

Transnational Terrorism and the al Qaeda Model: Confronting New Realities

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On 6 January 1995, Philippine authorities responded to a fire that had started in room 603 of the Dona Josefa apartment complex in downtown Manila. Although firefighters quickly contained the blaze, which they first attributed to a simple cooking fire, they soon realized that they had stumbled upon something far more sinister. The fire, later investigations revealed, was started by one of the residents, who had mistakenly mixed water with chemicals being prepared for bombs. The incident's timing—coming just one week before the Pope's visit to the Philippines—immediately set off alarm bells within the Philippine security establishment. More alarming was the apartment's location, just minutes away from one of the Pontiff's intended destinations, and the discovery of Roman Catholic vestments that would provide cover for a suicide bomber.

But the most disturbing revelation was found in a laptop computer left in the apartment when the residents fled. Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, one of the residents of the apartment, had reportedly told his roommate, Abdul Hakim Murad, to retrieve the laptop. Murad returned to the apartment but was intercepted by Philippine police. Murad attempted to flee, but he stumbled and was apprehended. Murad then offered large sums of money to the police in an effort to bribe his way out of his predicament, but to no avail. Later, Murad would be subjected to a grueling inquisition—according to reports—about the contents of the computer and his role in the scheme that was code-named “Oplan Bojinka.”

Oplan Bojinka, it was later learned, was a complex plan to bomb 11 US airliners over the Pacific Ocean as they traveled from Asia back to the United States. The plot would involve a team of five bombers who would travel on planes for a particular leg of their journey, plant the bomb, and then exit the plane

33/34

at the next stop. Most of the bombers would later travel on separate routes back to Pakistan, where they would meet. The airplanes, however, would have a very different fate. As the planes journeyed to their next stops—in most cases the United States—the bombs would detonate, destroying the planes in mid-air. More than 4,000 people likely would have died had Oplan Bojinka been completed.

In later trial testimony, it was revealed that the bombing of Philippine Airlines flight 434 from Cebu to Japan on 11 December 1994, in which a Japanese businessman was killed, was a trial run for the larger Bojinka plan. Oplan Bojinka also included airborne suicide attacks with passenger airplanes onto key US targets, including CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. When Murad revealed this detail during interrogation, he also admitted attending flying schools in the United States and elsewhere. Subsequent FBI investigations confirmed Murad's attendance in at least two American schools, one in New York and the other in North Carolina.

On 11 September 2001, an analogue of Oplan Bojinka—and some would argue Bojinka itself—was actualized when

19 young men, mostly Saudi Arabian nationals, commandeered four passenger airplanes and rammed three of them into critical US targets, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The resulting social and economic impact—some 3,000 lives lost and billions of dollars in economic damage—catapulted terrorism onto an entirely new level of strategic importance. Catastrophic, or mass-casualty terrorism, once a theory, had now become a reality.¹ But the larger issue revolved around the nature of terrorism itself and its emerging modus operandi. Whether the 11 September attacks in the United States were the delayed manifestation of Oplan Bojinka, as some believe, or whether they were an isolated plan, it is clear that terrorism—and particularly that form of terrorism practiced by al Qaeda—has fundamentally changed.²

The 11 September attacks on the United States were a bold, calculated transnational attack by an organization that has established and maintained a multinational presence in more than 50 countries, directed by a base located—at least until recently—in Afghanistan. Like many multinational corporations, al Qaeda is both the product and beneficiary of globalization. The organization took advantage of the fruits of globalization and modernization—including satellite technology, accessible air travel, fax machines, the internet, and other modern conveniences—to advance its political agenda. No longer geographically constrained within a particular territory, or financially tied to a particular state, al Qaeda emerged as the ultimate transnational terror organization, relying on an

34/35

array of legitimate and illicit sources of cash, including international charities that were often based in the West.

In the weeks following the attacks, many politicians, journalists, and pundits pointed to a “massive intelligence failure” that facilitated or allowed the attacks.³ Some attributed this failure to the lack of human intelligence operations within Afghanistan. However, some experts have argued that the greatest intelligence failure of the 11 September attacks was the inability on the part of intelligence and law enforcement agencies to grasp and understand that al Qaeda represented a different type of terrorism, one less anchored to specific geographic locations or political constituencies and one capable of achieving transglobal strategic reach in its operations.⁴

The 11 September attacks also exposed fundamental weaknesses of modern Western states, including vulnerable borders, inadequate immigration controls, and insufficient internal antiterrorism surveillance. Indeed, investigations conducted following the US terror attacks would reveal an uncomfortable truth about al Qaeda and its affiliate groups. Probably their most important bases of operation—from a financial and logistical perspective—were located not in Afghanistan or Sudan, but rather in Western Europe and North America, including in the United States itself.⁵

The al Qaeda Multi-Cellular Terror Model

Al Qaeda (Arabic for “The Base”) traces its roots to Afghanistan and the pan-Islamic resistance to the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979. In 1982, Osama bin Laden, then a young Saudi Arabian national, joined the anti-Soviet jihad. He traveled to Afghanistan where, after just a few years, he established his own military camps from which anti-Soviet assaults could be launched. In 1988, bin Laden and others established al Qaeda, not as a terrorist organization, but rather as a reporting infrastructure so that relatives of foreign soldiers who had come to Afghanistan to join the resistance could be properly tracked.⁶ Al Qaeda reportedly had the additional function of funneling money to the Afghan resistance.⁷ In 1989, the year the Soviets withdrew their last troops from Afghanistan, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia, where he began delivering public lectures about topics that were sensitive to the government—including predictions that Kuwait would soon be invaded by Iraq. When his prediction came true, he became frustrated when the Saudi government ignored his advice (including offers of military assistance), and instead turned to the United States for military help.

Increasingly unhappy with bin Laden’s public activities and his militant views, the Saudi government placed him under house arrest. Through his family connections, bin Laden was nevertheless able to secure permission for a business trip to Pakistan. Once in Pakistan, he traveled to Afghanistan and stayed a few months. But soon after, he left for Sudan where he was welcomed by National Islamic Front (NIF) leader, Hassan al-Turabi.⁸ Bin Laden’s time in Sudan

35/36

is probably the most important in terms of al Qaeda's development. During this period, al Qaeda forged alliances with militant groups from Egypt, Pakistan, Algeria, and Tunisia, as well as with Palestinian Jihad and Hamas.⁹ Also while in Sudan, al Qaeda began to develop its signature transnational modus operandi by engaging in a range of international operations, such as deploying fighters to Chechnya and Tajikistan, establishing satellite offices in Baku, Azerbaijan, and funding affiliates based in Jordan and Eritrea.¹⁰ Under American pressure, however, Sudan forced bin Laden to leave in 1996. He and other members of al Qaeda relocated their operations to Afghanistan where they remained, until recently.

Al Qaeda has traditionally operated with an informal horizontal structure, comprising more than 24 constituent terrorist organizations, combined with a formal vertical structure. Below Osama bin Laden was the "majlis al shura," a consultative council that directed the four key committees (military, religious, finance, and media), members of which were handpicked by senior leadership. The majlis al shura discussed and approved major operations, including terrorist attacks.¹¹ Bin Laden and his two cohorts, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Mohammed Atef, set general policies and approved large-scale actions. Until the US intervention in Afghanistan, al Qaeda acted in a manner somewhat resembling a large charity organization that funded terrorist projects to be conducted by preexisting or affiliate terrorist groups.

The United States emerged as a central enemy to al Qaeda almost from the beginning of the organization's existence for a variety of reasons, including al Qaeda's unhappiness with US operations in the 1990-91 Gulf War and the 1992-93 Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. Al Qaeda's overarching complaint against the United States has centered on its continued military presence in Saudi Arabia and throughout the Arabian peninsula. To publicize its disdain for the United States, al Qaeda issued various "fatwas" (verdicts based on Islamic law) urging that US forces should be attacked. In 1992 and 1993, the group issued fatwas urging that American forces in Somalia should be attacked. In 1996, the group issued a "Declaration of Jihad on the Americans Occupying the Country of the Two Sacred Places," which urged the expulsion of American forces from the Arabian Peninsula.¹² This was followed by a media interview in 1997 in which bin Laden called for attacks on US soldiers.¹³

The anti-American rhetoric emanating from al Qaeda hit a high pitch in 1998 when the organization essentially fused with Egypt's two main terrorist organizations, al Jihad (Islamic Jihad) and al Gamaa al Islamiya (Islamic Group), both of which were linked to the assassination of former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The new campaign would be known as the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders, and would also include co-signatories from Pakistan and Bangladesh.¹⁴ Contained in the text that announces the World Islamic Front are calls to attack not only US soldiers, but also US civilians. The proclamation demands that Muslims everywhere should "abide by Allah's order by killing Americans and stealing their money anywhere, anytime, and whenever

36/37

possible."¹⁵ To understand al Qaeda's evolution, it is especially important to recognize the importance of the Egyptian influence on bin Laden, which dates back to his time in Afghanistan. Currently most of al Qaeda's membership is drawn from these two Egyptian groups. Moreover, one Egyptian in particular, Ayman al-Zawahiri—a former key figure in al Jihad—has had a tremendous intellectual influence on Osama bin Laden and is considered by many to be a candidate to succeed him.¹⁶

As indicated above, al Qaeda's model has been to establish bases with indigenous groups throughout the world. Early in its existence, al Qaeda developed the ability to penetrate Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to the point that it was "inseparably enmeshed with the religious, social, and economic fabric of Muslim communities worldwide."¹⁷ In some cases, al Qaeda pursued a virtual "hands off" policy with its affiliated group. It may have guided or directed the group's operations, but at the same time required it to raise its own funds. Ahmed Ressay, who was intercepted entering the United States in December 1999 as part of the infamous "Millennium Plot," was part of a cell in Montreal, Canada, that survived by engaging in petty theft—including passport theft—and other crimes. However, for certain operations, such as the 11 September attacks in the United States, al Qaeda was much more willing to provide substantial and direct financial support.

Al Qaeda's strength lay in its reliance on a multi-cellular structure, spanning the entire globe, which gave the

organization agility and cover. One French terrorism expert recently lamented, “If you have good knowledge of the [al Qaeda] network today, it’s not operational tomorrow.”¹⁸ He compared its networks to a constantly changing virus that is impossible to totally grasp or destroy. Al Qaeda’s multi-cellular international structure provided an ironic backdrop to President George Bush’s proclamation that the United States would find terrorists wherever they were located and would consider attacking any nation that harbored terrorists. The uncomfortable reality is that many states—including those allied with the United States—harbored al Qaeda cells, but did nothing to neutralize them, either because they did not know of their presence (or the precise danger they posed) or were unwilling, for political or security reasons, to disrupt their operations. Certain German investigators, for instance, ruefully admit that their lack of aggressive intervention—despite full awareness of al Qaeda’s activities in many of its main cities—probably contributed to the 11 September tragedy.

As a truly transnational terrorist organization, al Qaeda has sought to expand beyond the traditional venue of the Middle East, Western Europe, North America, and South Asia. Increasingly the organization has pursued Southeast Asia as a key basing and staging region. Al Qaeda has long cultivated links with groups such as the Philippine-based Abu Sayyaf and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Indonesian group Laskar Jihad. Al Qaeda is also linked to region-wide organizations, such as Jemaah Islamiah, the mastermind of plots against the US Embassy in Singapore and other critical American and Western

37/38

targets. In late September 2001, the Philippine military’s chief of staff confirmed speculation that al Qaeda was seeking to support the Abu Sayyaf Group with “materiel, leadership, and training support.”¹⁹ Similar trends have been detected in Indonesia, where officials suspect growing linkages between al Qaeda and indigenous groups such as Laskar Jihad. In December 2001, the head of Indonesia’s intelligence services, Abdullah Hendropriyono, asserted that al Qaeda and other international terrorist organizations were attempting to sow unrest on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi by promoting inter-ethnic violence between Muslims and Christians. He also confirmed that al Qaeda and other international groups had used the territory as a base and training site for international terrorist operations.²⁰

Al Qaeda has also established links in Africa and South America. In South America, the “triple border” area (where Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay meet) is viewed as a base for such Middle Eastern terrorist organizations as Hezbollah, al Gamaa al Islamiya, and Hamas, all al Qaeda constituent or affiliate groups. A 1999 Argentine intelligence report stated that al Qaeda was operating in the region in an attempt to forge links with Hezbollah supporters.²¹ The region, and other locations in Brazil, appear to have played a significant role in the planning of the 11 September attacks.²² Al Qaeda also has established links in various African countries, including Somalia, Sudan, and South Africa.²³ Al Qaeda reportedly has considered moving to Somalia following US military operations in Afghanistan, a possibility that recently prompted a US Naval blockade of the entire Somali coastline.

Al Qaeda has flourished in an environment of weak or quasi-states that are undergoing disruptive political or social change. Vast swaths of political instability in many parts of the world, and particularly in Africa and Asia, have provided a breeding ground for al Qaeda and its analogues. As one French analyst stated, wide expanses of anarchic territory “need no longer be considered a regrettable feature of the postmodern world, but rather a strategic challenge that should be addressed urgently.”²⁴ Such areas are not only hospitable to terrorists, they may also attract transnational crime groups, drug traffickers, and maritime pirates. Despite their isolation, paradoxically, these areas constitute an acute threat to global security.

Al Qaeda’s Suicidal Tendencies

In early 2001, Dahmane Abd al-Sattar received what was probably the most important mission of his life. As a member of a Tunisian-dominated al Qaeda cell based in Belgium, he and an unidentified accomplice had been “activated” by the al Qaeda leadership. Their goal would be to conduct a suicide strike on Ahmed Shah Massoud, the legendary leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, thousands of miles away. With the help of at least 14 European-based co-conspirators, Mr. Sattar, along with his accomplice, began a circuitous journey, posing as European-based Moroccan journalists. They used forged Belgian pass-

ports and an apparently forged Pakistani visa.²⁵ Their journey first involved traveling to the United Kingdom, where they obtained a letter of introduction written by Yasser al-Siri, the head of London's Islamic Observation Center. The letter provided the two assassins with the legitimacy and cover to gain access to Massoud.²⁶

The pair next traveled to Pakistan. There, with the al-Siri introduction letter in hand, they were able to obtain visas at the Afghanistan embassy posing as journalists for "Arabic News International."²⁷ The men then traveled to Kabul, which at that time was firmly controlled by the Taliban. Later they were given permission to cross into the Panjshir Valley, the stronghold of the man whom they would assassinate. After a long series of negotiations, the assassins managed to get approval for their interviews of key Northern Alliance leaders, but they focused particularly on interviewing Massoud. Just before the interview, the cameraman reportedly placed his rigged camera on a low table facing Massoud.²⁸ Then the interview began. The main journalist, presumably al-Sattar, asked Massoud what he would do with Osama bin Laden if he (Massoud) returned to power. Massoud reportedly laughed at the question, and at that instant the camera exploded. One of the two assassins died immediately in the explosion. The second was shot dead by nearby guards.²⁹ Massoud, meanwhile, lay on the ground in a pool of blood. He died soon thereafter.

The attack on Commander Massoud is remarkable not simply because of its tactical value for al Qaeda—it took away the Northern Alliance's most capable leader—but also because it highlighted the efficacy of suicide techniques that al Qaeda has increasingly come to rely upon. Suicide terrorism is defined as "the readiness to sacrifice one's life in the process of destroying or attempting to destroy a target to advance a political goal."³⁰ The difference between a brave combat soldier and a suicide bomber is that the former confronts his fears of death, hoping to avoid its clutches. The suicide bomber, on the other hand, *intends* to die. If somehow the suicide attacker survived the attack, yet successfully conducted the terrorist operation, he would most likely consider himself a failure.

Before the 11 September attacks, experts generally considered suicide bombers to be usually poor, not particularly well-educated, unmarried, and hungry for revenge.³¹ The 11 September suicide attacks, conducted by well-educated and generally prosperous individuals, have shaken that profile. Additionally, Israeli security agents have discovered growing discrepancies to the general suicide bomber profile, such as increased incidence of educated or prosperous attackers.³² In January 2002, Israel encountered another surprise in the profile of suicide bombers when a 28-year-old Palestinian woman named Wafa Idris blew herself up in a crowded shopping district in downtown Jerusalem. No longer could Israeli security forces concentrate their anti-bombing surveillance exclusively on Palestinian men.

If the 11 September attacks are any guide, al Qaeda or its affiliate groups will increasingly rely on suicide attacks. The method has an array of advantages over more traditional warfare. One Israeli-based analyst enumerates

39/40

four major points: it is simple and inexpensive; it almost certainly guarantees mass casualties and extensive damage because the bomber can choose the exact time, location, and circumstances of the attack; there are no post-attack fears of interrogation since the attacker will almost certainly die; and it has a powerful effect on the public and the media, due to the widespread horror and sense of helplessness that it cultivates.³³

Al Qaeda's reliance on suicide attacks has become a key part of its arsenal, particularly in recent years. Prominent al Qaeda suicide attacks have included the bombing of the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the bombing of USS *Cole* in October 2000. Al Qaeda's interest in airborne suicide attacks is significant not only because of the 11 September attacks and Oplan Bojinka, but also because of other attacks that were either disrupted or thwarted while in progress.

In 1994, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), an al Qaeda affiliate, hijacked an Air France Airbus A300 and flew it to France with the intent of exploding the airplane in the air over Paris. The plane first landed in Marseille for refueling. There French commandos raided the plane, killing all of the hijackers.³⁴ In 1999, US intelligence officials reportedly received evidence suggesting that Osama bin Laden was planning to blow up at least six airliners at six international airports simultaneously. The 1999 interception of Ahmed Ressam along the US-Canada border by an astute US

Customs officer probably thwarted an airport attack in late 1999. Although it is not clear that these planned attacks involved suicide tactics, most likely al Qaeda would have used such tactics if they would have ensured success.

Porous Borders and the Vulnerable State

On 30 November 2001, a US federal judge sentenced a former Mexican immigration inspector, Angel Salvador Molina-Paramo, to 30 months in federal prison for his role in a global human smuggling ring spanning several continents. Molina-Paramo's partner and the chief of the smuggling operation was George Tajirian, an Iraqi-born human smuggler accused of trafficking hundreds of illegal immigrants from the Middle East across the US-Mexican border during the 1990s. US authorities had arrested Tajirian in 1998 and, following a plea agreement, he was sentenced to 13 years in US federal prison. Prosecutors alleged that the ring smuggled Palestinian, Jordanian, Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, and other illegal immigrants through Mexico to the United States. The smuggling operation "included smuggling stations in Jordan, Syria, Palestine, and Greece; and staging areas in Greece, Thailand, Cuba, Ecuador, and Mexico."³⁵

With the sentencing of Molina-Paramo coming just weeks after the 11 September attacks in the United States, the obvious question surrounding this case was whether any of the migrants—most of whom were smuggled between 1996 and 1998—were possibly terrorists. Mr. Tajirian did not appear to be operating a terrorist-funneling operation; however, it is also clear that Tajirian was not particularly fussy about any criminal or terrorist background of his migrant

40/41

clients. During his prosecution, authorities introduced evidence that Tajirian had smuggled into the United States "persons with known ties to subversive or terrorist organizations as well as individuals with known criminal histories."³⁶ If a migrant had a known criminal background, Tajirian simply raised the smuggling fees.³⁷ Overall, US officials believe that Tajirian and his cohorts smuggled more than 1,000 Middle Eastern residents illegally into the United States.³⁸

This immigrant smuggling case might be viewed as simply an oddity, perhaps another indicator of the sinister and depraved international underworld of human smuggling. Most traditional security planners would consider the case—and the issue of human smuggling in general—an interesting social or labor migration phenomenon that, though disturbing, bears little relevance to national or international security. But the case of George Tajirian and the ring he led is also arguably one more example of the vulnerability of US border security, a vulnerability which, in an age of international terrorism where modern terrorists must travel to multiple countries to either raise money, cultivate support, or conduct attacks, cannot simply be dismissed as merely an immigration issue or social policy question.

The reality that few US authorities want to publicly admit is that the notion of border security, particularly within the dark and transient world of transnational crime, is largely fiction. For more than two decades, human smuggling syndicates with links to China, India, Albania, and other countries have developed complex and circuitous pathways into the United States, just as they have in Western Europe and East Asia. In the context of international terrorism, porous borders and the rise of human smuggling—and its attendant side industry of document fraud—pose serious security challenges for states. Just as the human body's lymphatic system provides a stream for the spread of lethal cancer cells, so too can the global stream of human smuggling and illegal migration carry the agents of global terrorism. Ironically, despite the publicity regarding vulnerable borders in the United States following the 11 September attacks, Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge publicly admitted in February 2002 that US borders "remain disturbingly vulnerable to terrorists."³⁹ It is precisely this concern that has prompted President Bush to consider fusing US Customs with the troubled Immigration and Naturalization Service, the agency nominally in charge of border enforcement.

Identity fraud and illegal migration have emerged as the lifeblood of global terrorism, as critical as any bomb, machine gun, or grenade. Terrorist organizations place a premium on clandestine international mobility, relying on an array of identity fraud techniques. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the physician-terrorist considered to be Osama bin Laden's second-in-command, is known to have carried a "bewildering variety of passports" that, among other things, allowed him to

secretly enter the United States in the early 1990s to raise funds from California mosques in order to support terrorist activities of the Egyptian group al Jihad.⁴⁰ In another case, Philippine police in early 2002 arrested a 31-year-old Indonesian man, Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi, who was implicated in a plot to bomb the US Em-

41/42

bassy in Singapore, after he was discovered carrying at least four fake or forged passports, including ones issued by the governments of Indonesia and the Philippines.⁴¹ Officials determined that the man, a well-known bomb specialist for the terror group Jemaah Islamiah, had relied on these passports—which used various aliases—to travel throughout Southeast Asia to coordinate different cells of the group in preparation for a series of attacks. Similar patterns have emerged with other terrorist and transnational crime organizations around the world.⁴²

Just as the illicit transnational migration of people can pose security challenges for the United States or other countries, so too can the flow of commercial cargo. Every year, the United States receives over 5.8 million containers from maritime sources, and over 2.1 million rail cars.⁴³ Facing the daunting task of inspecting these cargo units is the US Customs Service, which can inspect only about five percent of this international cargo, because of personnel constraints. In one border-crossing area along the US-Canada border, there are only eight primary inspection lanes and customs inspectors typically have only two minutes to inspect each tractor-trailer.⁴⁴ Moreover, because cargo can enter the United States and not be inspected for up to 30 days—due to “port of entry” procedures that allow inspection only in the final destination city—US authorities have little basis to verify the identity of the sender or the identity of the contents of thousands of multi-ton containers traveling throughout the United States on trains, trucks, or barges.⁴⁵

In the context of international terrorism, the lack of rigorous cargo inspection procedures makes the United States and other Western countries extremely vulnerable to mass-casualty attacks by terrorist groups and other nonstate actors. Terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda could theoretically attempt to smuggle a nuclear or chemical weapon into the United States within the normal stream of cargo imports in order to conduct a mass-casualty attack. It is well-known that al Qaeda has sought to develop nuclear and chemical weapon capability. It is also documented that al Qaeda has sought to exploit the global container traffic stream in at least one case. In October 2001, Italian authorities discovered an al Qaeda operative locked inside a shipping container destined for Canada. The container was fitted with a bed and bathroom. The Egyptian national who was traveling in the container was also found to be carrying airport maps, airport security passes, and a mechanic’s certificate.⁴⁶

The most devastating scenario would involve the smuggling of nuclear weapons via shipping containers. A recent Central Intelligence Agency report suggests that non-missile delivery of a nuclear device by state or non-state actors is the most likely means through which the United States is likely to suffer a nuclear, chemical, or biological attack. Such groups would likely deploy such devices not through missiles, but through smuggling aboard ships, trucks, airplanes, or other means. The CIA report lists various advantages for such a method, including the ability to deploy the weapon covertly, the ability to mask the source of the weapon (to evade retaliation), the ability to ensure that the weapon was used effectively at the intended location, and the ability to evade

42/43

missile or other defenses. The report argued that “foreign nonstate actors—including terrorist, insurgent, or extremist groups—have used, possessed, or expressed an interest in CBRN [chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear] materials.”⁴⁷ Al Qaeda is among such groups.⁴⁸ Clearly, in light of such threats, border security takes on much greater urgency, although it is not clear that this understanding has reached traditional military or security planning circles.

The Dilemma of State Responses to Terrorism

In the early hours of Sunday, 14 October 2001, Abdel Rahman Hamad, having just completed morning prayers, stood on the rooftop of his house and gazed at the surrounding vista. As he leaned against a wall on the edge of his roof, two bullets fired by an Israeli government sharpshooter traveled more than 300 yards and penetrated Hamad’s chest, killing him almost instantly.⁴⁹ The assassination capped many months of Israeli surveillance of Hamad. Abdel Rahman Hamad was a high-ranking leader of Hamas and was the chief suspect behind the June 2001 suicide bombing at a Tel

Aviv disco that had killed 21 people only four months earlier.

The assassination, coming just a few weeks after the 11 September attacks in the United States, elicited an awkward response from Washington. On one hand, the United States, which had publicly discussed its own desire to kill Osama bin Laden, attempted to present a neutral position, cautioning the Israeli government against the employment of its “targeted killing” program. The United States, after all, was in the midst of a debate over its own self-imposed ban against overseas assassinations. Many political leaders were calling for an end to the policy, while others argued that such a policy change was unnecessary since, they reasoned, killing individuals in a lawful use of force—in this case self-defense—is not assassination. Presumably Israel could have relied on the same logic, since Hamad was a known Hamas manager who was preparing suicide bombers for future missions involving the murder of Israeli civilians and widespread destruction of property.

The Hamad assassination also provides another useful insight relevant to state responses to terrorism. If there is anything to be learned from the “war on terror”—whether conducted by the United States, Israel, or France—it should be that it is a form of warfare that is dark, morally ambiguous, and replete with dirty tricks. Spurred by sudden intelligence insights, whether from human or technological sources, states will be presented with time-sensitive opportunities to deploy special forces (or similar types of military or paramilitary units) to inflict deadly results upon individuals or entire organizations. Israel’s model of targeted killings—albeit not entirely successful—may emerge as the norm in future warfare, which will likely be quiet, bloody, and murderous.

A state policy of preemptive assassinations, which most likely would be couched in such euphemistic phrases as “permissive termination” or “calculated elimination,” may be deemed necessary and politically expedient, and yet would

43/44

remain anathema to the traditional and honorable soldiering ideal that has bonded military forces, particularly in Western states, for multiple generations. This contradiction will have to be managed head-on; otherwise it may result in diminished morale and civilian misunderstanding. As one analyst has noted: “Western countries have been disinclined to prepare for military action that was considered uncivilized.”⁵⁰ Civilized or not, states may be required to engage in such actions if the threat of transnational terrorism—with its current predisposition for mass casualties—is to be contained or averted.

Another morally complicated issue involves state use of torture during interrogation. When Abdul Hakim Murad was questioned by Philippine investigators in 1995, he was reportedly subjected to various forms of torture. At one stage in the interrogation, Philippine authorities allegedly deceived Murad into believing that Israeli Mossad agents were behind his interrogation. Whether because of that or for other reasons, Murad eventually confessed the details of Oplan Bojinka. In this case, aggressive interrogation techniques, while arguably morally abhorrent and distasteful, effectively served their purpose. Thousands of innocent civilians did not die in early 1995 because of information gained through these methods.

Traditionally, the United States and certain other Western countries have skirted the torture dilemma by “exporting” their difficult candidates to states and regimes known to engage in the practice—such as Egypt—with full knowledge that interrogation with torture would likely take place.⁵¹ Yet such a practice of “vicarious torture” is imbued with an obvious hypocrisy that prevents the sending state—such as the United States—from having clean hands when it engages in such practices. Moreover, obtaining human intelligence from foreign governments is fraught with its own downside risk: such intelligence, filtered through a foreign government, may contain information tainted by that government’s biases or hidden policy objectives.

There is no easy answer to the thorny issue of interrogation involving the application of torture. From a moral and legal perspective, the answer would seem to be a clear-cut no, don’t do it. From a practical perspective, moreover, torture can be counterproductive, eliciting a resolve of defiance within the individual being interrogated, and the intelligence so gained may be unreliable. But in the harsh world of transnational terrorism, the reality is far from black and white. As one terrorism expert recently wrote, intelligence is the key weapon against global terrorism, but

intelligence does not come cheaply and, moreover, “Americans still do not appreciate the enormously difficult—and morally complex— problem that the imperative to gather ‘good intelligence’ entails.”⁵² In a conversation between that writer and a Sri Lankan army officer credited with thwarting attacks by the ruthless terrorist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the officer noted that terrorism could not be fought with laws or moral dicta, but only by thoroughly “terrorizing” the terrorists—in other words,

44/45

“inflicting on them the same pain that they inflict on the innocent.”⁵³ In these murky aspects of dealing with terrorists, there are no easy answers.

Conclusion

Al Qaeda’s attack on the United States on 11 September 2001 was a major turning point in the evolution of international terrorism. In this case, the United States was attacked not by a fellow state, but a non-state terrorist organization. Al Qaeda represents the worst that globalization has to offer. Its transnational tentacles reach into every corner of the globe. Its ability to penetrate countries with passport fraud and other illegal immigration techniques is unparalleled, and its virus-like ability to infect indigenous groups—even those with originally benign goals—is now well-documented.

The lesson to be learned from al Qaeda is that terrorist groups can now exist in a transnational milieu, divorced from state-driven constraints. Even if we witness the demise of al Qaeda, we are not likely to witness the demise of its model. Terrorist groups can thrive in the dark pockets of anarchy that pervade the globe. But they can also coexist alongside their targets by planting cells in Western Europe and North America. The question thus becomes: Have we learned the lesson, and, moreover, are we prepared for the next attack?

NOTES

1. Regarding warnings about the rise of “catastrophic terrorism,” see Ashton Carter et al., “Catastrophic Terrorism: Tackling the New Danger,” *Foreign Affairs*, 77 (November/December 1998), 80.
2. Investigations conducted in Southeast Asia after the 11 September attacks in the United States provide linkages between Bojinka and the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., suggesting that the former was possibly a blueprint for the latter. Specifically, certain key leaders of a newly discovered group, Jemaah Islamiah, have reported links to both plots. See Richard C. Paddock, “Southeast Asian Terror Exhibits Al Qaeda Traits,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 March 2002, p. A1.
3. This specific phrase was uttered by US Senator Richard Shelby on the CBS News Show *Face the Nation* on 16 September 2001 (file accessed through Lexis-Nexis).
4. Ed Blanche, “Al-Qaeda Recruitment,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 14 (January 2002), 27-28.
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45/46

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