

Portrait of a Modern Terrorist Group

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THE events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent attacks in Madrid, London and elsewhere have left us in no doubt that there are groups motivated by a questionable brand of Islam prepared to target people and property in the west. What is less obvious is that since 9/11 the nature of this threat has changed. To properly appreciate the new menace and have any chance of neutralising it, an understanding of how terrorist networks form is crucial. Worryingly, western governments have failed to recognise this.

Before the 9/11 attacks on the US, the terrorist networks backed by Al-Qaida were extensions of neighbourhood gangs, student associations or study groups at radical mosques. These groups of young men became radicalised together, through normal face-to-face interaction. The group acted as an echo chamber, amplifying its members' grievances, intensifying their bonds to each other and fostering the values of the group over those of the wider society, leading to a gradual separation from it. These natural group dynamics resulted in a spiral of mutual encouragement, transforming a few young Muslims into dedicated terrorists willing to follow the model of their heroes and sacrifice themselves for comrades and the cause. Their decision to turn to violence and the terrorist movement was a collective one and they travelled to Afghanistan together for training. Once there, some were incorporated into Al-Qaida Central, which exerted control from its central command on its social networks around the world. Others returned home to cause mischief.

Today, Islamist networks are still based around "bunches of guys", but the way they are connected to each other and to Al-Qaida Central has altered. This is partly a result of the "war on terror". The horrors of 9/11 galvanised the US into attempting to destroy the terrorist movement. US forces invaded Afghanistan, destroying terrorist sanctuaries, eliminating key members of the Al-Qaida leadership and forcing the rest into hiding. The US also started monitoring communications and stemming the flow of money from the leaders to the followers. In essence, the allied response isolated the surviving leadership and, through worldwide vigilance, made it very difficult for the networks to survive. Most members went into hiding, and a few of the remaining leaders found an isolated sanctuary in the Afghan-Pakistani border region.

Despite all this, grass-roots recruitment and mobilisation continued, fuelled by Muslims outraged at the invasion of Iraq. When these newcomers tried to join the Al-Qaida social movement, they found it hard to make contact with the actual organisation (with some spectacular exceptions among second-generation British citizens from Pakistani families, who managed to join terrorist groups in Pakistan using family connections). As a result, with no real links to Al-Qaida Central, the new wave of terrorist wannabes became radicalised entirely at home, self-financed and self-trained.

Good examples of this kind of disconnected network include: the group behind the 2004 Madrid train bombings; the network that included Mohammed Bouyeri, who in 2004 killed the Dutch film director Theo van Gogh because of a provocative film he made about Islam; the group arrested in 2005 in Australia while allegedly conspiring to bomb Sydney and Melbourne; and the Toronto group arrested in 2006 for planning to bomb the Canadian parliament.

Another major recent change is that new sympathisers are being radicalised online rather than face-to-face, through Islamist-extremist internet forums. Young Muslims use such platforms to share their dreams, hopes and grievances. The same support and validation that young people used to derive from their "real world" peer groups are now found in these forums, which hail terrorist heroes. Al-Qaida is becoming a virtual social movement. This in turn is transforming the demographic of the network, attracting ever younger members and women, who find it easier to participate in online discussions.

The post-9/11 environment has seen Al-Qaida evolve into a decentralised social structure -- a "leaderless jihad". While it lacks a formal command-and-control structure, the internet allows it a semblance of unity. Indeed, the internet's structure has had a profound influence on the jihad. The anonymity it offers protects members and allows them to link up without ever needing to meet in person. It leads to attacks by terrorists who appear to be "lone wolves" but who are in fact part of a virtual network. Take Yehya Kadouri, a 17-year-old Dutch boy who built a bomb in his parents' home. He had never met another terrorist but was an active member of several forums.

The key to the modern terrorist network is the collective discourse on internet forums, which provides general guidance and tactical instruction to the participants in the absence of the command hierarchies of traditional terrorist organisations. It also fosters a true conversation among the participants -- it is impossible to anticipate where a given discussion will lead. The result is that each small local terrorist network pursues its own activity for its own local reasons, and in doing so promotes the overall goals and strategy of the Al-Qaida terrorist social movement far more effectively than any central command could. This explains why governments' bureaucratic and ideological approach to tackling terrorism -- pursuing high-value targets in the hope the movement will implode -- is bound to fail.

What, then, should governments do? Their strategy should be twofold. First, they should continue to seek to eliminate violent networks, and ensure the fair prosecution of captured terrorists in a transparent way in order to regain the trust of Muslim communities worldwide. Any campaign against terrorism must be focused exclusively on the perpetrators, and not on racial or ethnic groups in general. It is when Muslims are indiscriminately censured that they become angry. It is also worth remembering that the most effective way to rob terrorism of its glory is to reduce the terrorists to common criminals. There is no glory in being taken to prison in handcuffs.

The second strategy is to contain the threat and wait until it disappears for internal reasons. Young people follow fashions and define themselves in contrast to their elders. They worship fashionable "jihadi heroes", but fashions come and go. If we have the good sense to allow the leaderless jihad to fade away, it should do so in years rather than generations. The aim should be

to accelerate the process of internal decay by avoiding any action -- such as the invasion of Iraq - that could prolong and invigorate this violent movement. A military strategy, for example, is completely counterproductive because it creates more terrorists than it eliminates.

Journalists and commentators are quick to connect the dots of the various scattered Islamist activities and imagine an overall coordination and conspiracy, yet these ad hoc operations do not add up to a coherent political strategy or a coordinated, international grand plan. The network may have evolved since 9/11, but its limitations are clear: the leaderless jihad can only be a terrorist network and nothing more.