ability to bridge personal rivalries and ideological differences, creating a breadth of tactical connections that is unprecedented in the history of modern terrorism. It is the extent of this transnationalism that sets the Saudi renegade apart from

other exporters of cross-border violence and is one of the main factors accounting for the perceived strategic threat that he is seen to pose, not only to the United States, but to the international system in general.¹⁹

Conclusion: the United States the Challenge confronting the Afghan-connected

Several challenges will face the U.S. in confronting extremism emanating out of Afghanistan. First, Washington will need to engage countries that it has little direct experience of dealing with in terms of counter-terrorism or, indeed, collaborative foreign policy, including Russia, China, Iran and the Central Asian Republics. At the very least, new personal/agency working relationships will need to be established and modified intelligence modalities for information exchange instituted (particularly in the case of China, Russia and Iran). The United States will also need to become accustomed to working in unfamiliar multilateral counter-terrorism settings where its voice is likely to carry marginal weight relative to other states such as Russia and China.

Second, the U.S. need to come to grips with the fact that the policies of many of these governments have directly contributed to the growth of radical Islamic sentiment in this part of the world. This is true of China and Russia as well as several states in Central Asia – particularly Uzbekistan and, to a lesser extent, Krygzstan.

Third, the U.S. will need to formulate an effective policy for Pakistan, formerly one of the main supporters of the Taliban and, itself, a hotbed of Islamic radicalism. The challenge here will be to exert enough pressure on Islamabad to cut links with regional extremism – especially in the context of the Kashmiri conflict – without triggering a fundamentalist backlash and possible civil war in what remains a nuclear armed country.²⁰ Finally, Washington will need to develop a comprehensive policy for confronting the Taliban without creating an inherently unstable power vortex in Afghanistan. A prolonged period of institutional and governing uncertainty would not only re-create the type of internal chaos that spawned the radicalism of the past six years; it would also be sure to attract the attention of regional powers and possibly precipitate a highly dangerous grab for territory and influence among several nuclear-armed rivals.²¹

In sum, the changing locus of international terrorism will require some fundamental changes in U.S. counter-terrorism thinking and policy formulation. States with which Washington has comparatively little direct experience will need to be engaged; traditional assumptions about former allies and foes re-visited; and new knowledge and intelligence bases developed. Achieving these objectives will necessitate innovative, forward looking and politically dynamic responses that are both consistent yet flexible enough to meet the challenges of a rapidly developing world and overall geo-strategic terrorist environment.

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Noten

¹ This article is based on a presentation given in the Hague before the Royal Netherlands Society of Military Art and Science (KVBK) on October 29th, 2001.

² See U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2000* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, April 2001), Appendix C; and Peter Chalk, *West European Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: The Evolving Dynamic* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 173.

³ Peter Chalk, *Non-Military Security and Global Order: The Impact of Violence, Chaos and Extremism on National and International Stability* (London: Macmillan, 2000), add page number.

⁴ As bad as this death count was, it could have been far worse. Not only was one hijacking thwarted; had the Pentagon been struck in any other place, the entire structure could have been leveled (the corner of the building that was hit had just been reinforced).

⁵ See, for instance, Rohan Gunaratna, 'Blowback', *Jane's Intelligence Review* 13/8 (2001): 42-45; 'The Spider in the Web', *The Economist*, September 22, 2001; 'One Man and a Global Web of Violence', *The New York Times*, January 14, 2001; 'Borderless Network of Terror', *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2001.

⁶ See, for instance, *Responsibility for the Terrorist Atrocities in the United States, 11 September 2001*, statement by Prime Minister Tony Blair before the British Parliament, October 4, 2001. Accessed via <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/text/evidence.htm> 5; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban. Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 134; and 'The Spider in the Web', *The Economist*, September 22, 2001. The *fatwa* was signed and issued in Khost and is generally seen as one of the clearest statements of Bin Laden's anti-Western beliefs and global intentions.

⁷ For an excellent account of Aum Shinriyko and the 1995 sarin attack see David Kaplan, *The Cult at the End of the World. The Terrifying Story of the Aum Doomsday Cult*

from the Subways of Tokyo to the Nuclear Arsenal of Russia (New York: Crown Publishers, 1996).

⁸ The foot and mouth outbreak had a devastating impact on the UK economy, both directly as a result of containment, eradication and compensation costs (over 1 billion GBP has already been paid out in compensation costs) and losses accruing to directly and indirectly related industries (especially tourism). The epidemic also triggered considerable criticism against the Blair government, especially with regards the mass culling operations that were instituted to try and contain the disease's spread.

⁹ Author interview with French and Indian counter-terrorism intelligence officials, Paris and New Delhi, January-February, 2001. See also Shawn Howard, 'The Afghan Connection: Islamic Extremism in Central Asia', *National Security Studies Quarterly* (Summer 2000); Rashid, *Taliban. Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, chapter 6; 'Beijing Hopes to Gain from U.S. Raids on Afghanistan', *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 4, 2001; and 'Moscow Eager to Tie Rebels in Chechnya to Bin Laden', *The Washington Post*, 26 September, 2001.

¹⁰ Egyptian Islamic Jihad merged with *al-Qaeda* in 1998. The group was founded by Zawahiri and led in conjunction with Atef.

¹¹ See, for instance, Rashid, *Taliban. Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, chapter 10; Gunaratna, 'Blowback', 42-45; 'The Spider in the Web', *The Economist*, September 22, 2001; 'One Man and a Global Web of Violence', *The New York Times*, January 14, 2001; 'Borderless Network of Terror', *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2001.

¹² Western intelligence sources estimate that Bin Laden has provided at least 100 million dollar to Mullah Omar over the last six years, as well as a legion of highly dedicated Islamic warriors organized under the banner of the 055 Brigade.

¹³ So consistent has the support of the IMU been that the group's leader, Juma Namangani, reportedly carries a warrant signed by Mullah Omar, which designates him as one of the

regime's most honored foreign guests after Bin Laden.

¹⁴ Author interview, French counter-terrorism intelligence officials, Paris, February 2001. See also 'The Perpetual Vortex', *The Economist*, September 29, 2001; and 'Uzbekistan's Islamic Warrior', *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 4, 2001.

¹⁵ Author interview with Indian intelligence, New Delhi, February 2001.

¹⁶ See, for instance Rashid, 'The Taliban: Exporting Extremism', 31; and 'The Heart of Darkness', *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 05, 1999.

¹⁷ See, for instance, 'Central Asia's Narcotics Industry', *ISS Strategic Comments* (June 1997): 1-2; Tamara Makarenko, 'Crime and Terrorism in Central Asia', *Jane's Intelligence Review* (July 2000): 16-17; and her 'Terrorism and Drug Trafficking Threaten Stability in Central Asia', *Jane's Intelligence Review* (November 2000): 28-30. according to the Paris-based *Observatoire Geopolitique de Drogues* (OGD), income taxed from this narcotics base has netted the Taliban at least 60 million dollar over the past four years, which has been used to purchase everything from weapons and ammunition to food, fuel, clothes and transportation.

¹⁸ Rashid, *Taliban. Taliban. Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, chapter 10; *Responsibility for the Terrorist Atrocities in the United States*, 11 September 2001, 4-6; 'One Man and a Global Web of Violence', *The New York Times*, January 14, 2001; 'The Spider in the Web', *The Economist*, September 22, 2001.

¹⁹ 'The Spider in the Web', *The Economist*, September 22, 2001.

²⁰ Author interview with British and French intelligence officials, London and Paris, January-February 2001. See also 'US Pressures Pakistan to Cut Ties with Extremist Groups', *The Washington Post*, January 26, 2000; 'Caught in the Middle', *The Economist*, September 22, 2001; and 'Anti-U.S. Sentiment Spreading in Pakistan', *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2001.

²¹ 'After the Taliban', *The Economist*, October 6, 2001.