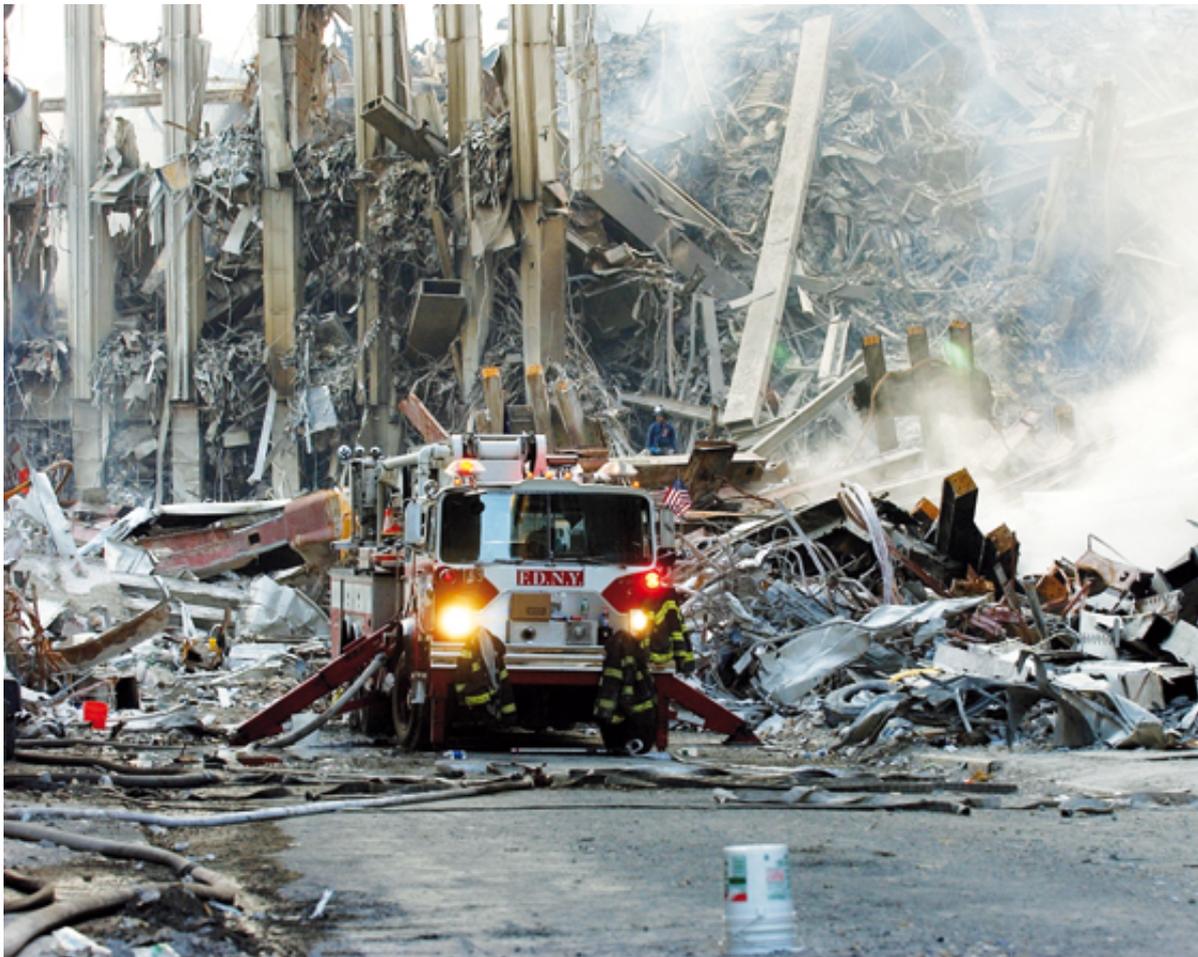


THE WAR ON TERROR: SEPARATING THE (STAR) FISH FROM THE SEA

Though hardly a new phenomenon, terrorism has assumed greater political saliency since the events of 9/11. Unfortunately, this greater saliency has not resulted in more effective strategies to counter the terrorist threat, the nature of which is often poorly understood. This essay describes terrorism as a method, then develops a model of what terrorist organizations look like and how they function, focusing on their evolution from hierarchical insurgent groups of the pre 9/11 era to network-like structures of today, such as al-Qaeda.

Mao Zedong's dictum about insurgency says, "The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea."¹ "Counterinsurgent strategy has often attempted to "drain the sea"- i.e., separate the guerrilla from his support base in the population.

By implication, this essay will point out that counterterrorist strategies against contemporary terrorist networks must adapt this drain-the-sea principle to the network model if effective policies are to be developed.



Terrorism as a Method

Terrorism uses or threatens violence for political objectives. Terrorist acts are also meant to have a psychological effect that is felt beyond the immediate victims. Terrorism is conducted by a non-state entity such as al-Qaeda, an organization or individuals who see themselves as acting on behalf of a broader movement. Terrorists, being weak, must use their enemy's strength against it. At least initially, terrorists are little known and largely ignored. Acts of terrorism alter this fact. The message is simple: the state is not as strong as it appears; it cannot defend itself. On the other hand, the terrorist seems powerful, able to strike out at its enemy at will. The terrorist also wants to appear to be on the side of right and justice while his victims represent the forces of injustice and evil. This message is addressed to neutrals and the terrorist's would-be constituency. The terrorist relies on the active and passive support of elements within these communities to change the basic correlation of forces. A terrorist attack advertises the terrorist's power and his cause, gaining sympathy from his constituents and creating terror among the enemy. The enemy reacts, striking at the terrorist in an unfocused and ineffective manner that fails to destroy him and actually angers the terrorist's would-be constituents. This reaction causes the constituents' support for the terrorist to increase, allowing him easier access to intelligence as well as moral and material support.

The Development of Post-9/11 Islamist

Terrorism Islamist terrorism dates from the mid-twentieth century. Islamism (i.e., a strict and politicized version of Islam) became a major force in the Muslim world with the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s. The success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the bankruptcy of secular radicalism in the Muslim world propelled Islamist radicals into the forefront of revolutionary change. The struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89) intensified their fervor and rallied tens of thousands of Muslim fighters (mujahidin) to the Afghan cause. The obligation to take up jihad was seen as incumbent upon all individuals who were physically able to answer the call, since no organized state was in a position to defend the Muslim community in Afghanistan. After the victory of the mujahidin over the Soviets, the jihadis looked for new missions. Many returned to their homelands, most of which were ruled by secular nationalist governments. The jihadis considered these secular governments to be apostate regimes that had abandoned their religion. The jihadis fought these regimes, characterizing these regimes as the "near enemy." By the close of the decade, however, Islamist threats to the near enemy were on the wane, especially in Egypt and Algeria, where mainstream Muslims had grown weary of the brutal tactics of the jihadis, and state repression had proven effective against them. The radical Islamist movement seemed to be heading for a dead end. At this point, al-Qaeda stepped forward. Al-Qaeda and its founder Osama bin Laden focused on the United States and the western world, "the far enemy." In effect, repression in the Muslim world displaced much terrorism and many terrorists into the West. Al-Qaeda's actual operation started small, even while its recruitment and ideology were in full swing. Beginning in 1992, al-Qaeda affiliates committed a string of attacks, culminating in the attacks of September 11, 2001, which took al-Qaeda and bin Laden to a new level. The deaths of some 3,000 people set up a chain reaction, which al-Qaeda had only partly anticipated. Bin Laden attempted to incite a global jihad against the United States. It appeared he would succeed. The United States angered Muslims by invading Afghanistan when negotiations with the Taliban regime failed to deliver bin Laden and his aides. Bin Laden hoped for a reprise of the struggle against the Soviet occupation that had so badly bled the Red Army. Instead, the U.S. effort met initial success. The fall of the Taliban deprived al-Qaeda of a state sponsor that was able to provide security and the ability to operate openly. This loss caused the organization to become more network-like and less like a traditional hierarchical organization. Its organizational structure, or lack of it, has had a profound effect on al-Qaeda's strengths and vulnerabilities and how it operates. Traditional hierarchical organizations have a chain of command and a staff organized into sections. These staff sections assist the leadership in acquiring resources and information, vet and train personnel, prepare directives to subordinates, communicate with those subordinates and the public, and plan operations. Such organizations are centrally directed and able to marshal resources in a consistent manner. When organized thusly, insurgent or terrorist organizations have to pay close attention to security of communication and safety of membership. So they organize into cells where members of one cell are unfamiliar with the members of any other cell — only the cell's leader knows his/her immediate superior — and where communication is often indirect, through message drop, for example. Such a structure provides a degree of security, but at the cost

of ease and speed of communication. Contemporary networks like al-Qaeda function differently. Their structure is more horizontal than vertical. While the visual model of a traditional hierarchical organization is a pyramid, a network resembles a telephone exchange with direct and indirect connections between patrons. While some members (nodes) of the network may be more important than others, none is essential to the network's existence and operation. Even when it had a base of operations in Afghanistan prior to 9/11, al-Qaeda functioned like a loosely connected set of networks. There were three major collections of local affiliates: North African affiliates, the "Arab core" in the Middle East, and Southeast Asian affiliates. Al-Qaeda central consisted of bin Laden and his key associates grouped into four committees: military, business, communications, and media. But these committees had fluid organizational roles and did not function like departments of a typical hierarchical organization. The central staff gave up operational control of terrorist actions by 1996.² Its fluid structure allowed al-Qaeda to survive the U.S. onslaught in Afghanistan. While key members of al-Qaeda central were captured, the organization could not be "rolled up" cell by cell the way a hierarchical organization might have been. In their analysis of network theory, Brafman and Beckstrom explain the resilience of networks and how they survive and prosper. Hierarchical organizations and networks often look alike, just as the many-legged spider and the many-armed starfish do. The real difference between them is their animating principle. Like a traditional hierarchical organization, the spider has a brain, a central command structure that marshals the organism's resources. It can be killed by destroying that mechanism or severing it from the rest of the organism. The starfish is different. It lacks a centralized control mechanism. An arm cut off from the rest of the organism continues to exist and transforms itself into a new copy of the original. Cutting its communications paths and destroying parts of it does not kill the organism. Rather, it may lead to the organism's proliferation.³ In fact, the largely structure-less character of al-Qaeda was apparent even before the 9/11 attacks. Its terrorist cells were essentially self-generating: a group of friends, schoolmates, kin, or "a bunch of guys,"⁴ drawn together by a joint belief in radical Islamist ideology, often inspired by a charismatic imam. The critical step toward overt terrorist action was often a chance contact with someone who had participated in the Afghan jihad or was otherwise in contact with a member of al-Qaeda central. In short, al-Qaeda could thrive in an environment where Islamist radicalism was intense and widespread. It did not recruit members or organize cells itself, but it rather made use of informal, pre-existing groups that had largely recruited themselves. A blow to the center of the al-Qaeda organization would not be fatal.

Conclusion

Today's Islamist terrorist organizations have abandoned the hierarchical model of the old insurgencies and adapted the network (starfish) model. While such networks cannot be easily broken by the use of "enhanced" interrogation, they do have other weaknesses. Notable among these weaknesses is one they share with classical insurgencies; they may be separated from their constituencies (the "sea"). This separation may be physical, or, more likely, psychological, for example; by demonstrating that the terrorist organization is not on the "right side" through state building, provision of services, and support of good governance. Such strategies may take a long time and they may involve more law enforcement than military might, but they can defeat starfish-like networks by cutting them off from their sustaining sea.

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(1) http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_guerrilla_must_move_amongst_the_people_as_a/216649.html. (2) Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 42-43, 70-71. (3) Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power*

of Leaderless Organizations (New York: Portfolio, 2006). (4) A phrase used by Canadian authorities to describe an Algerian sleeper cell. See Marc Sageman,