

Untangling the Terror Web: Al-Qaeda Is Not the Only Element

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Brief Analysis

On Thursday, October 24, the Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a new terrorist threat alert (this time warning of attacks on transportation systems), highlighting once more why attention has been focused on al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups since September 11, 2001. A year on, however, other Middle Eastern terrorist groups and state sponsors of terrorism still receive inconsistent attention despite a sharp rise in their activity. In fact, militant Islamist groups from al-Qaeda to Hamas interact and support one another in an international matrix of logistical, financial, and sometimes operational terrorist activity. Inattention to any one part of the web of militant Islamist terror undermines the effectiveness of measures taken against other parts of that web.

Links between Terror Groups

September 11 produced a political will, markedly absent after previous attacks, to take concrete action to counter and disrupt the terrorist threat to America and its allies. Yet, while efforts targeting Osama bin Laden and his associates are concerted and continuous, similar efforts are lacking when it comes to other terrorist groups of global reach and state sponsors of terrorism. In the months after September 2001, groups such as Hamas and Hizballah were placed on new U.S. government terrorism lists, and the primary Hamas front organization in America was shut down. Since then, however, these groups have received only fleeting attention -- usually in the wake of increasingly heinous terrorist attacks. But the links between terrorist groups reveal a matrix of illicit activity on an international scale. Consider the following examples of the terror web:

On February 15, 2002, Turkish police arrested two Palestinians and a Jordanian who entered Turkey illegally from Iran on their way to conduct bombing attacks in Israel. The three were members of Beyyiat el-Imam (a group linked to al-Qaeda) who fought for the Taliban and received terrorist training in Afghanistan. They were dispatched by Abu Musab Zarqawi, then in Iran and now believed to be in Syria after receiving medical treatment in Iraq. Zarqawi has been linked to Hizballah, as well as to a terrorist cell apprehended in Germany that had been operating under the name Tawhid. German prosecutors announced that the group, tied to the recently arrested Abu Qatada in Britain but controlled by Zarqawi, was planning to attack U.S. or Israeli interests in Germany. Eight men were arrested, and raids yielded hundreds of forged passports from Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Denmark, and other countries.

The International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) finances the activities of a diverse cross-section of international terrorist groups. From 1986 to 1994, bin Laden's brother-in-law Muhammad Jamal Khalifa headed the IIRO's Philippines office, through which he channeled funds to al-Qaeda affiliates, including Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. In 1999, an IIRO employee in Canada was linked to the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. More recently, official Palestinian documents seized by Israeli forces in April 2002 establish that the IIRO donated at least \$280,000 to Palestinian charities and organizations that U.S. authorities have linked to Hamas.

The al-Taqwa banking system, which was added to U.S. terrorism lists in November 2001 for al-Qaeda links, was established in 1988 with financing from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, "\$60 million collected annually for Hamas was moved to accounts with Bank al-Taqwa." Al-Taqwa shareholders include known Hamas members and individuals linked to al-Qaeda. A 1996 report by Italian intelligence further linked al-Taqwa to Hamas and other Palestinian groups, as well as to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group and the Egyptian al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya.

U.S. officials contend that, shortly after Palestinian violence erupted in September 2000, Iran assigned Imad Mughniyeh, Hizballah's international operations commander, to help Palestinian militant groups, specifically Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). According to a former Clinton administration official, "Mugniyah got orders from Tehran to work with Hamas." In fact, in the March 27, 2002, "Passover massacre" suicide bombing, Hamas relied on the guidance of a Hizballah expert to build an extra-potent bomb. In June 2002, Iran gave PIJ a 70 percent increase in funds, and Tehran continues to train terrorists at camps in Lebanon's Beka'a Valley and in Iran proper. Iran also provides safe haven to two senior al-Qaeda fugitives who head the group's military committee, as well as to dozens of other al-Qaeda personnel. According to an Arab intelligence officer, some al-Qaeda operatives were instructed to leave the country, but were told that "they may be called on at some point to assist Iran."

Targeting the Logistical Net

A key lesson learned so painfully on September 11 is that counterterrorism efforts must target logistical cells with the same vigor as operational cells. The September 11 attacks could never have been executed without the logistical assistance of a sophisticated and well-entrenched support network. The nineteen hijackers were funded and facilitated by dozens of individuals, cells, front organizations, and affiliates that provided essential logistical support. Long-term logistical planning also went into the bombing of the USS Cole and the embassies in East Africa.

Accordingly, an individual, group, or state that provides funds, travel documents, training, or other support for terrorist activity is no less important to a terrorist network than the operative who detonates the bomb, pulls the trigger, or crashes the airplane. Among the terrorists subsequently linked to the September 11 plot are a disturbing number of individuals in an alarming number of countries who, while previously known to authorities as Islamic extremists (and in some cases the subjects of surveillance), were not assigned the priority they deserved because they were merely "terrorist supporters," not actual "terrorist operatives." Similarly, low priority was assigned to eliminating the permissive operating environment provided by states that allow terrorists to maintain facilities on their territory, largely on the grounds that these states did not themselves directly plan and execute terrorist attacks.

Despite an impressive collection of statements from senior administration officials and from President George W. Bush himself (e.g., "there are no good terrorists" and "if you house a terrorist, you are a terrorist"), such rhetoric has not been followed by a fully articulated policy or persistent action against the operational and logistical network of terror groups and sponsors outside of the al-Qaeda fold. Syria and Iran continue to sponsor terrorism at a frenetic pace; the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Lebanon publicly support terrorist groups without sanction; groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Islamic Action Front in Jordan vocally and actively support terrorist groups; and Hizballah, Hamas, PIJ, and other terrorist groups continue to raise funds, smuggle weapons, recruit operatives, and carry out gruesome attacks.

Conclusion

Given the multifarious links between international terrorist groups (including al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hizballah) and their relationships to state sponsors of terrorism such as Iran and Syria, the war on terror should have a strategic focus on the full matrix of international terrorism, not a tactical focus on al-Qaeda. The next phase of the war on terror demands greater attention to the web of logistical and operational interaction among these various groups and state sponsors.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow in terrorism studies at The Washington Institute and author of *Targeting Terror: U.S. Policy toward Middle Eastern State Sponsors and Terrorist Organizations, Post-September 11* (The Washington Institute, 2002).

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