

Untangling the Web: Crossovers among International Terrorist Groups

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Brief Analysis

On October 22, 2003, Matthew Levitt, The Washington Institute's senior fellow in terrorism studies, testified before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. The following is an edited version of his remarks. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=15\)](#)

Constricting the Operating Environment

No counterterrorism effort, however extensive, will put an end to terrorist attacks or fully uproot terrorism. There will always be people and groups with entrenched causes, an overwhelming sense of frustration, a self-justifying worldview, and a healthy dose of evil, who will resort to violence as a means of expression. The goal of counterterrorism, therefore, should be to constrict the operating environment in order to make it increasingly difficult for terrorists to carry out their plans. This includes cracking down on logistical and financial support networks as well as operational cells.

Academic experts frequently argue that terrorism is an inexpensive business and that combating terrorist financing will not prevent terrorist attacks. In fact, it is extremely expensive to maintain safe houses, buy loyalties, maintain the physical infrastructure of terrorist organizations, pay salaries to members, and meet the various other costs associated with terrorism. Denying terrorists the opportunity to conduct support activities undermines their ability to perpetrate attacks, even if their radical ideology and violent intentions remain.

One of the most effective ways to constrict the operating environment and crack down on terrorist financing is to target the network of logistical support groups. Many of these groups are not particular to a single terrorist organization. In fact, militant Islamist organizations from al-Qaeda to Hamas interact and support one another in an international matrix of logistical, financial, and sometimes operational terrorist activity. Unfortunately, two years into the war on terror, these and other groups, along with a variety of Middle Eastern state sponsors, still receive inconsistent attention despite a sharp rise in their activity. Inattention to any one part of the web of militant Islamist terrorism undermines the effectiveness of measures taken against other parts of that web.

The Matrix of Terror

Terrorists cannot necessarily be pigeonholed as members of one group or another, as if they carried membership cards in their wallets. In reality, the networks that characterize today's terrorist threat are largely informal and unstructured. Not every al-Qaeda operative has pledged an oath of allegiance (bayat) to Osama bin Laden, and many terrorists maintain affiliations with members of other groups and facilitate one another's activities. This matrix of relationships is what makes the threat of international terrorism so dangerous.

Consider the example of al-Qaeda operational commander Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (aka Fadel Nazzal Khalayaleh). U.S. officials recently revealed that Zarqawi has "ties" to Hizballah and that plans were in place for his deputies to meet with Asbat al-Ansar, Hizballah, "and any other group that would enable them to smuggle mujaheddin into Palestine" in order to "conduct operations" in Israel. Moreover, Zarqawi received "more than \$35,000" in mid-2001 "for work in Palestine," which included "finding a mechanism that would enable more suicide martyrs to enter Israel" as well as facilitating the provision of "training on explosives, poisons, and remote-controlled devices."

Palestinian groups like Hamas have even less concrete connections to al-Qaeda. Yet, in the area of financing and logistical support, there is significant overlap and cooperation between these terrorist organizations. For example, several European countries recently joined the United States in freezing the assets of the al-Aqsa International Foundation, a Hamas front organization funding "Palestinian fighters" while recording its disbursements as "contributions for charitable projects." Significantly, al-Aqsa's representative in Yemen, Mohammed Ali Hasan al-Moayad, was arrested not only for funding Hamas, but also for providing money, arms, communication gear, and recruits to al-Qaeda. According to an Israeli report on Hizballah's global activity, the head of al-Aqsa's Netherlands office indicated that his branch had also raised funds for Hizballah in coordination with the foundation's main office in Germany.

A Case in Point: Northern Virginia

Indeed, the very "wings" of Hamas, Hizballah, and other groups that some are reluctant to categorize as terrorist are actively engaged in terrorist financing, in many cases through the same front organizations. One salient example of this phenomenon is the myriad of companies, charities, and other suspected terrorist fronts now under investigation in northern Virginia.

This complex case highlights the critical need to move away from the strict compartmentalization of terrorist groups in terrorism investigations. Treating the family of organizations in northern Virginia -- which included the Safa Group, SAAR Foundation, Success Foundation, and many more -- solely as a Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or al-Qaeda case clearly did not work. The tentacles of this entrenched network are suspected of providing extensive logistical and financial support to a variety of international terrorist groups. Tracing these financial trails, however, proved immensely difficult given the groups' proactive efforts to layer their myriad transactions and obfuscate their terrorist intentions. More than anything, the links between various personalities tied to these terrorist groups, front organizations, and operatives keyed investigators into focusing on the networks' financing and support activities. In fact, progress toward unraveling this complex web appears to have developed only with the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act, which facilitated the sharing of intelligence with prosecutors and the cross-referencing of information between previously compartmentalized terrorism investigations.

Conclusion

Money has not been a constraint on the activities of al-Qaeda, Palestinian terrorist groups, or the jihadists and Ba'athists fighting coalition forces in Iraq. This will continue to be the case until more serious action is taken toward restricting the financing of terrorism. Acting against terrorist financing is one of the best ways to advance the war on terror, the Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the stabilization of Iraq.

The principal terrorist threat today stems from the web of shadowy relationships between loosely affiliated groups.

The sponsors of such groups further complicate the web, be they states or substate actors. Indeed, there is no precise organizational or command structure to the assemblage of groups that cooperate with al-Qaeda or fall under the organization's umbrella. Given the multifarious links between international terrorist groups and their relationships with state sponsors of terrorism such as Iran and Syria, the war on terror will be most effective if it has a strategic focus on the full matrix of international terrorism rather than a tactical focus on al-Qaeda. Prosecuting the war on terror, whether on the battlefield or in the courtroom, demands greater attention to the web of interaction among these various groups and state sponsors.

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