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# Rethinking Terrorism and Counterterrorism Since 9/11

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*This article examines what has been learned since 11 September 2001 about the nature of twenty-first-century terrorism, the challenges that it poses, and how it must be countered. It attempts to better understand Usama bin Laden and the terrorist entity that he created and to assess whether we are more or less secure as a result of the U.S.-led actions in Afghanistan and the pursuit of the al Qaeda network. The article considers these issues, placing them in the context of the major trends in terrorism that have unfolded in recent months and will likely affect the future course of political violence.*

A few hours after the first American air strikes against Afghanistan began on 7 October 2001, a pre-recorded videotape was broadcast around the world. A tall, skinny man with a long, scraggly beard, wearing a camouflage fatigue jacket and the headdress of a desert tribesman, with an AK-47 assault rifle at his side, stood before a rocky backdrop. In measured, yet defiant, language, Usama bin Laden again declared war on the United States. Only a few weeks before, his statement would likely have been dismissed as the inflated rhetoric of a saber-rattling braggart. But with the World Trade Center now laid to waste, the Pentagon heavily damaged, and the wreckage of a fourth hijacked passenger aircraft strewn across a field in rural Pennsylvania, bin Laden's declaration was regarded with a preternatural seriousness that would previously have been unimaginable. How bin Laden achieved this feat, and the light his accomplishment sheds on understanding the extent to which terrorism has changed and, in turn, how our responses must change as well, is the subject of this article.

## The September 11 Attacks by the Numbers

The enormity and sheer scale of the simultaneous suicide attacks on September 11 eclipsed anything previously seen in terrorism. Among the most significant characteristics of the

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operation were its ambitious scope and dimensions; impressive coordination and synchronization; and the unswerving dedication and determination of the 19 aircraft hijackers who willingly and wantonly killed themselves, the passengers, and crews of the four aircraft they commandeered and the approximately 3,000 persons working at or visiting both the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Indeed, in lethality terms alone the September 11 attacks are without precedent. For example, since 1968, the year credited with marking the advent of modern, international terrorism, one feature of international terrorism has remained constant despite variations in the number of attacks from year to year. Almost without exception,<sup>1</sup> the United States has annually led the list of countries whose citizens and property were most frequently attacked by terrorists.<sup>2</sup> But, until September 11, over the preceding 33 years a total of no more than perhaps 1,000 Americans had been killed by terrorists either overseas or even within the United States itself. In less than 90 minutes that day, nearly three times that number were killed.<sup>3</sup> To put those uniquely tragic events in context, during the entirety of the twentieth century no more than 14 terrorist operations killed more than 100 persons at any one time.<sup>4</sup> Or, viewed from still another perspective, until the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, no single terrorist operation had ever killed more than 500 persons at one time.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the metric, therefore, the attacks that day were unparalleled in their severity and lethal ambitions.

Significantly, too, from a purely terrorist operational perspective, *spectacular* simultaneous attacks—using far more prosaic and arguably conventional means of attack (such as car bombs, for example)—are relatively uncommon. For reasons not well understood, terrorists typically have not undertaken coordinated operations. This was doubtless less of a choice than a reflection of the logistical and other organizational hurdles and constraints that all but the most sophisticated terrorist groups are unable to overcome. Indeed, this was one reason why we were so galvanized by the synchronized attacks on the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam three years ago. The orchestration of that operation, coupled with its unusually high death and casualty tolls, stood out in a way that, until September 11, few other terrorist attacks had. During the 1990s, perhaps only one other terrorist operation evidenced those same characteristics of coordination and high lethality: the series of attacks that occurred in Bombay in March 1993, when 10 coordinated car bombings rocked the city, killing nearly 300 people and wounding more than 700 others.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the attacks on the same morning in October 1983 of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut (241 persons were killed) and a nearby French paratroop headquarters (where 60 soldiers perished); the 1981 hijacking of three Venezuelan passenger jets by a mixed commando of Salvadoran leftists and Puerto Rican *independistas*; and the dramatic 1970 hijacking of four commercial aircraft by the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), two of which were brought to and then dramatically blown up at Dawson's Field in Jordan, there have been few successfully executed, simultaneous terrorist spectacles.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the September 11 attacks not only showed a level of patience and detailed planning rarely seen among terrorist movements today, but the hijackers stunned the world with their determination to kill themselves as well as their victims. Suicide attacks differ from other terrorist operations precisely because the perpetrator's own death is a requirement for the attack's success.<sup>8</sup> This dimension of terrorist operations, however, arguably remains poorly understood. In no aspect of the September 11 attacks is this clearer than in the debate over whether all 19 of the hijackers knew they were on a suicide mission or whether only the 4 persons actually flying the aircraft into their targets did. It is a debate that underscores the poverty of our understanding of bin Laden, terrorism motivated by a religious imperative in particular, and the concept of martyrdom.

The so-called *Jihad Manual*, discovered by British police in March 2000 on the hard drive of an al Qaeda member's computer is explicit about operational security (OPSEC) in the section that discusses tradecraft. For reasons of operational security, it states, only the leaders of an attack should know all the details of the operation and these should only be revealed to the rest of the unit at the last possible moment.<sup>9</sup> Schooled in this tradecraft, the 19 hijackers doubtless understood that they were on a one-way mission from the time they were dispatched to the United States. Indeed, the video tape of bin Laden and his chief lieutenant, Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, recently broadcast by the Arabic television news station *al Jazeera* contains footage of one of the hijackers acknowledging his impending martyrdom in an allusion to the forthcoming September 11 attacks.

The phenomenon of martyrdom terrorism in Islam has of course long been discussed and examined. The act itself can be traced back to the Assassins, an off-shoot of the Shia Ismaili movement, who some 700 years ago waged a protracted struggle against the European Crusaders' attempted conquest of the Holy Land. The Assassins embraced an ethos of self-sacrifice, where martyrdom was regarded as a sacramental act—a highly desirable aspiration and divine duty commanded by religious text and communicated by clerical authorities—that is evident today. An important additional motivation then as now was the promise that the martyr would feel no pain in the commission of his sacred act and would then ascend immediately to a glorious heaven, described as a place replete with “rivers of milk and wine . . . lakes of honey, and the services of 72 virgins,” where the martyr will see the face of Allah and later be joined by 70 chosen relatives.<sup>10</sup> The last will and testament of Muhammad Atta, the ringleader of the September 11 hijackers, along with a “primer” for martyrs that he wrote, entitled, “The Sky Smiles, My Young Son,” clearly evidences such beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

Equally as misunderstood is the attention focused on the hijackers' relatively high levels of education, socioeconomic status, and stable family ties.<sup>12</sup> In point of fact, contrary to popular belief and misconception, suicide terrorists are not exclusively derived from the ranks of the mentally unstable, economically bereft, or abject, isolated loners. In the more sophisticated and competent terrorist groups, such as the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or Tamil Tigers), it is precisely the most battle-hardened, skilled, and dedicated cadre who enthusiastically volunteer to commit suicide attacks.<sup>13</sup> Observations of the patterns of recent suicide attacks in Israel and on the West Bank and Gaza similarly reveal that the bombers are not exclusively drawn from the maw of poverty, but have included two sons of millionaires. Finally, in the context of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, suicide attacks—once one of the more infrequent (though albeit dramatic, and attention-riveting, tactics)—are clearly increasing in frequency, if not severity, assuming new and more lethal forms.

### **Where the United States Went Wrong in Failing to Predict the 9/11 Attacks**

Most importantly, the United States was perhaps lulled into believing that mass, simultaneous attacks in general and those of such devastating potential as seen in New York and Washington on September 11 were likely beyond the capabilities of most terrorists—including those directly connected to, or associated with, Usama bin Laden. The tragic events of that September day demonstrate how profoundly misplaced such assumptions were. In this respect, the significance of past successes (e.g., in largely foiling a series of planned terrorist operations against American targets between the August 1998 embassy bombings to the November 2000 attack on the *U.S.S. Cole*, including more than 60

instances when credible evidence of impending attack forced the temporary closure of American embassies and consulates around the world) and the terrorists' own incompetence and propensity for mistakes (e.g., Ahmad Ressam's bungled attempt to enter the United States from Canada in December 1999) were perhaps overestimated. Both impressive and disturbing is the likelihood that there was considerable overlap in the planning for these attacks and the one in November 2000 against the *U.S.S. Cole* in Aden, thus suggesting al Qaeda's operational and organizational capability to coordinate major, multiple attacks at one time.<sup>14</sup>

Attention was also arguably focused too exclusively either on the low-end threat posed by car and truck bombs against buildings or the more exotic high-end threats, against entire societies, involving biological or chemical weapons or cyberattacks. The implicit assumptions of much of American planning scenarios on mass casualty attacks were that they would involve germ or chemical agents or result from widespread electronic attacks on critical infrastructure. It was therefore presumed that any conventional or less extensive incident could be addressed simply by planning for the most catastrophic threat. This left a painfully vulnerable gap in antiterrorism defenses where a traditional and long-proven tactic—like airline hijacking—was neglected in favor of other, less conventional threats and where the consequences of using an aircraft as a suicide weapon seem to have been ignored. In retrospect, it was not the 1995 sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway and the nine attempts to use bioweapons by Aum that should have been the dominant influence on our counterterrorist thinking, but a 1986 hijacking of a TWA flight in Karachi, where the terrorists' intention was reported to have been to crash it into the center of Tel Aviv and the 1994 hijacking in Algiers of an Air France passenger plane by terrorists belonging to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), who similarly planned to crash the fuel-laden aircraft with its passengers into the heart of Paris. The lesson, accordingly, is not that there need be unrealistic omniscience, but rather that there is a need to be able to respond across a broad technological spectrum of potential adversarial attacks.

We also had long consoled ourselves—and had only recently began to question and debate the notion—that terrorists were more interested in publicity than killing and therefore had neither the need nor the interest in annihilating large numbers of people.<sup>15</sup> For decades, there was widespread acceptance of the observation made famous by Brian Jenkins in 1975 that, “Terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead.”<sup>16</sup> Although entirely germane to the forms of terrorism that existed in prior decades, for too long this antiquated notion was adhered to. On September 11, bin Laden wiped the slate clean of the conventional wisdom on terrorists and terrorism and, by doing so, ushered in a new era of conflict.

Finally, before September 11 the United States arguably lacked the political will to sustain a long and determined counterterrorism campaign. The record of inchoate, unsustainable previous efforts effectively retarded significant progress against this menace. The carnage and shock of the September 11 attacks laid bare America's vulnerability and too belatedly resulted in a sea change in national attitudes and accompanying political will to combat terrorism systematically, globally, and, most importantly, without respite.<sup>17</sup>

## Terrorism's CEO

The cardinal rule of warfare, “know your enemy,” was also violated. The United States failed to understand and comprehend Usama bin Laden: his vision, his capabilities, his financial resources and acumen, as well as his organizational skills. The broad outline of

bin Laden's curriculum vitae is by now well known: remarkably, it attracted minimal interest and understanding in most quarters prior to September 11.<sup>18</sup> The scion of a porter turned construction magnate whose prowess at making money was perhaps matched only by his countless progeny and devout religious piety, the young Usama pursued studies not in theology (despite his issuance of *fatwas*, or Islamic religious edicts), but in business and management sciences. Bin Laden is a graduate of Saudi Arabia's prestigious King Abdul-Aziz University, where in 1981 he obtained a degree in economics and public administration. He subsequently cut his teeth in the family business, later applying the corporate management techniques learned both in the classroom and on the job to transform the terrorist movement he founded, al Qaeda, into the world's preeminent terrorist organization.<sup>19</sup>

Bin Laden achieved this by cleverly combining the technological munificence of modernity with a rigidly puritanical explication of age-old tradition and religious practice. He is also the quintessential product of the 1990s and globalism. Bin Laden the terrorism CEO could not have existed—and thrived—in any other era. He was able to overcome the relative geographical isolation caused by his expulsion from the Sudan to Afghanistan, engineered by the United States in 1996, by virtue of the invention of the satellite telephone. With this most emblematic technological artifice of 1990s global technology, bin Laden was therefore able to communicate with his minions in real time around the world.<sup>20</sup> Al Qaeda operatives, moreover, routinely made use of the latest technology themselves: encrypting messages on Apple PowerMacs or Toshiba laptop computers, communicating via e-mail or on Internet bulletin boards,<sup>21</sup> using satellite telephones and cell phones themselves and, when travelling by air, often flying first class. This “grafting of entirely modern sensibilities and techniques to the most radical interpretation of holy war,” Peter Bergen compellingly explains in *Holy War, Inc.*, “is the hallmark of bin Laden's network.”<sup>22</sup>

For bin Laden, the weapons of modern terrorism critically are not only the guns and bombs that they have long been, but the mini-cam, videotape, television, and the Internet. The professionally produced and edited two hour al Qaeda recruitment videotape that bin Laden circulated throughout the Middle East during the summer of 2001—which according to Bergen also subtly presaged the September 11 attacks—is exactly such an example of bin Laden's nimble exploitation of “twenty-first-century communications and weapons technology in the service of the most extreme, retrograde reading of holy war.”<sup>23</sup> The tape, with its graphic footage of infidels attacking Muslims in Chechnya, Kashmir, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Indonesia, and Egypt; children starving under the yoke of United Nations economic sanctions in Iraq; and most vexatiously, the accursed presence of “Crusader” military forces in the holy land of Arabia, was subsequently converted to CD-ROM and DVD formats for ease in copying onto computers and loading onto the World Wide Web for still wider, global dissemination. An even more stunning illustration of his communications acumen and clever manipulation of media was the pre-recorded, pre-produced, B-roll, or video clip, that bin Laden had queued and ready for broadcast within hours of the commencement of the American air strikes on Afghanistan on Sunday, October 7.

In addition to his adroit marrying of technology to religion and of harnessing the munificence of modernity and the West as a weapon to be wielded against his very enemies, bin Laden has demonstrated uncommon patience, planning, and attention to detail. According to testimony presented at the trial of three of the 1998 East Africa embassy bombers in Federal District Court in New York last year by a former bin Laden lieutenant, Ali Muhammad,<sup>24</sup> planning for the attack on the Nairobi facility commenced

nearly five years before the operation was executed. Muhammad also testified that bin Laden himself studied a surveillance photograph of the embassy compound, pointing to the spot in front of the building where he said the truck bomb should be positioned. Attention has already been drawn to al Qaeda's ability to commence planning of another operation before the latest one has been executed, as evidenced in the case of the embassy bombings and the attack 27 months later on the *U.S.S. Cole*. Clearly, when necessary, bin Laden devotes specific attention—perhaps even to the extent of micromanaging—various key aspects of al Qaeda “spectaculars.” In the famous “home movie”/videotape discovered in an al Qaeda safe house in Afghanistan that was released by the U.S. government in December 2001, bin Laden is seen discussing various intimate details of the September 11 attack. At one point, bin Laden explains how “we calculated in advance the number of casualties from the enemy, who would be killed based on the position of the tower. We calculated that the floors that would be hit would be three or four floors. I was the most optimistic of them all. . . . due to my experience in this field . . .” alluding to his knowledge of construction techniques gleaned from his time with the family business.<sup>25</sup> Bin Laden also knew that Muhammad Atta was the operation's leader<sup>26</sup> and states that he and his closest lieutenants “had notification [of the attack] since the previous Thursday that the event would take place that day [September 11].”<sup>27</sup>

The portrait of bin Laden that thus emerges is richer, more complex, and more accurate than the simple caricature of a hate-filled, mindless fanatic. “All men dream: but not equally,” T. E. Lawrence, the legendary Lawrence of Arabia, wrote. “Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.”<sup>28</sup> Bin Laden is indeed one of the dangerous men that Lawrence described. At a time when the forces of globalization, coupled with economic determinism, seemed to have submerged the role of the individual charismatic leader of men beneath far more powerful, impersonal forces, bin Laden has cleverly cast himself as a David against the American Goliath: one man standing up to the world's sole remaining superpower and able to challenge its might and directly threaten its citizens.

Indeed, in an age arguably devoid of ideological leadership, when these impersonal forces are thought to have erased the ability of a single man to affect the course of history, bin Laden—despite all efforts—managed to taunt and strike at the United States for years even before September 11. His effective melding of the strands of religious fervor, Muslim piety, and a profound sense of grievance into a powerful ideological force stands—however invidious and repugnant—as a towering accomplishment. In his own inimitable way, bin Laden cast this struggle as precisely the “clash of civilizations” that America and its coalition partners have labored so hard to negate. “This is a matter of religion and creed; it is not what Bush and Blair maintain, that it is a war against terrorism,” he declared in a videotaped speech broadcast over *al Jazeera* television on 3 November 2001. “There is no way to forget the hostility between us and the infidels. It is ideological, so Muslims have to ally themselves with Muslims.”<sup>29</sup>

Bin Laden, though, is perhaps best viewed as a “terrorist CEO”: essentially having applied business administration and modern management techniques to the running of a transnational terrorist organization. Indeed, what bin Laden apparently has done is to implement for al Qaeda the same type of effective organizational framework or management approach adapted by corporate executives throughout much of the industrialized world. Just as large, multinational business conglomerates moved during the 1990s to flatter, more linear, and networked structures, bin Laden did the same with al Qaeda.

Additionally, he defined a flexible strategy for the group that functions at multiple levels, using both top down and bottom up approaches. On the one hand, bin Laden has functioned like the president or CEO of a large multinational corporation: defining specific goals and aims, issuing orders, and ensuring their implementation. This mostly applies to the al Qaeda “spectaculars”: those high-visibility, usually high-value and high-casualty operations like September 11, the attack on the *Cole*, and the East Africa embassy bombings. On the other hand, however, he has operated as a venture capitalist: soliciting ideas from below, encouraging creative approaches and “out of the box” thinking, and providing funding to those proposals he thinks promising. Al Qaeda, unlike many other terrorist organizations, therefore, deliberately has no one, set *modus operandi*, making it all the more formidable. Instead, bin Laden encourages his followers to mix and match approaches: employing different tactics and different means of operational styles as needed. At least four different levels of al Qaeda operational styles can be identified:

1. *The professional cadre*. This is the most dedicated, committed, and professional element of al Qaeda: the persons entrusted with only the most important and high-value attacks—in other words, the “spectaculars.” These are the terrorist teams that are predetermined and carefully selected, are provided with very specific targeting instructions, and who are generously funded (e.g., to the extent that during the days preceding the September 11 attacks, Atta and his confederates were sending money back to their paymasters in the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere).
2. *The trained amateurs*. At the next level down are the trained amateurs. These are individuals much like Ahmed Ressam, who was arrested in December 1999 at Port Angeles, Washington State, shortly after he had entered the United States from Canada. Ressam, for example, had some prior background in terrorism, having belonged to Algeria’s Armed Islamic Group (GIA). After being recruited into al Qaeda, he was provided with a modicum of basic terrorist training in Afghanistan. In contrast to the professional cadre, however, Ressam was given open-ended targeting instructions before being dispatched to North America. All he was told was to attack some target in the United States that involved commercial aviation. Ressam confessed that he chose Los Angeles International Airport because at one time he had passed through there and was at least vaguely familiar with it. Also, unlike the well-funded professionals, Ressam was given only \$12,000 in “seed money” and instructed to raise the rest of his operational funds from petty thievery—for example, swiping cell phones and lap tops around his adopted home of Montreal. He was also told to recruit members for his terrorist cell from among the expatriate Muslim communities in Canada and the United States. In sum, a distinctly more amateurish level of al Qaeda operations than the professional cadre deployed on September 11; Ressam clearly was far less steeled, determined, and dedicated than the hijackers proved themselves to be. Ressam, of course, panicked when he was confronted by a Border Patrol agent immediately upon entering the United States. By comparison, 9 of the 19 hijackers were stopped and subjected to greater scrutiny and screening by airport personnel on September 11. Unlike Ressam, they stuck to their cover stories, did not lose their nerve and, despite having aroused suspicion, were still allowed to board. Richard Reid, the individual who attempted to blow up an American Airlines passenger plane en route from Paris to Miami with an explosive device concealed in his shoe, is another example of the trained amateur. It

- should be emphasized, however, that as inept or even moronic as these individuals might appear, their ability to be lucky even once and then to inflict incalculable pain and destruction should not be lightly dismissed. As distinctly second-tier al Qaeda operatives, they are likely seen by their masters as expendable: having neither the investment in training nor the requisite personal skills that the less numerous, but more professional, first-team al Qaeda cadre have.
3. *The local walk-ins.* These are local groups of Islamic radicals who come up with a terrorist attack idea on their own and then attempt to obtain funding from al Qaeda for it. This operational level plays to bin Laden's self-conception as a venture capitalist. An example of the local walk-in is the group of Islamic radicals in Jordan who, observing that American and Israeli tourists often stay at the Radison Hotel in Amman, proposed, and were funded by al Qaeda, to attack the tourists on the eve of the millennium. Another example is the cell of Islamic militants who were arrested in Milan in October 2001 after wiretaps placed by Italian authorities revealed discussions of attacks on American interests being planned in the expectation that al Qaeda would fund them.
  4. *Like-minded insurgents, guerrillas, and terrorists.* This level embraces existing insurgent or terrorist groups who over the years have benefited from bin Laden's largesse and/or spiritual guidance; received training in Afghanistan from al Qaeda; or have been provided with arms, materiel, and other assistance by the organization. These activities reflect bin Laden's "revolutionary philanthropy": that is, the aid he provides to Islamic groups as part of furthering the cause of global jihad. Among the recipients of this assistance have been insurgent forces in Uzbekistan and Indonesia, Chechnya, and the Philippines, Bosnia and Kashmir, and so on. This philanthropy is meant not only hopefully to create a jihad "critical mass" out of these geographically scattered, disparate movements, but also to facilitate a quid pro quo situation, where al Qaeda operatives can call on the logistical services and manpower resources provided locally by these groups.

Underpinning these operational levels is bin Laden's vision, self-perpetuating mythology and skilled acumen at effective communications. His message is simple. According to bin Laden's propaganda, the United States is a hegemonic, status quo power; opposing change and propping up corrupt and reprobate regimes that would not exist but for American backing. Bin Laden also believes that the United States is risk and casualty averse and therefore cannot bear the pain or suffer the losses inflicted by terrorist attack. Americans and the American military, moreover, are regarded by bin Laden and his minions as cowards: cowards who only fight with high-tech, airborne-delivered munitions. The Red Army, he has observed, at least fought the mujahedin in Afghanistan on the ground; America, bin Laden has maintained, only fights from the air with cruise missiles and bombs. In this respect, bin Laden has often argued that terrorism works—especially against America. He cites the withdrawal of the U.S. Marines, following the 1983 barracks bombing, from the multinational force deployed to Beirut and how the deaths of 18 U.S. Army Rangers (an account of which is described in the best-selling book by Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*, and current film of the same title)—a far smaller number—prompted the precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Somalia a decade later.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, it should never be forgotten that some 20 years ago bin Laden consciously sought to make his own mark in life as a patron of *jihad*—holy war. In the early 1980s, he was drawn to Afghanistan, where he helped to rally—and even more critically, fund—

the Muslim guerrilla forces resisting that country's Soviet invaders. Their success in repelling one of the world's two superpowers had a lasting impact on bin Laden. To his mind, Russia's defeat in Afghanistan set in motion the chain of events that resulted in the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the demise of communism. It is this same self-confidence coupled with an abiding sense of divinely ordained historical inevitability that has convinced bin Laden that he and his fighters cannot but triumph in the struggle against America. Indeed, he has often described the United States as a "paper tiger" on the verge of financial ruin and total collapse—with the force of Islam poised to push America over the precipice.

Remarkably, given his mindset, bin Laden would likely cling to the same presumptions despite the destruction of the Taliban and liberation of Afghanistan during this first phase of the war against terrorism. To him and his followers, the United States is doing even more now than before to promote global stability (in their view, to preserve the status quo) and ensure the longevity of precisely those morally bankrupt regimes in places like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and elsewhere whom bin Laden and his followers despise. In bin Laden's perception of the war in Afghanistan, most of the fighting has been done by the Northern Alliance—the equivalent of the native levies of imperial times; though instead of being led by British officers as in the past, they are now guided by U.S. military special operations personnel. Moreover, for bin Laden—like guerrillas and terrorists everywhere—not losing is winning. To his mind, even if terrorism did not work on September 11 in dealing the knockout blow to American resolve that bin Laden hoped to achieve, he can still persuasively claim to have been responsible for having a seismic effect on the United States, if not the entire world. Whatever else, bin Laden is one of the few persons who can argue that they have changed the course of history. The United States, in his view, remains fundamentally corrupt and weak, on the verge of collapse, as bin Laden crowed in the videotape released last year about the "trillions of dollars" of economic losses caused by the September 11 attacks. More recently, Ahmed Omar Sheikh, the chief suspect in the killing of American journalist, Daniel Pearl, echoed this same point. While being led out of a Pakistani court in March, he exhorted anyone listening to "sell your dollars, because America will be finished soon."<sup>31</sup>

Today, added to this fundamental enmity is now the even more potent and powerful motivation of revenge for the destruction of the Taliban and America's "war on Islam." To bin Laden and his followers, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the United States is probably still regarded as a "paper tiger," a favorite phrase of bin Laden's, whose collapse can be attained provided al Qaeda survives the current onslaught in Afghanistan in some form or another. Indeed, although weakened, al Qaeda has not been destroyed and at least some of its capability to inflict pain, albeit at a greatly diminished level from September 11, likely still remains intact. In this respect, the multiyear time lag of all prior al Qaeda spectaculars is fundamentally disquieting because it suggests that some monumental operation might have already been set in motion just prior to September 11.

### **Future Threats and Potentialities**

Rather than asking what could or could not happen, it might be more profitable to focus on understanding what has not happened for the light this inquiry can shed on possible future al Qaeda attacks. This approach actually remains among the most understudied and in turn conspicuous lacunae of terrorism studies. Many academic terrorism

analyses—when they venture into the realm of future possibilities if at all—do so only tepidly. In the main, they are self-limited to mostly lurid hypotheses of worst-case scenarios, almost exclusively involving CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear) weapons, as opposed to trying to understand why—with the exception of September 11—terrorists have only rarely realized their true killing potential.

Among the key unanswered questions include:

- Why haven't terrorists regularly used man-portable surface-to-air missiles (SAMS/ MANPADS) to attack civil aviation?
- Why haven't terrorists employed such simpler and more easily obtainable weapons like rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to attack civil aviation by targeting planes while taking off or landing?
- Why haven't terrorists used unmanned drones or one-person ultra-light or micro-light aircraft to attack heavily defended targets from the air that are too difficult to gain access to on the ground?
- Why haven't terrorists engaged in mass simultaneous attacks with very basic conventional weapons, such as car bombs, more often?
- Why haven't terrorists used tactics of massive disruption—both mass transit and electronic (cyber)—more often?
- Why haven't terrorists perpetrated more maritime attacks, especially against cruise ships loaded with holidaymakers or cargo vessels carrying hazardous materials (such as liquefied natural gas or [LNG])?
- Why haven't terrorists engaged in agricultural or livestock terrorism (which is far easier and more effective than against humans) using biological agents?
- Why haven't terrorists exploited the immense psychological potential of limited, discrete use of CBRN weapons and cyberattacks more often?
- Why haven't terrorists targeted industrial or chemical plants with conventional explosives in hopes of replicating a Bhopal with thousands dead or permanently injured?
- And, finally, why—again with the exception of September 11—do terrorists generally seem to lack the rich imaginations of Hollywood movie producers, thriller writers, and others?

Alarming, many of these tactics and weapons have in fact already been used by terrorists—and often with considerable success. The 1998 downing of a civilian Lion Air flight from Jaffna to Colombo by Tamil Tigers using a Russian-manufactured SA-14 is a case in point. The aforementioned series of car bombings that convulsed Bombay in 1993 is another. The IRA's effective paralyzing of road and rail-commuting traffic around London in 1997 and 1998 is one more as were the similar tactics used by the Japanese Middle Core to shut down commuting in Tokyo a decade earlier. And in 1997, the Tamil Tigers launched one of the few documented cyber-terrorist attacks when they shut down the servers and e-mail capabilities of the Sri Lanka embassies in Seoul, Washington, D.C., and Ottawa. As these examples illustrate, terrorists retain an enormous capability to inflict pain and suffering without resorting to mass destruction or mass casualties on the order of the September 11 attacks. This middle range, between worst-case scenario and more likely means of attack is where the United States remains dangerously vulnerable. Terrorists seek constantly to identify vulnerabilities and exploit gaps in U.S. defenses. It was precisely the identification of this vulnerability in the middle range of America's pain threshold that led to the events of that tragic day.

## Conclusion

Terrorism is perhaps best viewed as the archetypal shark in the water. It must constantly move forward to survive and indeed to succeed. Although survival entails obviating the governmental countermeasures designed to unearth and destroy the terrorists and their organization, success is dependent on overcoming the defenses and physical security barriers designed to thwart attack. In these respects, the necessity for change in order to stay one step ahead of the counterterrorism curve compels terrorists to change—adjusting and adapting their tactics, *modus operandi*, and sometimes even their weapons systems as needed.<sup>32</sup> The better, more determined, and more sophisticated terrorists will therefore always find a way to carry on their struggle.

The loss of physical sanctuaries—the most long-standing effect that the U.S.-led war on terrorism is likely to achieve—will signal only the death knell of terrorism as it has been known. In a new era of terrorism, “virtual” attacks from “virtual sanctuaries,” involving anonymous cyberassaults may become more appealing for a new generation of terrorists unable to absorb the means and methods of conventional assault techniques as they once did in capacious training camps. Indeed, the attraction for such attacks will likely grow as American society itself becomes ever more dependent on electronic means of commerce and communication. One lesson from last October’s anthrax cases and the immense disruption it caused the U.S. Postal Service may be to impel more rapidly than might otherwise have been the case the use of electronic banking and other online commercial activities. The attraction therefore for a terrorist group to bring down a system that is likely to become increasingly dependent on electronic means of communication and commerce cannot be dismissed. Indeed, Zawahiri once scolded his followers for not paying greater attention to the fears and phobias of their enemy, in that instance, Americans’ intense preoccupation with the threat of bioterrorism. The next great challenge from terrorism may therefore be in cyberspace.

Similarly, the attraction to employ more exotic, however crude, weapons like low-level biological and chemical agents may also increase. Although these materials might be far removed from the heinous capabilities of true WMD (weapons of mass destruction) another lesson from last October’s anthrax exposure incidents was that terrorists do not have to kill 3,000 people to create panic and foment fear and insecurity: five persons dying in mysterious circumstances is quite effective at unnerving an entire nation.

This article has hitherto discussed and hypothesized about terrorism. What, in conclusion, should be done about it? How should it be viewed? First, it should be recognized that terrorism is, always has been, and always will be instrumental: planned, purposeful, and premeditated. The challenge that analysts face is in identifying and understanding the rationale and “inner logic”<sup>33</sup> that motivates terrorists and animates terrorism. It is easier to dismiss terrorists as irrational homicidal maniacs than to comprehend the depth of their frustration, the core of their aims and motivations, and to appreciate how these considerations affect their choice of tactics and targets. To effectively fight terrorism, a better understanding of terrorists and terrorism must be gained than has been the case in the past.

Second, it must be recognized that terrorism is fundamentally a form of psychological warfare. This is not to say that people do not tragically die or that assets and property are not wantonly destroyed. It is, however, important to note that terrorism is designed, as it has always been, to have profound psychological repercussions on a target audience. Fear and intimidation are precisely the terrorists’ timeless stock-in-trade. Significantly, terrorism is also designed to undermine confidence in government and leadership and to rent the fabric of trust that bonds society. It is used to create unbridled fear,

dark insecurity, and reverberating panic. Terrorists seek to elicit an irrational, emotional response. Countermeasures therefore must be at once designed to blunt that threat but also to utilize the full range of means that can be brought to bear in countering terrorism: psychological as well as physical; diplomatic as well as military; economic as well as persuasion.

Third, the United States and all democratic countries that value personal freedom and fundamental civil liberties will remain vulnerable to terrorism. The fundamental asymmetry of the inability to protect all targets all the time against all possible attacks ensures that terrorism will continue to remain attractive to our enemies. In this respect, both political leaders and the American public must have realistic expectations of what can and cannot be achieved in the war on terrorism and, indeed, the vulnerabilities that exist inherently in any open and democratic society.

Fourth, the enmity felt in many places throughout the world towards the United States will likely not diminish. America is invariably seen as a hegemonic, status quo power and more so as the world's lone superpower. Diplomatic efforts, particularly involving renewed public diplomacy activities are therefore needed at least to effect and influence successor generations of would-be terrorists, even if the current generation has already been missed.

Finally, terrorism is a perennial, ceaseless struggle. Although a war against terrorism may be needed to sustain the political and popular will that has often been missing in the past, war by definition implies finality. The struggle against terrorism, however, is never-ending. Terrorism has existed for 2,000 years and owes its survival to an ability to adapt and adjust to challenges and countermeasures and to continue to identify and exploit its opponent's vulnerabilities. For success against terrorism, efforts must be as tireless, innovative, and dynamic as that of the opponent.

## Notes

1. The lone exception was 1995, when a major increase in non-lethal terrorist attacks against property in Germany and Turkey by PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) not only moved the US to the number two position but is also credited with accounting for that year's dramatic rise in the total number of incidents from 322 to 440. See Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999*. Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State Publication 10321, April 1996, p. 1.

2. Several factors can account for this phenomenon, in addition to America's position as the sole remaining superpower and leader of the free world. These include the geographical scope and diversity of America's overseas business interests, the number of Americans traveling or working abroad, and the many U.S. military bases around the world.

3. See "Timetables of the Hijacked Flights," in Reporters, Writers, and Editors of *Der Spiegel Magazine, Inside 9-11: What Really Happened* (NY: St. Martin's, 2002), pp. 261-262.

4. Brian M. Jenkins, "The Organization Men: Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack," in James F. Hoge, Jr. and Gideon Rose, *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and the New War* (NY: Public Affairs, 2001), p. 5.

5. Some 440 persons perished in a 1978 fire deliberately set by terrorists at a movie theater in Abadan, Iran.

6. Celia W. Dugger, "Victims of '93 Bombay Terror Wary of U.S. Motives," *New York Times*, 24 September 2001.

7. Several other potentially high lethality simultaneous attacks during the 1980s were averted. These include, a 1985 plot by Sikh separatists in India and Canada to simultaneously bomb three aircraft while in flight (one succeeded: the downing of an Air India flight while en route from Montréal, Québec, to London, England, in which 329 persons were killed); a Palestinian plot to

bomb two separate Pan Am flights in 1982 and perhaps the most infamous and ambitious of all pre-September 11th incidents: Ramzi Ahmed Yousef's "Bojinka" plan to bring down 12 American airliners over the Pacific. See Jenkins, "The Organization Men: Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack," p. 6.

8. See Yoram Schweitzer, "Suicide Terrorism: Development and Main Characteristics," in The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, *Countering Suicide Terrorism: An International Conference* (Jerusalem and Hewlett, NY: Gefen, 2001), p. 76.

9. See bin Laden's comments about this on the videotape released by the U.S. Government in November 2001, a verbatim transcript of which is reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 313–321.

10. "Wedded to death in a blaze of glory—Profile: The suicide bomber," *The Sunday Times* (London), 10 March 1996; and Christopher Walker, "Palestinian 'Was Duped into Being Suicide Bomber'," *The Times* (London), 27 March 1997.

11. See Reporters, Writers, and Editors, *Inside 9–11*, on pp. 304–313.

12. See, for example, Jenkins, "The Organization Men," p. 8.

13. See in particular the work of Dr. Rohan Gunaratna of St. Andrews University in this area and specifically his "Suicide Terrorism in Sri Lanka and India," in International Policy, *Countering Suicide Terrors*, pp. 97–104.

14. It is now believed that planning for the attack on an American warship in Aden harbor commenced some two to three weeks before the August 1998 attacks on the East Africa embassies. Discussion with U.S. Naval Intelligence Service agent investigating the Cole attack. December 2001.

15. See Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, "American and the New Terrorism," *Survival*, vol. 42, no. 1, Spring 2000, pp. 59–75 and the "America and the New Terrorism: An Exchange" by Olivier Roy, Bruce Hoffman, Reuven Paz, Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, *Survival*, vol. 42, no. 2, Summer 2000, pp. 156–172. In it Simon and Benjamin aver that I had become "too closely bound to the academic fashion of the moment . . ." (p. 171). As I told both Simon and Benjamin after September 11th: their observation was indeed correct.

16. Brian Michael Jenkins, "International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict," in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf (eds.), *International Terrorism and World Security* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p. 15.

17. See, for example, the discussion of two former members of the U.S. National Security Staff, Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, on the effects of the al-Shifa on the Clinton Administration and its counterterrorism policy post the August 1998 embassy bombings. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, "A Failure of Intelligence?" in Robert B. Silvers and Barbara Epstein (eds.), *Striking Terror: America's New War* (NY: New York Review of Books, 2002), pp. 279–299.

18. It should be noted that on many occasions, the Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, warned in Congressional testimony and elsewhere of the profound and growing threat posed by bin Laden and al Qaeda to US national security.

19. See Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (NY: Free Press, 2001), pp. 14–15.

20. Bruce Hoffman, "Terrorism's CEO: An On-Line Interview with Peter Bergen, author of *Holy War, Inc.*," at <http://www.theatlantic.com>, January 2002.

21. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.*, p. 28.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

24. Ali Muhammad, a former major in the Egyptian Army, enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he served as a non-commissioned officer at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, teaching U.S. Special Forces about Middle Eastern culture and politics. Muhammad, among other al Qaeda operatives, like Wadi el-Hoge, demonstrates how al-Qaeda found the U.S. a comfortable and unthreatening operational environment. See Hoffman, "Terrorism's CEO," [www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2002-01-09.html](http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2002-01-09.html).

25. Reporters, Writers, and Editor, *Inside 9-11*, p. 317.

26. Ibid., p. 319.
27. Ibid., p. 317.
28. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 23.
29. Neil MacFarquhar with Jim Rutenberg, "Bin Laden, in a Taped Speech, Says Attacks in Afghanistan Are a War Against Islam," *New York Times*, November 4, 2001, p. B2.
29. Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A story of Modern War* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999).
31. Raymond Bonner, "Suspect in Killing of Reporter Is Brash and Threatening in a Pakistani Court," *New York Times*, 13 March 2002.
32. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (London: Orion and NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 180–183.
33. My colleague at St. Andrews University, Dr Magnus Ranstorp's, formulation.