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What Constitutes Terrorist Network Resiliency?

by David N Santos

Since the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001 there have been numerous discussions on the issue of terrorism and terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda, within the media and the intelligence community. At times these discussions have created an image of the terrorist phenomenon as one of a monolithic and unstoppable menace continuing to spread around the world unabated. Lost in these discussions is a basic understanding of what any organization needs to continue to exist. What are its basic needs? What are its sources of strength and resiliency? Most organizations, whether terrorist or not, rely on some basic essential elements that are used to help define, guide and maintain the organization. These elements allow an organization to develop strength in its structure as well as its cause in order to maintain a resilient mindset. These elements of strength and resiliency enable the organization to experience periods of adversity, look critically at the outcomes of those experiences and take the lessons learned to improve the organization's performance.

Every successful organization, to include terrorist organizations, has to identify what their most essential elements for survival are. These basic elements will vary to some degree based on an organization's unique qualities. However, there are some elements that are almost universal to all organizations and those identified as terrorist organizations in particular.

Some of the more universal elements that can contribute to a terrorist network's strength, longevity and resiliency involve the organization's ideology, social network apparatus and capability as well as the ability to maintain a source of funding for its operations. These are the key basic elements needed by any terrorist network to maintain and further a viable long lasting organization. If a terrorist organization were to fail to maintain a high level of proficiency in each of these elements, either individually or collectively, the organization could experience a degraded ability to achieve its desired objectives.

When analyzing the actions and motives of terrorist networks, specifically the current Islamic terrorist threat, an examination of what the driving ideology and principles at play influencing these organizations must be considered. It should be understood that ideology is essentially a collection of ideas and principles an individual or group believes will enable them to achieve a specific goal or objective. The significance of the role ideology has in facilitating a terrorist organization in achieving its objectives can be explained through the concept of *ends*, *ways* and *means*. More specifically, the *ends* represent the objectives a terrorist organization is looking to achieve. The *ways* is the concept, or the why, the terrorist organization is conducting certain acts. The *means* is the how a terrorist organization will achieve its stated objectives. In the case of terrorist networks the means is commonly achieved through the use of fear created by acts of violence. The ideology a terrorist organization uses to explain these ends, ways and means to its members must be expressed as simply and clearly as possible. If an ideology is too

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intricate and cumbersome potential recruits may not be able to relate to the ideology's principles easily and thus find it difficult to accept and believe in.

In the case of the Middle East, religion is the primary influencing ideology for terrorist activity. This is not to say there aren't other concepts or principles that help to encourage terrorist violence. Rather, the Islamic religion provides a common baseline of principles which members of the Muslim world are already familiar with and give precedence to in their daily lives. It is this basic understanding of the Islamic religion that radical clerics use help infuse their violent message into the principles of Islamic law. The trend today of the continuing growth of radical interpretations of Islam is aided by another movement underway in the Muslim world. This movement is known as *Salafi* which translated from Arabic refers to the "ancient one" indicating a connection the movement seeks to make with the Prophet Mohammed. The Salafi movement tries to evoke an image of the period of Islam during the days of the Prophet Mohammed that glorifies the perceived purity of the religion at that time (Sageman, 2004). The Salafi movement is based upon the belief that "Islam became decadent because it strayed from the righteous path" (Sageman, 2004, p. 4) it was founded on. Adherents of the Salafi ideology believe Islam has become diluted and decadent due to the influence of non-Muslim and Western principles and practices. The Salafi solution to this problem is to remove the corruption to the Islamic faith through the use of violence.

Once the corruptive influences are removed an Islamist state based on the Salafi perceived nature of Islamic law can be installed. The establishment of an Islamist state is clearly the Salafi goal or endstate and therefore the *ends* for their ideology. According to Sageman (2004), al Qaeda represents the most common example of a Salafi inspired terrorist organization. The Salafi belief that Islam has become corrupted by numerous non-Muslim influences is their justification for breaking with current modern Muslim traditions. Therefore Salafi opposition to those non-Muslim influences believed to be corrupt represents the *ways* for the Salafi ideology. The Salafi insistence on the use of violence as the primary method for achieving their objective of creating an Islamist state is the *means* of their ideology. Violence, although the more common tactic of the Salafi movement is not the only method used to continue the spread of Islam. In fact a more non-violent approach does exist through the process of spreading the meaning of Islam through contact face to face contact with individuals and groups. This process of preaching the word of Islam is known as *Dawa* which strives to incite change by exposing and converting individuals to Islam (Sageman, 2004).

As a non-violent approach to furthering Islam, the concept of *dawa* does not truly fit a terrorist organization's desire for achieving mass recruitment nor the ability to influence change in targeted populations and societies quickly. The concept of *dawa* is one that requires time and patience to bring change and further Islam's influence over a long period of time. However, the concept of *dawa* is not completely lost to Islamic inspired terrorist organizations and radicals. In fact as the concept of *dawa* expanded throughout history, so did its relationship with political activism. This relationship has been justified by Salafi leaders as a traditional principle within Islam (Sageman, 2004). Therefore as corruption grew within the governments of the Muslim world those within the Salafi movement believed the only solution to the corrupted Muslim states was the imposition of *Sharia Law* (Sageman, 2004). The Salafi movement saw the use of Sharia law as the only true law an individual was obligated to follow and obey. This belief in the supremacy of Sharia law took shape as a form of political activism, which according to Western standards violates a long standing principle of the separation of church and state (Sageman, 200).

With the infusion of Sharia law as well as other religious beliefs into a political context, Islamic clerics and leaders can ensure the presence of Islam in all aspects of an individual's life. With Islam's presence within a Muslim's daily life Islamic radical clerics and leaders make it difficult for other competing beliefs or ideologies to exist which would challenge Islam's hold on that society. Although, there are few states that are completely controlled and administered solely by Sharia law, the value placed on Islam's beliefs and principles as a defining social phenomenon for a society is no less significant. With the importance of Islam's role within a society as more than just a religion, radical clerics and leaders are able to demonstrate to potential recruits, through their own specific interpretation, how Islam continues to be an uncompromising and incorruptible part of their society. The ability to maintain this incorruptible image of Islam allows radical Islamic organizations to recruit new members who are either naïve to the greater society they live in or have become disheartened with the current government and society and seek some form of meaningful change. With this in mind the concept and value of *dawa* is not lost on terrorist organizations. They realize the need for getting their message (and subsequently their specific version of Islam) out to as many potential members as possible. The use of *dawa* in this manner by terrorist organizations is in keeping with the traditions envisioned by Muhammed Illyas who saw the spread of Islam to new places and individuals at the grassroots level (Sageman, 2004). This continued effort of bringing radical Islamic principles to new individuals and reinforcing those principles in those who have already accepted them serves to build strength and resiliency of the ideology of a terrorist organization.

The use of violence and fear allows a terrorist organization to rapidly gain the attention of the public and state governments to the objectives they are attempting to achieve. Acts of violence demonstrate to a targeted audience the dedication a terrorist organization has to its cause and ideology. No better example of this can be found than those acts of violence that involve suicide bombers. The death and destruction caused by the suicide bombing is not as important as the message it sends. The act of giving his or her life demonstrates to potential recruits the importance of the terrorist organization's cause. To the targeted audience, the suicide bomber shows the complexities that are involved in combating an individual devoted to a specific set of ideas. The act of giving one's life for a specific cause demonstrates the need for addressing the ideological commitment terrorists have for their cause at the same time as addressing a physical threat. If the ideological threat is left unanswered new recruits will continue to take the place of those suicide bombers. The fear resulting from acts of violence like suicide bombings, though useful for inciting fear in a targeted audience, can also demonstrate to young terrorist recruits how to get instantaneous results for their cause.

Ideology provides the bonding material for a terrorist organization to ensure all members, regardless of demographic or location, are acting within the same set of principles to achieve the organization's desired endstate. Terrorist ideology looks to manipulate the importance Islam has not only within the Muslim world as a whole but specifically with the individual Muslim. Islam has a greater role in dictating how a Muslim should live his or her life than is commonly seen in Western states with other religions. Radical clerics and terrorist leaders use individual adherence to Islam as a means to push their message of hate without question by the individual. However, ideology alone cannot allow a terrorist organization to maintain itself against counterterrorist efforts or achieve its goals. Terrorist organizations need to have the ability to bring in new members on a continuous basis. One way for ensuring access to new members is a functioning social structure and network within targeted societies.

As Sageman (2004) suggests the current wave of extremist Islamic terrorist organizations are not a “specific organization, but a social movement consisting of a set of more or less formal organizations, linked in patterns of interaction” (p. 137). This description indicates that although terrorist organizations may appear to operate as autonomous entities they are in fact interconnected with numerous other types of organizations. Through the use of social networking terrorist organizations have attached themselves to both violent and non-violent organizations to acquire a variety of needed support and services. One of the prevailing images of terrorists when viewed from a social context is that they are either isolated individuals or small groups who have become radicalized in some fashion. This however, is not the case; terrorists are in fact linked not only to one another but to various individuals with a given society and at various levels either directly or indirectly (Sageman, 2004).

One of the key structural elements of terrorist organizations Sageman (2004) describes is the concept of *hubs*. These hubs serve as the brains, or nerve center, for terrorist activity. Although Sageman’s (2004) description of terrorist hubs focuses on a global context depicting regional hubs this same type of structure can be found at all levels of society where terrorist activity whether violent or non-violent takes place. As Sageman (2004) points out these regional hubs receive their guidance and direction along with funding from a *central staff* hub. The purpose of this central staff is to help direct and fund terrorist operations within the desired ideological direction of the overall movement. The influence of Sageman’s (2004) description of terrorist networks involving the use of hubs can be seen today within the analysis provided by some U.S. intelligence organizations. A similar structure depicting terrorist structure and activity was devised by the United State Army’s Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG). Their analysis indicated a similar concept of a small core of terrorist leaders providing guidance and direction to smaller organizations. The AWG model also used the concept of a circular structure with a *central staff* type of element as the center of the model with successive rings of smaller groups insulating the central staff. These successive rings would also include groups that provided specific services such as logistics, intelligence, operations and recruitment.

This is a very practical structure in that each of the functions needed (funding, logistics, intelligence, operations, recruitment) can all be compartmentalized from one another. This compartmentalization allows strength to the overall organization and movement by minimizing potential damage to the network resulting from counterterrorist operations. However, some terrorist organizations have used a more traditional hierarchical structure for its command and control functions. Unfortunately, this form of structure has proved to be more vulnerable to state counterterrorist efforts (Sageman, 2004). One such organization is Indonesia’s Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) who’s hierarchical structure was severely disrupted by the Indonesian security forces in the years following the October 2002 Bali nightclub bombing.

In order to maintain security and continue to gain access to resources terrorist organizations have to grow and adapt themselves to their environment as it changes (Sagmen, 2004). Not to change and adapt would result in the terrorist organization in becoming complicit in its activities and security measures. One element to maintaining a terrorist organization’s resiliency is the adaptability of its members. The ability of a terrorist organization’s members to integrate themselves into a society with no identifiable characteristics which could draw unwanted attention is imperative. This is a quality that would be of great importance to those individuals who serve as recruiters, financiers or logisticians. These individuals need to maintain an appearance of full integration into a society to facilitate their efforts in gaining the trust of

other individuals capable of providing some form of assistance. Once a terrorist member has gained the trust of a targeted group within a society they are then capable of sharing their specific radical beliefs, thus expanding the terrorist ideology to a greater audience. In this manner a single individual can serve as a hub for a terrorist organization, identifying new members and sources of support while expanding the reach and influence of the terrorist organization's ideology (Sageman, 2004).

Adaptability among the members of a terrorist organization allows that organization the ability to decentralize some of its leadership and operational control. The ability to operate in a decentralized manner allows a terrorist organization to withstand the loss of multiple hubs while not completely preventing the organization from continuing its operations (Sageman, 2004). This is in contrast to Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah which experienced a significant decline in its abilities to conduct operations in the short term following attacks specifically targeting the organization's hierarchy (Sageman, 2004). With the increase in the number of hubs a terrorist organization has in operation there is also an increase in the number of general purpose members (fighters) available as well. Counterterrorist efforts that would focus primarily on the threat posed by these general purpose members would not reduce the terrorist organization's overall capabilities. However, if these same counterterrorist efforts focus on identifying and targeting an organizations hubs and a sufficient number are destroyed a terrorist organization's capabilities could be severely restricted (Sageman, 2004). A robust social network affords a terrorist organization two key strengths 1) multiple lines of contact with individuals and groups which can provide a variety of support services, in return for which the terrorist organization shares their radical ideology and 2) a defense in depth concept as a protective measure against counterterrorist efforts. That is, the greater the number of subordinate hubs and general purpose members the more insulated the core organizational leadership and primary support structure becomes.

As important as ideology and social networking are, their benefits will only carry a terrorist organization to a certain extent. As with virtually any other organization or activity around the world, money, is the lifeblood of any organization or movement. Without a reliable source of funding a terrorist organization loses its ability to be proactive in conducting operations as well as procure needed support services and material items. Since acquiring and maintaining sources of financing is vital to the existence of a terrorist organization, security for those sources of funding along with the methods of transferring and storing funds is equally vital. As a result, terrorist organizations have proved to be exceptionally agile in identifying and implementing numerous methods of funding and transferring money in order to prevent effective countermeasures by state governments (Williams, 2005).

The process of globalization has created unprecedented levels of interconnectivity among not only state governments but also among domestic and international financial institutions. As such, vast sums of money can be transferred from one part of the world to another nearly instantaneously. The sheer pace and vastness of the globalization process with developments in information and telecommunications technology has created a nearly impossible task to monitor effectively daily financial transactions to ensure there is no link to terrorist activity. Previous attempts to counter terrorist financing, such as in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, has been to freeze known or suspected terrorist financial assets. Yet this countermeasure has only yielded limited success. As Williams (2005) notes, current attempts to identify and attack terrorist financing has

only served to increase the “capacity of terrorist organizations to adapt quickly to new regulations by adopting novel methods of circumventing rules and regulations” (pp. 6).

If Williams (2005) is correct in his analysis that current efforts to target terrorist funding are only resulting in making smarter and more efficient fiscally minded terrorist organizations than what is enabling this trend? One of the key issues is current international law is lacking in specificity and applicability to the nature of the threat posed by transnational terrorist organizations like al Qaeda. One of the main deficiencies with international law is with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) which had been created in 1989 by the G-7 states to counter money laundering activities conducted by international criminal and drug trafficking organizations (Williams, 2005). The FATF identified 40 recommendations to be implemented to counter money laundering activities.

However, no formal binding convention or treaty was created therefore consistent implementation of the FATF recommendations did not occur thus leaving loop holes in international law for use by terrorist organizations to circumvent the FATF. Efforts like the FATF can only be successful if they receive the full support of the international community. Limited or no support provides opportunities for terrorist organizations to continue their financing operations relatively unmolested. The FATF was a lackluster effort to combat terrorist financing due to inefficiency in the manner in which it operated resulting in money laundering not being truly deterred but rather shifted to other areas around the globe where these activities could be conducted more freely (Williams, 2005). The FATF is only one example of inconsistencies in international economic law (as well as with state domestic law) which have inhibited effective terrorist financing countermeasures. The ineffectiveness of the FATF and other counter drug and organized crime measures which have been used to target terrorist financing has only served to actually create more experienced and smarter terrorist financing practices. Instead of preventing terrorist financing, efforts such as the FATF have only facilitated it to expand.

Current international law efforts to combat terrorist financing have primarily focused on terrorist funds once they have been obtained. So how does a terrorist organization receive its funds? Only a handful of terrorist organizations such as Hizbollah or Hamas and a variety of the Palestinian organizations have been able to receive direct funding from state sponsors. A more common system of terrorist funding is through the patronage of another terrorist organization like al Qaeda, direct funding through donations from sympathetic individuals or groups as well as the use of charitable organizations. The use of patronage is a common practice used by al Qaeda who provides support to religious centers and schools which promote their specific extremist Islamic ideology. In this way al Qaeda, through its financial support to these schools, is ensuring a continuous process of recruitment and indoctrination of new members while continuing to the spread of their violent message. One could say al Qaeda’s support of these schools is a form of investment in their own future.

Just as with any typical business or company within the international community there is an individual or group that is responsible for securing sources of funding. Terrorist organizations have this same requirement for an individual to serve as a financial facilitator. For many organizations, such as al Qaeda, a financial facilitator is responsible for identifying those individuals or organizations that would be sympathetic to their group and secure donations from them. So significant is the role of the facilitator that there are at any one moment numerous facilitators engaging different geographical regions simultaneously. The 9/11 commission

concluded the use of facilitators has become so widespread that the funds for the attacks in New York City and Washington were generated by a core group of facilitators operating throughout the Persian Gulf region (Comras, 2005). The 9/11 Commission also indicated financial facilitators were the primary individuals within the al Qaeda network responsible for securing funding as well as moving those funds to various locations and cells and storing additional funds (Comras, 2005). Since the release of the 9/11 Commission's report numerous al Qaeda facilitators have been targeted but al Qaeda has been able to replace the loss of facilitators at an almost one to one ratio (Comras, 2005). Clearly, al Qaeda and arguably other terrorist organizations realize the importance of these facilitators. Having a dedicated individual(s) responsible for funding ensures security as well as continuity through maintaining institutional knowledge of the process of financing the organization.

Perhaps one of the most widely used methods of raising, moving and storing funds by terrorist organizations is through the use of charities. The concept of charity is an integral part of the Islamic faith and the responsibility of every Muslim to perform. According to Islamic law each Muslim is expected to donate a percentage of their own personal wealth (a process known as *zakat*) as well as provide assistance to charitable efforts through personal service of some kind (Comras, 2005). These donations are quite often collected by local religious centers or mosques and later distributed to other charitable organizations to support various social programs. However, terrorist organizations like al Qaeda, Hizbollah and Jemaah Islamiyah have gained access to these donations through their support of the religious centers and mosques where these donations are made. To complicate matters these donations, viewed as individual religious obligations, have little to no oversight by state governments, particularly within the Middle East (Comras, 2005). Therefore these donation sites provide in many ways a secure and continuous form of access to funds for terrorist organizations. Unfortunately, many of the individuals providing these donations do not know their funds will ultimately end up supporting terrorist violence.

Terrorist organizations like Hizbollah, Hamas, and Jemaah Islamiyah have used charities as a means to improve and solidify their own public image with a local population. Through the use and support of charities terrorist organizations have been involved in providing essential social services and relief to targeted populations (Abuza, 2009). Through an active role in charities terrorist organizations have been able to bring themselves closer to the population while at the same time isolating a state government from that same population. In the case of Jemaah Islamiyah they worked hand in hand with the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia charity to provide relief to victims of the Tsunami disaster that hit Indonesia in December 2004 (Abuza, 2009). Although, support of charities does not in anyway reduce a terrorist organization's desire for the use of violence, it can have the affect of causing the populations they operate in to overlook that violence. A situation such as this only makes counterterrorist efforts for a state government that much more difficult. Thus the use and support of charities provides a nearly constant and almost secure method of raising, moving, and storing funds for terrorist organizations.

The threat of terrorism and those organizations dedicated to using violence to bring attention to their cause and to achieve a desired endstate is not likely to disappear anytime soon. Knowing this, state governments are wise to look at what are the key elements which allow these terrorist organizations to continue to exist. There are a few basic elements that all terrorist organizations need in order to exist. These elements allow terrorist organizations to build and maintain strength and longevity as well as foster a high level of resiliency to withstand set backs.

Some of these elements are ideology which on one hand serves to ensure a common understanding of purpose of what the organization is trying to achieve and on the other hand, ideology can be used to maintain consistency of purpose and a unity of effort for a terrorist organization which is geographically dispersed.

Social networks are another key element. These networks allow terrorist organizations to expand their influence (ideology) to new and larger populations, thus exposing them to greater pools of potential recruits as well as sympathetic supporters who may provide logistical, financial or intelligence support. These social networks provide depth to a terrorist organization creating a larger organization composed of numerous smaller semi-autonomous groups. This depth within the organization adds security to withstand counterterrorist efforts by a state government. Perhaps, the most important element though for terrorist organizations is financing. Even with a cohesive ideology which is maintained and expanded through robust social networks, if the organization does not have some form of funding little will be accomplished. The current state of international economic law is failing to meet the challenge of terrorist financing. A lack of coherent and robust international law has enabled terrorist organizations to use loop holes in the law to facilitate money laundering and transfers as well as use civilian charities, both legitimate and illegitimate, to collect, transfer and store money. This lack of focus on how terrorist organizations receive funding will continue to enable them to do so. Any counterterrorist effort looking to achieve success must first identify what the basic needs of any terrorist organization are, tailor those needs to specific organizations and regions and begin to target those areas. Failing to do this will only lead to continued limited success in combating terrorism.

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