

Chapter 3

Terrorist Group Organization

This chapter will examine terrorist group organization. The organizational structure of a group determines its strengths and weaknesses. A general knowledge of the prevalent models of terrorist organizations leads to a better understanding of their capabilities. Knowledge of the different labels and systems of classification that have been applied to groups and individuals aid us in discarding useless or irrelevant terms, and in understanding the purposes and usefulness of different terminologies.

In recent times, the popular image of a terrorist group operating according to a specific political agenda and motivated by ideology or the desire for ethnic or national liberation dominated our understanding of terrorism. While still true of some terrorist organizations, this image is no longer universally valid. Also, a generational change in leadership of established groups is in many cases ushering in a more a destructive and relentless type of organization.

There are two general categories of organization; hierarchical and networked. The age of an organization is one of the determinants of whether it is likely to adopt a network or hierarchical structure. Newer groups tend towards organizing or adapting to the possibilities inherent in the network model. Ideology can have an effect on internal organization, with strict Leninist or Maoist groups tending towards centralized control and hierarchical structure. Within the larger structure, virtually all groups use variants of cellular organizations at the tactical level to enhance security and to task organize for operations.

Terrorist groups that are associated with a political activity or organization will often require a more hierarchical structure, in order to coordinate terrorist violence with political action. It also can be necessary for a politically affiliated group to observe “cease-fires” or avoid particular targets in support of political objectives. This can be difficult to enforce in networked organizations.

Terrorist groups can be at various stages of development in terms of capabilities and sophistication. Newer groups with fewer resources will usually be less capable, and operate in permissive areas or under the tutelage of more proficient organizations to develop proficiency. Also, groups professing or associated with ethnic or nationalist agendas and limiting their operations to one country or a localized region tend to require fewer capabilities. Groups can coalesce from smaller organizations, or splinter off from larger ones.

Section I: Terrorist Group Structure

Tactical Organization

The smallest elements of terrorist organizations are the cells that serve as building blocks for the terrorist organization. One of the primary reasons for a cellular or compartmentalized structure is security. The compromise or loss of one cell should not compromise the identity, location, or actions of other cells. A cellular organizational structure makes it difficult for an adversary to

penetrate the entire organization. Personnel within one cell are often unaware of the existence of other cells and, therefore, cannot divulge sensitive information to infiltrators.

Terrorists may organize cells based on family or employment relationships, on a geographic basis, or by specific functions such as direct action and intelligence. The terrorist group may also form multifunctional cells. The terrorist group uses the cells to control its members. Cell members remain in close contact with each other to provide emotional support and to prevent desertion or breach of security procedures. The cell leader is normally the only person who communicates and coordinates with higher levels and other cells.

A terrorist group may form only one cell or may form many cells that operate locally or internationally. The number of cells and their composition depend on the size of the terrorist group. A terrorist group operating within one country frequently has fewer cells and specialized teams than does an international terrorist group that may operate in several countries.

Levels of Commitment

**“There’s nothing wrong with being a terrorist, as long as you win.”
- Paul Watson, Sea Shepard Conservation Society**

There are typically different levels of commitment within an organization: sympathizers, supporters, cadre and leadership. The diagram below shows how each successive level of commitment has fewer members. This diagram is not intended as an organizational picture, but to show the relative numbers of each category. This distribution of overall numbers holds true for networks as well as hierarchies, although the numbers may be more evenly distributed, and sympathizers and supporters may intermingle, and be unaware of what their actual relationship to the organization is.

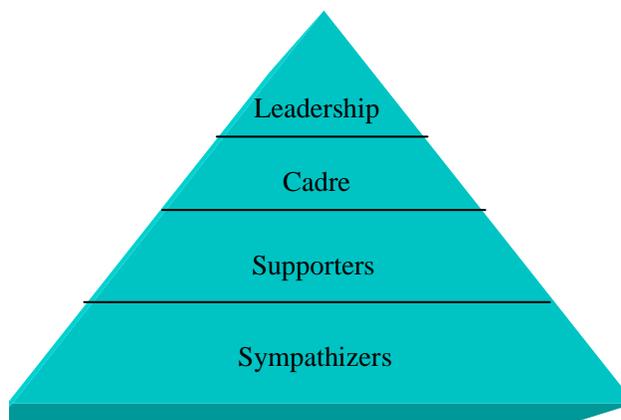


Figure 3-1: Levels of Commitment

- Leaders provide direction; approve goals and objectives; and direct operations. Usually leaders rise from within the ranks of any given organization, or create their own organization from scratch.
- Cadres are the active members of the terrorist organization. They need not all be operations oriented, as intelligence, finance, logistics, information operations, and communications specialists are all required in the active membership.
- Supporters are active in the political, fund-raising, and information activities of the group. They may also conduct initial intelligence and surveillance activities, and provide safe houses and transit assistance for active members of the organization. They are usually fully aware of their relationship to the terrorist group.

- Sympathizers are typically individuals or groups that are sympathetic to the announced goals and intentions of the terrorist organization, but are not committed enough to take action. They may not be aware of their precise relation to the terrorist group, and interface with a front that hides the overt connection to the terrorist group. Sympathizers can be useful for political activities, fund raising, and unwitting or coerced assistance in intelligence gathering or other non-violent activities.

Groups will recruit from populations that are sympathetic to their goals, although these groups need not necessarily be violent or illegal themselves. Often legitimate organizations can be influenced to provide recruiting grounds for terrorists. Militant Islamic recruiting, for example, is often associated with the proliferation of the radical Wahibbi sect. This recruiting is conducted on a worldwide basis via Wahibbist schools financed from both governmental and non-governmental donations and grants.⁶⁶ Some recruiting may be done for particular skills and qualifications, and not be tied to ideological characteristics. Of particular concern are attempts of terrorist organizations to recruit current or former members of the U.S. armed forces, both as trained operatives, and as agents in place.

Some groups will also use coercion and leverage to gain limited or onetime cooperation from useful individuals. This cooperation can range anywhere from gaining information to conducting a suicide bombing operation.⁶⁷ Blackmail and intimidation are the most common forms of coercion. Threats to family members are also employed. Coercion is often directed at personnel in government security and intelligence organizations.

Networked Structure

Terrorists are now increasingly part of far more amorphous, indistinct and broader networks than previously experienced. Groups based on religious or single-issue motives lack a specific political or nationalistic agenda; they therefore have less need for a hierarchical structure to coordinate the achievement of their goals. Instead, they can depend and even thrive on loose affiliation with like-minded groups or individuals from a variety of locations. General goals and targets are announced, and individuals or cells are expected to use flexibility and initiative to target them.

Basic Concepts

Networks consist of nodes. A node may be an individual, a cell, another networked organization, or a hierarchical organization. They may also consist of parts of other organizations, even governments, which are acting in ways that can be exploited for the network's organizational goals.

The effectiveness of a networked organization is dependent on several things. The network achieves long-term organizational effectiveness when the nodes share a unifying ideology,

⁶⁶ Victor N. Corpus, "The Invisible Army" (Briefing presented at Fort Leavenworth, KS, 5 November 2002), TRADOC ADCSINT-Threats Files, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

⁶⁷ Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, rev. ed. (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 270-271.

common goals or mutual interests.⁶⁸ When there is failure to accept the goals of the organization, pieces of the network will drop out. This is less catastrophic than a splintering within a hierarchical group, but too many losses will render the organization ineffective.

Another difficulty for network organizations not sharing a unifying ideology is that nodes can pursue objectives or take actions that do not meet the goals of the organization, or are actually counterproductive. In this instance, the independence of nodes fails to develop synergy between their activities or contribute to common objectives.

Networks distribute the responsibility for operations, and provide redundancies for key functions. Operating cells need not contact or coordinate with other cells except for those essential to a particular operation or function. The avoidance of unnecessary coordination or command approval for operations provides deniability to the leadership and enhances operational security.

Networks are not necessarily dependent on the latest information technology for their effect. The organizational structure and the flow of information inside the organization are the defining aspects of networks. While information technology has made networks more effective, low-tech means such as couriers and landline telephones can enable networks in certain circumstances.

Basic Types

- Chain Networks



Figure 3-2: Chain Network

Each node links to the node next in sequence. Communication between the nodes is by passing information up or down the line. This organization is most common among networks that smuggle goods and people or launder money.

- Hub (or Star)

Nodes communicate with one central node. The central node need not be the leader or decision maker for the network. A variation of the hub is a wheel design where the outer nodes communicate with one or two other outer nodes in addition to the hub. This is a common financial or economic organization network.

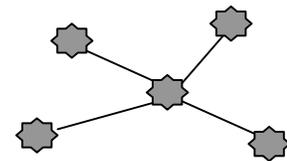


Figure 3-3: Hub Network

- All Channel

All nodes are connected to each other. The network is organizationally “flat”, meaning there is no hierarchical command structure above it. Command and control is distributed within the network. This is communication intensive and can be a security problem if the linkages can

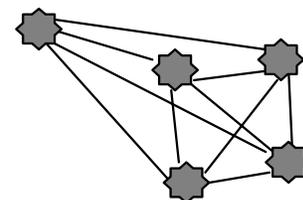


Figure 3-4: All Channel Network

⁶⁸ John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, ed., *Networks and Netwars* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 9.

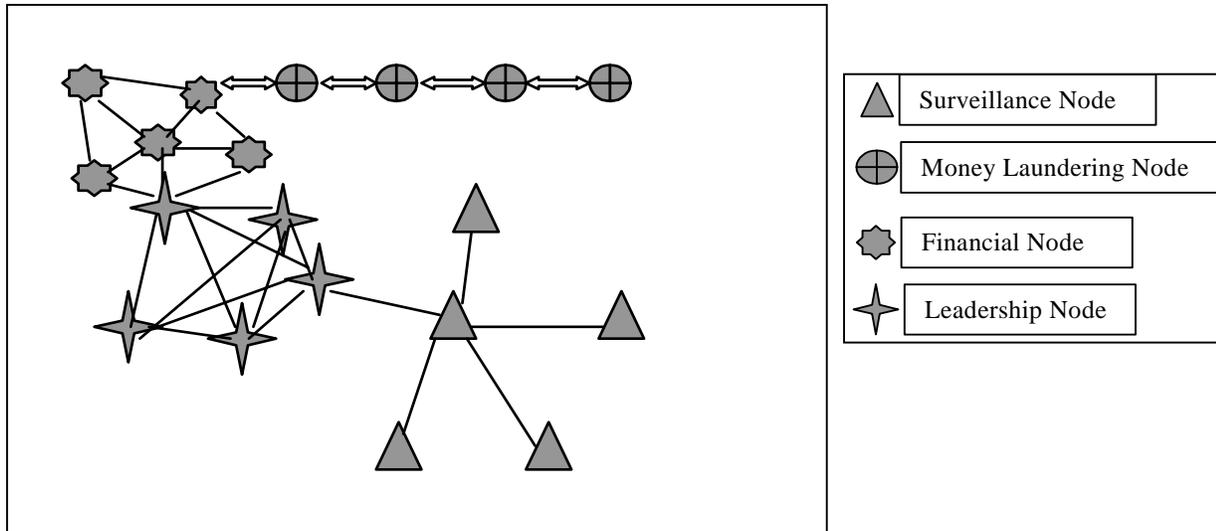


Figure 3-5: Hybrid Network

be identified or reconstructed. However, the lack of an identifiable “head” confounds targeting and disruption efforts normally effective against hierarchies.

Despite their differences, the three types will most likely be encountered together in hybrid organizations, where the particular organizational capability of that network type is most appropriate. Thus, a transnational terrorist organization might use chain networks for its money laundering activities, tied to a wheel network handling financial matters, tied in turn to an all channel leadership network to direct the use of the funds into the operational activities of a hub network conducting pre-targeting surveillance and reconnaissance.

Hierarchical Structure

Hierarchical organizations are those that have a well-defined vertical chain of command and responsibility. Information flows up and down the organization in channels that correspond to these vertical chains, and may or may not move horizontally through the organization. This is more traditional, and is common of groups that are well established with a command and support structure.

Hierarchical organizations feature greater specialization of functions in their subordinate cells (support, operations, intelligence). Only the cell leader has knowledge of other cells or contacts. Senior leadership has visibility of the organization at large. In the past, terrorism was practiced in this manner by identifiable organizations with a command and control structure influenced by revolutionary theory or ideology. Radical leftist organizations such as the Japanese Red Army, the Red Army Faction in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, as well as ethno-nationalist terrorist movements like the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Irish Republican Army and the Basque separatist group ETA, conformed to this stereotype of the "traditional" terrorist group. These organizations had a clearly defined set of political, social or economic objectives, and tailored aspects of their organizations (such as a ‘Political’ wing or “social welfare” group) to facilitate their accomplishment. The necessity to coordinate activities between the various

“fronts”, some of which were political and (avowedly) non-violent, and the use of violence by terrorists and insurgents, favored a strong hierarchical authority structure.

Section II: Categories of Terrorist Organizations

There are many different categories of terrorism and terrorist groups that are currently in use. These categories serve to differentiate terrorist organizations according to specific criteria, which are usually related to the field or specialty of whoever is selecting the categories. Also, some categories are simply labels appended arbitrarily or redundantly, often by the media. For example, every terrorist organization is by definition “radical”, as terror tactics are not the norm for the mainstream of any group. While this guide does not employ these categories in describing the operational aspect of terrorist groups, some categories do provide pertinent descriptive information. This section addresses many of the more common classifications, and provides explanation of terms and their relationship.

Legal Categories

Legal categories are those that define terrorist organizations according to legal statutes or in relation to national or international laws. Legal categories usually define a state’s or group of states’ relation to the terrorist organization. Such a relationship may range from toleration of activities that do no harm to the state in question to proscribing membership or support of such an organization as a criminal act. In the United States, two particular legal categories are:

- DFTO (Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization); this is a political designation determined by the U.S. Department of State. Listing as a DFTO imposes legal penalties for membership, prevents travel into the U.S., and proscribes assistance and funding activities within the U.S. or by U.S. citizens.⁶⁹
- Organizations, individuals or entities identified under Executive Order 13224. 219 as of November 2002. This Executive Order imposes penalties on the specific individuals and organizations named as terrorists and supporters of terrorism. It was designed primarily as a method of disrupting terrorist financing. Since it is an Executive Order, it may be updated to reflect changing conditions.

Other countries and the United Nations have similar, if varied, legal categories of “proscribed” organizations and individuals. Inclusion of a group on such lists of legally designated groups is at the discretion of, and for the interests of, the state or organization compiling the list.

Motivation Categories

Motivation categories describe terrorist groups in terms of their ultimate goals or objectives. While political or religious ideologies will determine the “how” of the conflict, and the sort of society that will arise from a successful conclusion, motivation is the “what”; what the end state or measure of success is. Some of the common motivation categories are:

⁶⁹ Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001* (Washington, D.C., May 2002), 144.

- Separatist. Separatist groups are those with the goal of separation from existing entities through independence, political autonomy, or religious freedom or domination. The ideologies separatists subscribe to include social justice or equity, anti-imperialism, as well as the resistance to conquest or occupation by a foreign power.
- Ethnocentric. Groups of this persuasion see race as the defining characteristic of a society, and therefore a basis of cohesion. There is usually the attitude that a particular group is superior because of their inherent racial characteristics.
- Nationalistic. The loyalty and devotion to a nation, and the national consciousness derived from placing one nation's culture and interests above those of other nations or groups. This can find expression in the creation of a new nation, or in splitting away part of an existing state to join with another that shares the perceived "national" identity.
- Revolutionary: Dedicated to the overthrow of an established order and replacing it with a new political or social structure. Although often associated with communist political ideologies, this is not always the case, and other political movements can advocate revolutionary methods to achieve their goals.

Ideological Categories

**"From fanaticism to barbarism is only one step."
- Denis Diderot**

Ideological categories describe the political, religious, or social orientation of the group. While some groups will be seriously committed to their avowed ideologies, for others, ideology is poorly understood, and primarily a rationale used to provide justification to outsiders or sympathizers. It is a common misperception to believe that ideological considerations will prevent terrorists from accepting assistance or coordinating activities with terrorists or states on the opposite side of the religious or political spectrum. Quite often terrorists with differing ideologies have more in common with each other than with the mainstream society they oppose.⁷⁰ Common ideological categories include:

Political

Political ideologies are concerned with the structure and organization of the forms of government and communities. While observers outside terrorist organizations may stress differences in political ideology, the activities of groups that are diametrically opposed on the political spectrum are similar to each other in practice.

- Right wing: Tending to the reactionary or conservative side of the political spectrum, and often, but not exclusively, associated with fascism or neo-Nazism. Despite this, right-wing extremists can be every bit as revolutionary in intent as other groups, the difference being

⁷⁰ Christopher C. Harmon, *Terrorism Today* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000; reprint, Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 198.

that their intent is to replace existing forms of government with a particular brand of authoritarian rule.

- Left wing: Usually associated with revolutionary socialism or variants of communism (i.e. Maoist, Marxist-Leninist, etc.). With the demise of many communist regimes, and the gradual liberalization of the remainder towards capitalism, left-wing rhetoric can often move towards and merge with anarchistic thought.
- Anarchist: Anti-authoritarian, often blending anti-capitalism and populist or communitarian messages. Modern anarchists tend to neglect the problem of what will replace the current order, but generally take the line that small communities are the highest form of political organization necessary or desirable. Currently, anarchism is the ideology of choice for many individuals and small groups who have no particular dedication to any ideology, and are looking for a convenient philosophy to justify their actions.

Religious

Religiously inspired terrorism is on the rise, with a forty-three percent increase of total international terror groups espousing religious motivation between 1980 and 1995.⁷¹ While Islamic terrorists and organizations have been the most active, and the greatest recent threat to the United States, all of the major world religions have extremists that have taken up violence to further their perceived religious goals. Religiously motivated terrorists see their objectives as holy writ, and therefore infallible and non-negotiable.

Religious motivations can also be tied to ethnic and nationalist identities, such as Kashmiri separatists combining their desire to break away from India with the religious conflict between Islam and Hinduism. The conflict in Northern Ireland also provides an example of the mingling of religious identity with nationalist motivations. There are frequently instances where groups with the same general goal, such as Kashmiri independence, will engage in conflict over the nature of that goal (religious or secular government).

Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu and a host of lesser known denominations have either seen activists commit terrorism in their name, or spawned cults professing adherence to the larger religion while following unique interpretations of that particular religion's dogma. Cults that adopt terrorism are often apocalyptic in their worldview, and are highly dangerous and unpredictable. It is interesting to note that religiously motivated terrorists are among the most energetic developers of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) for terrorist use. Also, religiously inspired cults executed the first confirmed uses of biological and chemical nerve agents by terrorists.

Social

Often particular social policies or issues will be so contentious that they will incite extremist behavior and terrorism. Frequently this is referred to as "single issue" or "special interest"

⁷¹ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 90.

terrorism. Some issues that have produced terrorist activities in the United States and other countries are:

- Animal rights
- Abortion
- Ecology/environment
- Minority rights

“The overall threat posed by special interest extremism appears to be increasing.”
- From “Terrorism in the United States, 1999” FBI Publication #0308, Federal Bureau of Investigation

Location or Geographic Categories

Geographic designations have been used in the past, and although they are often confusing, and even irrelevant when referring to international and transnational terrorism, they still appear. Often, a geographical association to the area with which the group is primarily concerned will be made. “Mid-Eastern” is an example of this category, and came into use as a popular shorthand label for Palestinian and Arab groups in the 1970s and early 1980s. Frequently, these designations are only relevant to the government or state that uses them. However, when tied to particular regions or states, the concepts of domestic and international terrorism can be useful.

- *Domestic*. These terrorists are “home-grown” and operate within and against their home country. They are frequently tied to extreme social or political factions within a particular society, and focus their efforts specifically on their nation’s socio-political arena.
- *International or Transnational*. Often describing the support and operational reach of a group, these terms are often loosely defined, and can be applied to widely different capabilities.
 - International groups typically operate in multiple countries, but retain a geographic focus for their activities. Hezbollah has cells worldwide, and has conducted operations in multiple countries, but is primarily concerned with events in Lebanon and Israel.
 - Transnational groups operate internationally, but are not tied to a particular country, or even region. Al Qaeda is transnational; being made up of many nationalities, having been based out of multiple countries simultaneously, and conducting operations throughout the world. Their objectives affect dozens of countries with differing political systems, religions, ethnic compositions, and national interests

An insurgency-linked terrorist group that routinely crosses an international border to conduct attacks, and then flees to safe haven in a neighboring country, is “international” in the strict sense of the word, but does not compare to groups that habitually operate across regions and continents.

Section III: Knowledge Exchange and Proliferation Between Organizations

Terrorist groups increase their capabilities through the exchange of knowledge. These exchanges occur both directly and indirectly. Direct exchange occurs when one group provides the other with training or experienced personnel not readily available otherwise. An example of direct exchange is the provision of sophisticated bomb construction expertise by the IRA and ETA to less experienced groups.

Indirect transfer of knowledge occurs when one group carries out a successful operation and is studied and emulated by others. The explosion of hijacking operations in the 1970s, and the similar proliferation of hostage taking in the 1980s were the result of terrorist groups observing and emulating successful techniques.

Assessment of terrorist threat capabilities cannot rest upon the basis of proven operational abilities. Military professionals must evaluate potential terrorist threats according to what capabilities they may acquire through known or suspected associations with other groups. Also, consideration must be given to capabilities that can reasonably be acquired through the study and employment of techniques and approaches that have proven successful for other terrorist organizations.

A development related to this is the proliferation of specialized knowledge useful to terrorists over the last decade. The reductions in military and intelligence establishments after the Cold War have made expertise in sabotage, espionage, small unit tactics, and other useful skills readily available. Similar reductions in research and development institutions make technical and scientific expertise in weapons of mass destruction, information technology, and electronic countermeasures more accessible, either through direct contacts or intermediaries such as rogue or dysfunctional states.

Conclusion

This chapter provided descriptions of the common organizational models for terrorist groups. It also presented an array of categories and descriptions of terrorists and terrorist groups, in order to clarify the jargon that surrounds this topic, and to avoid those terms that are not useful for the purposes of military professionals assessing the terrorist threat.