



## **Dislocating Alcioneus: How to combat al-Qaeda and the new terrorism**

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*Heracles slew that great man of war, giant of terror, Alcioneus; but not before the giant, with rocks his only weapon, felled twelve four-horse chariots, and the men who bestrode them twice the number, proud horsemen all. -Pindar, Nemean Odes*

### **A strategy of dislocation**

Among the exploits of the mythic hero Heracles was his contest with Alcioneus, son of Gaia the earth goddess. Unknown to Heracles, Gaia had made her son invulnerable in the land of his birth, where he and Heracles confronted each other. So Alcioneus was able to brush aside Heracles' best efforts and kill many of the hero's companions. Eventually, Athena intervened to reveal Alcioneus' secret. Heracles then dragged Alcioneus beyond the borders of his homeland and was able to defeat him. The Greek hero used a similar stratagem to defeat another of Gaia's sons, Antaeus, a wrestler who grew stronger whenever he was thrown to the earth. To prevail, Heracles wrapped his arms around Antaeus, lifted him off the ground, and crushed him to death while holding him aloft.

Both stories describe Heracles using a strategy of dislocation to defeat an asymmetric foe. The unique capabilities of these foes allowed them not only to absorb Heracles' assaults with relative impunity, but to actually benefit from them: they grew stronger as the Greek hero grew weary. In order to defeat them, Heracles had to alter the terms of battle in an unusual way. Devising a successful strategy required that he understand the specific asymmetry that allowed his opponents to turn his assaults to their advantage. The stories of Alcioneus and Antaeus also call attention to the important distinction between "asymmetric strategies" and "asymmetric foes". An asymmetric strategy for defeating a Heracles-like character would involve avoiding tests of brute strength. By contrast, an asymmetric foe (such as Alcioneus) might allow or even seek direct confrontation. This, because the foe's very nature would transform the dynamics of the engagement.

The 11 September attacks were not only acts of asymmetric warfare, they were the acts of an asymmetric foe: al-Qaeda. Its organizational structure is that of a distributed transnational network composed of semi-autonomous subnational elements. This makes it relatively immune to the type of counter-measures that might work well against traditional nation-state adversaries. Indeed, the strategy of this foe depends on provoking a standard military response -- preferably one that drives a wedge between the Muslim and non-Muslim segments of humanity. Al Qaeda's terrorist violence is neither "nihilistic", as some have asserted, nor is it narrowly instrumental. Instead, it is catalytic -- meaning that it aims to provoke a wider conflict and mobilize a larger constituency. As Osama bin Laden freely admits: "We are seeking to incite the Islamic nation to rise up to liberate its land and to conduct jihad for the sake of God."<sup>1</sup>

## **Targeting al-Qaeda**

Official discourse on terrorism has tended to treat the subject in an undisciplined fashion, preferring rhetoric to analysis.<sup>2</sup> Effective action requires that the subject be parsed. An important first step is to recognize that "terrorism", per se, is not the type of thing against which a state or an alliance can "wage war," properly speaking. Terrorism is not an entity, like a nation-state, that can be simply targeted. It is an activity -- and one that in many respects is more akin to crime, than war. It has no capital, no center, no unifying program or ideology. It is not even truly an "ism".

Terrorism is a political pathology generated by conditions of communal violence, civil decay, and social despair, polarization, and alienation. With regard to modern international society, it is not a transient or ephemeral problem, but an existential one -- which means it is deeply rooted in modern conditions and not vulnerable to a quick "knock out" blow. Instead, it defines a persistent category of security threat -- like cross-border aggression, genocide, or illicit arms transfers -- and should be seen as a routine or categorical concern for security establishments.<sup>3</sup>

The threat that showed itself on 11 September, however, was neither random nor existential. It was particular and historical. A sensible program of counter-measures would target this threat specifically, carefully tailoring responses to its character. The 11 September attacks were the worst in a series of assaults drawing attention to al-Qaeda and to the phenomena of the "new terrorism" specifically.

What is uniquely worrisome about al-Qaeda is its size, resource base, energy, sophistication, global reach, and inclination to conduct mass casualty attacks. Of particular concern to the United States is that the organization has specifically targeted US assets and the US homeland. Moreover, some members and associates of al-Qaeda had been able to gain facilitated entry into the United States and even the US armed forces as a consequence of earlier US support for the "Arab Afghan" mujahedin and of the close ongoing US relationship with Egypt and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> By any measures, these characteristics make al-Qaeda a unique threat.

The bin Laden network arose from brigades of Islamic volunteers who traveled to Afghanistan to fight Soviet occupation during the 1980s. It served initially to channel people and resources into that struggle and to support foreign veterans of the civil war and their families. By various estimates between 35,000 and 50,000 foreign Islamic volunteers have fought in Afghanistan, although most of these have been Pakistani. Between 10,000 and 15,000 of these volunteers came from the Arab world and many of these "Arab Afghans" moved through the channels that Osama bin Laden came to manage and control.<sup>5</sup>

At the start of the recent Afghan war approximately 2,000-3,000 volunteers were under al-Qaeda control inside Afghanistan, although perhaps only 25 percent of these were formal cadre of al-Qaeda, having taken an oath or bayat to bin Laden. Outside of Afghanistan, formal members certainly number less than a thousand, but they try to recruit among the much more numerous veterans of the Afghan wars. Through an umbrella formation, the Islamic World Front, al-Qaeda is also linked with Egypt's Jihad Group and Islamic Group, Pakistan's Al-Ansar Movement, the Jihad Movement of Bangladesh, Algeria's Armed Islamic Group, and the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines. Al Qaeda is estimated to have affiliations or operational cells in more than 40 countries.<sup>6</sup>

## **Organizational characteristics**

There are several characteristics of al-Qaeda (and organizations like it) that a program of effective counter-action must take into account:<sup>7</sup>

- Terrorist organizations of the new type tend to have a distributed or network structure and, thus, are quite decentralized, relative to Western military establishments.
- The new terrorism combines features of subnational and transnational organization. Al Qaeda, for instance, links subnational elements together in a transnational web.
- Commensurate with its transnational/subnational character, the new terrorism is relatively independent of state support. If anything, it is dependent on the phenomenon of weak or "failed" states, which it exploits, as in the cases of Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen.
- As a transnational organization, al-Qaeda also depends on and exploits the gaps or seams in international society -- it lives in the interstices. Anything that undermines or limits international cooperation, especially between the west and Muslim states, facilitates al-Qaeda's activities both globally and within states.
- Al Qaeda is a multi-functional formation, combining features of military, criminal, political, and commercial enterprises. Its component parts are also linked, at least informally, with social-cultural or religious organizations as well as political parties. Thus, al-Qaeda has both overt and covert components. This dual nature extends to its military activities.

Inside Afghanistan al-Qaeda cadre and volunteers served the Taliban regime in numerous overt roles: as shock troops and specialists in the civil war, as military trainers, as "virtue police", and as leadership

bodyguards. Outside Afghanistan, however, the sinews that hold al-Qaeda together are not typical military command, control, and logistical arrangements:<sup>8</sup>

- Individual cells and functional areas (planning, operations, support, intelligence, media) are insulated from each other. And these are embedded in a broader community of contacts and comrades. Common training, shared wartime experience, and adherence to bin Laden's perverse distortion of Islam are the pivotal integrative elements of the network
- Some operatives, resources, and general directions flow from the center, but initiative is highly decentralized and much of the network's support is procured locally. In a sense, the existence of the network itself -- the web of worldwide contacts that it embodies -- is the most important support that its individual cells receive.

These features of al-Qaeda make it a type of organization that cannot be easily "decapitated" or destroyed by one devastating blow to a "center." Moreover, attacks on individual components will be far less effective in collapsing this type of organization than they are when used against centralized or pyramidal structures. Rather than investing heavily in the hope for a "knock out" blow, a more systematic approach is required -- that is: an approach that attacks the network comprehensively as a system.

The foundation of a systematic campaign against al-Qaeda would be activities that (i) squeeze the blood flow of the organization -- its financial support system; (ii) throw more light on the organization's members and components through intelligence gathering activities; (iii) impede the movement of the organization by increasing the sensitivity of screening procedures at critical gateways -- borders, financial exchanges, arms markets, and transportation portals; and (iv) improve the protection of high-value targets. These measures would serve to diminish the organization's stealth, flexibility, and resourcefulness while also decreasing the vulnerability of its preferred targets.

Several of these proposed steps would make the routine activities of al-Qaeda more risky for its members. Recruiting, traveling, changing residences, collecting resources, training, reconnoitering targets -- all would carry a higher risk of detection and apprehension. At the same time, better protection of preferred targets will force the organization into more demanding and risky maneuvers, imposing a higher cost for success. Not only would this approach increase the likelihood of detection and apprehension or interdiction, it would also leave the organization less able to recover from strikes by military or law enforcement agencies. The organization might choose or be coerced into accepting a lower level of activity -- fewer attacks on a smaller scale against less salient targets -- but this is not an acceptable alternative for an organization like al-Qaeda. As discussed in the next section, it lives and grows only by means of executing frequent high-profile attacks.

## The logic of al-Qaeda's terrorism

Organizations that employ terrorism as their principal means of action lack the capability to persist in open armed contests with regular government forces. They compensate for this weakness through stealth and by choosing "soft", high-value (or strategic) targets. Their stealth derives from their modest institutional "footprint" and from their reliance on very small, irregular units that adopt civilian guise. This civilian guise allows their members and cells to disappear into civilian life and exploit channels of movement and communication not normally open to hostiles. This is an indirect method of opening gaps in their opponents' defenses.<sup>9</sup>

A functional taxonomy of terrorist strategies might differentiate them based on how they relate terrorist acts to ultimate ends or goals. Along these lines we can distinguish instrumental, catalytic, and immanent strategies. An instrumental strategy seeks an immediate gain or concession of some sort; or it seeks to deter some policy. A catalytic strategy seeks to inspire a constituency or to provoke a broader confrontation. Immanent strategies are those in which terror and destruction seem to be ends in themselves -- although the terrorist actor may see them as part of some greater metaphysical drama (apocalyptic terrorism), or as a desperate act of defiance and protest (expressive terrorism), or as a blow against a social order that is regarded corrupt beyond reform (nihilistic terrorism).

Instrumental terrorism often tailors violence to communicate a degree of restraint or proportionality. Implicit in this is the threat of "more to come" if the terrorists' demands are not met. However, instrumental terrorist acts also aim to communicate that negotiation or de-escalation is possible. By comparison, when a terrorist organization sees violence primarily as a catalysis of broader conflict, it will seek to cause as much damage as its capabilities allow. It does not fear polarization, but instead seeks it.

Al Qaeda attempts to use terror both instrumentally -- as in its assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud -- and as catalyst. Its global acts emphasize catalytic ends. The catalytic employment of terror is of greatest concern both because it tends toward large-scale destruction far removed from any specific battlefield and because al-Qaeda happens to have an attentive, responsive audience. Its hope of inciting a broader Islamic extremism is not delusional. This is not to say that al-Qaeda "represents" a constituency. It does not. But it does speak in a popular idiom, echoing popular concerns in the Muslim world. To further specify al-Qaeda's strategy:

- When using force as a mobilizing tool, the object of mobilization is people (potential recruits and supporters), resources, and public opinion. Acting forcibly can serve these ends by drawing attention to a cause, by demonstrating the feasibility of direct action, and by establishing the credibility of a terrorist organization.
- Catalytic uses of force are also meant to be provocative; they aim to compel responses from a targeted authority that isolates it politically, alters the balance of public opinion in ways favorable to the terrorists' cause, and facilitates terrorist mobilization efforts.

Thus, al-Qaeda strategy sees competition as occurring in two dimensions: the first involves ultimate objectives and is protracted; the second involves altering the political-military context in which ultimate objectives are pursued. The second dimension of struggle comprises a contest of political-military or strategic mobilization. Viewed from this perspective, the aim of terrorist activity is to catalyze a constituency in support of their program while compelling their opponents to act in ways that leave them exhausted, divided internally, despised within the terrorists' community of origin, and isolated internationally. Compared to this, the competition in the first dimension seems fairly straight-forward: it involves each side trying simply to impose its will on the other. Viewed solely in terms of this dimension, the terrorist challenge seems to invite fairly standard military and law enforcement responses. But it is the second dimension of competition that determines the magnitude, tenacity, and effectiveness of the terrorist challenge overall.

Military and law enforcement officials may choose to take a one-dimensional view of the struggle, but their actions will register in both dimensions, nonetheless. The danger is that governments will opt for "intuitive" one-dimensional responses that inadvertently contribute to the success of the terrorist's catalytic project. In order to dislocate terrorist groups, governments must isolate them politically and morally from the constituencies these groups hope to mobilize or co-opt. Less ambitiously: governments must minimize actions that have the effect of increasing the resonance of the terrorists' message. Actions that fail to respect these limits can have broadly destabilizing effects, swelling the ranks of the terrorist organizations and the discontented.

Recognizing the catalytic strategy that al-Qaeda and like-minded organization pursue, the program of counter-measures should emphasize actions that exhibit a high ratio of effectiveness to visibility and collateral effects. Low profile actions are best.

## **Elements of a global counter-terrorism program**

Commensurate with the decentralized and distributed form of the threat, a program of counter-measures must be coordinated globally and rooted locally in nations around the world. Moreover, recognizing that transnational terrorist organizations depend on and exploit the gaps in international society, international cooperation must be seamless. What is needed most is multinational cooperation in intelligence gathering and law enforcement activities. Especially important is the participation of nations in and around zones of instability. Only this type of effort can match the distributed character of the threat. But it will not happen without a strong foundation of consensus and trust.

Effective action against the new terrorism must combine direct and indirect measures:

- Direct measures seek to uncover and engage terrorists, their activities, and their supporters. Direct measures include active efforts at detection, disruption, apprehension, interdiction, and emergency response. They also include passive or routine efforts at screening and protection.

- Indirect measures address those conditions that facilitate the growth, activity, and power of terrorist organizations. Indirect measures aim to contain, slow, and reduce threat generation; these are discussed in the next section.

Within this schema, military action has a necessary place. But it should be carefully focused and emphasize the disruption and interdiction of terrorist groups -- not large-scale attacks on nation states. Military action must be discriminating in a way that most wars are not. Large-scale bombing campaigns, for instance, cut too broad a swath of destruction. This can feed the well of anti-Western sentiment that in turn shields and sustains terrorism. (Knowing this, terrorists care little about the destruction they bring down on people around them). On balance, patient intelligence gathering efforts, law enforcement, and measures of homeland protection are more important tools than large military strikes.<sup>10</sup>

## Protection and prevention

Homeland protection efforts should focus selectively on points of critical vulnerability -- such as airlines and nuclear power plants. In this area, America has more to learn from Europe and Israel than teach. The lapses in US airline security, for instance, are a scandal -- even to this day.<sup>11</sup>

Nations should also aim to better screen access to arms and to hazardous materials, machinery, and training. A comprehensive international criminal database and terrorist "watch list" would greatly facilitate this effort. It could also enhance passport control. What presently exists along these lines is piecemeal and under-funded. For instance, prior to 11 September, the US custom bureau had only limited real-time access to Interpol's database because the latter could not afford to extend its services.<sup>12</sup>

Tighter controls on technologies of mass destruction are especially important. Inspection and enforcement protocols to the chemical and biological weapon conventions should be strengthened. Cooperative threat reduction programs, like the one that helps the former Soviet republics manage their nuclear materials, should be extended to cover other regions and other types of weapons. Less exotic, but equally important: international flows of money, small arms, and military expertise must be made more transparent, nationally and internationally.

The tragic events of 11 September also underscore the urgent need for national police and intelligence agencies to dispense with bureaucratic feudalism and "turf wars". Effective action against the new terrorism requires unprecedented cooperation among agencies within nations and, especially, across borders. We do not need new police agencies or new police powers so much as we need existing agencies to use their powers more efficiently.<sup>13</sup>

## **Building cooperation**

Should the campaign against terrorism be perceived as the privileged instrument of a few states, it will not elicit the cooperation essential for its success. Thus, the campaign must be placed in a multilateral, legal framework as soon as possible.

Some first steps are elementary: All nations should endorse the International Criminal Court and extend the Court's purview to cover terrorism. Interpol and the UN Terrorism Prevention Branch should be reinforced substantially to help lead international cooperation in law enforcement. Military action against terrorism -- apart from acts of immediate self-defense -- should proceed under UN auspices, as during the Gulf War.

Internationalization of the campaign could have been advanced had the UN Security Council established a special tribunal on the crimes of September 11. The Security Council might also convene an international summit to map international strategy on terrorism. A jumble of competing national strategies will not do.<sup>14</sup>

## **Indirect counter-measures: the problem of failed states and regional instability**

The recent terrorist threat is part of shockwave emanating from the Middle East, Persian Gulf, and South and Central Asia conflicts of the past 35 years. These conflicts have filled the ranks of terrorist organizations, given them a field of play, and provided them with an attentive potential constituency. Progress toward fairly resolving the conflicts in Kashmir and between Israel and the Palestinian Authority would serve to weaken the resonance and mobilizing capacity of organizations like al-Qaeda.

The events of 11 September also made clear the necessity of attending to the stability of Afghanistan -- but not simply because Osama bin Laden and his cohort resided in that country, nor even because top Taliban leaders permitted them to do so. Both these facts were symptomatic of conditions that have made Afghanistan an incubator of terrorism for more than twenty years. The culprit was no one individual, organization, or government but, instead, a set of conditions: interminable civil war, a shattered civil society, and weak, non-responsive governance. Outside powers contributed generously to these conditions over the years -- grinding down Afghan society and seeking variously to subjugate the country, use it as a springboard for their strategic ambitions, or exploit its internal divisions and conflicts.

The case of Afghanistan shows how the new terrorist threat is related to several other distinctive challenges of the post-cold war era: the rash of failed and fragile states, the increase in communal conflict, and associated regional rivalries. Fragile states should be considered major gaps in international society and, as noted above, transnational terrorist (and criminal) organizations live and breed in such gaps. The post-cold war demobilization of large numbers of military personnel and

insurgents is a related problem in regions where these fighters have not been successfully re-integrated into civilian life and economy. Also related is the broad availability of light weapons, which in many places has fed a Kalashnikov culture. Together these challenges form a "problem cluster" that has significantly determined the character and magnitude of the new terrorism.

From this knowledge flows several policy guidelines:

First, effective action against terrorism requires that we attend to and balance the variety of issues that constitute the problem cluster of which the new terrorism is only one aspect.

Second, the international community must redouble its efforts to clean-up the effluent of the Cold war, defuse chronic conflicts, and stabilize war-ravaged societies. This task is harder and more expensive than once imagined, but clearly the price of neglect is even greater.

Finally, nations must (at minimum) avoid feeding the fires of toxic regional conflicts through destabilizing arms transfers and military assistance. Outside powers must finally abandon the reckless notion that such conflicts or their participants can be reliably harnessed to support national objectives.<sup>15</sup> If the 20-year Afghan civil war and its aftermath teach any lesson it is this: the dogs of war, once stirred, are likely to run out of control. We ignore this lesson at our peril.

## Notes

1 Quote is from a June 1999 al-Jazeera interview, see: "A sampling of quotations from Osama bin Laden," *Reuters*, 20 September 2001. Also see: Magnus Ranstorp, "Interpreting the broader context and meaning of Bin-Laden's fatwa," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 21 (4) 1998.

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