

3 Terrorist Organizational Models

Chapter 3

Terrorist Organizational Models

Our [enemy] is proactive, innovative, well-networked, flexible, patient, young, technologically savvy, and learns and adapts continuously based upon both successful and failed operations around the globe.¹⁰⁶

Honorable Lee Hamilton

**Task Force Chairman for the Future of Terrorism Task Force 2007
Department of Homeland Security, Homeland Security Advisory Council**

A terrorist organization's structure, membership, resources, and security determine its capabilities and reach. Knowledge of current and emergent models of terrorist organization improves an understanding and situational awareness of terrorism in a contemporary operational environment.

Popular images of a terrorist group operating in accordance with a specific political agenda and motivated by ideology or the desire for ethnic or national liberation dominated traditional appreciation of terrorism. While true of some terrorist organizations, this image is not universally valid. Terrorism threats range al-Qaida and affiliated cells with regional, international, or transnational reach to domestic hate groups and self-radicalized, unaffiliated terrorists with single issue agendas and finite capabilities.



Figure 3-1. **Diverse Terrorism Intents and Capabilities in the COE**

¹⁰⁶ Don Philpott, "The Future of Terrorism Task force," *Homeland Defense Journal*, April 2007, 16-20.

What is one of the most significant adaptations in terrorist organization? “Perhaps the most fundamental shift rests in the enemy's downsizing. We will not see large al-Qaida armies. Rather, we will increasingly face enemy forces in small teams or even individuals. From an operational perspective, these are ‘micro-targets with macro-impact’ operating in the global exchange of people, data, and ideas. The enemy, their tradecraft, their tactics, their weapons, and their battlefield, our battlefield -- all evolve at the pace of globalization itself. We are facing the future of war today. The ongoing debate, sometimes disagreement, among allies reflects this new reality, this new way of war.”¹⁰⁷



In examining the structure of terrorist groups, this handbook presents two general categories of organization: network and hierarchy. A terrorist group may employ either type or a combination of the two models. The cell is the basic unit of organization in any of the models.

Contemporary groups tend to organize or adapt to opportunities available in the network model. Other variants professing an ideology can have more defined effects on internal organization. Leninist or Maoist groups can tend towards centralized control and hierarchical structure.

Terrorist groups that are associated with a political activity or organization will often require a more hierarchical structure, in order to coordinate deliberate terrorist violence with political action. Examples include observing cease-fire agreements or avoiding particular targets in support of political objectives.

However, al-Qaida presents an example that has evolved from a hierarchical organization to a much more networked organization. Aspects of hierarchy still exist in senior leaders, cadre for functional coordination, and dedicated sub-groups of terrorism. Current patterns display an increasing use of loosely affiliated networks that plan and act on generalized guidance on waging terror. Individuals with minimal or no direct connection to al-Qaida may take their inspiration for terrorism from ideological statements of senior al-Qaida leaders. Some individuals receive minimal training but act with no control by an organization such as al-Qaida. Richard Reid and his attempt to bomb an intercontinental flight in midair during December 2001 is an example of such a lone actor.



Fig. 3-1. Reid and Shoe Bomb

¹⁰⁷ Henry Crumpton, Coordinator for Counterterrorism, “Remarks at Transnational Terrorism Conference-12 January 2006,” available from <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2006/59987.htm>; Internet; accessed 12 May 2007.

Presenting any generalized organizational structure can be problematic. Terrorist groups can be at various stages of development in terms of capabilities and sophistication. Change in terrorist leadership, whether through generational transition or in response to enhanced security operations, may signal significant adjustments to organizational priorities and available means to conduct terrorism. 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. Larger groups can merge from smaller organizations, or smaller groups can splinter off from larger organizations. Organizational method is situation dependent on specific circumstances of an operational environment during specified periods of time.

Section I: Organizational Commitment

Levels of Commitment

Typically, different levels of commitment exist within an organization. One way of display is four levels of commitment consisting of passive supporters, active supporters, cadre, and leaders. The pyramid diagram at Figure 3-2 is not intended as an organizational diagram, but indicates a relative number of people in each category. The general image of overall density holds true for networks as well as hierarchies. Passive supporters may intermingle with active supporters and be unaware of what their actual relationship is to the organization.

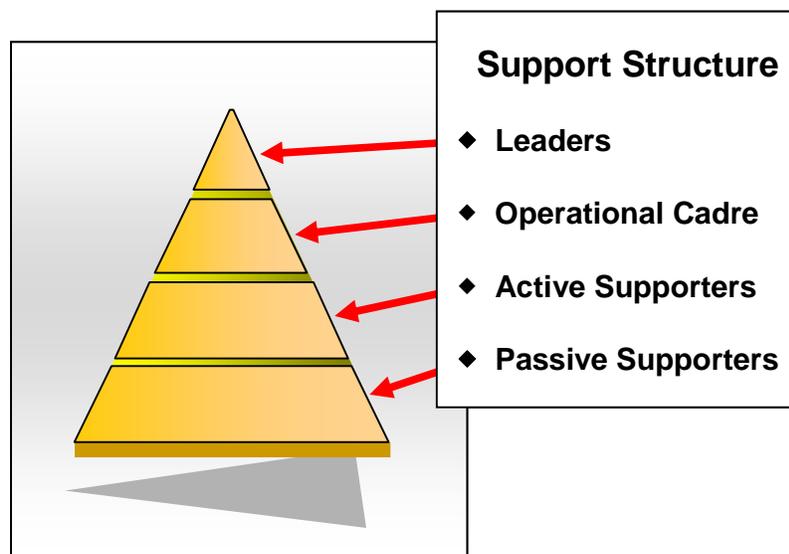


Figure 3-2. **Typical Levels of Organization**

- **Leaders** provide direction and policy; approve goals and objectives; and provide overarching guidance for operations. Usually leaders rise from within the ranks of an organization or create their own organization.

- **Cadres** are the active members of the terrorist organization. This echelon plans and conducts not only operations, but also manages areas of intelligence, finance, logistics, propaganda, and communications. Mid-level cadres tend to be trainers and technicians such as bomb makers, financiers, and surveillance experts. Low-level cadres are the bombers and similar direct action terrorists.
- **Active Supporters** are active in the political, fund-raising, and information activities of the group. Acting as a visible or tacit partner, they may also conduct intelligence and surveillance activities, and provide safehaven houses, financial contributions, medical assistance, and transit assistance for cadre members of the organization. Active supporters are fully aware of their relationship to the terrorist group but do not normally commit violent acts.

Figure 3-3. **HAMAS**

- **Passive Supporters** are typically individuals or groups that are sympathetic to the announced goals and intentions of an overarching agenda, but are not committed enough to take an active role in terrorism. 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. Sometimes fear of reprisal from terrorists is a compelling factor in passive support. Sympathizers can be useful for political activities, fund raising, and unwitting or coerced assistance in intelligence gathering and other non-violent activities.

Terrorist groups will recruit from populations that are sympathetic to their goals. Legitimate organizations can serve as recruiting grounds for terrorists. Militant Islamic recruiting, for example, is often associated with the proliferation of fundamentalist religious sects. Some recruiting is conducted on a worldwide basis via schools financed from both governmental and non-governmental donations and grants. Recruiting may be conducted for particular skills and qualifications and not be focused on ideological commitment. Some terrorist organizations have sought current or former members of the U.S. armed forces as trained operatives and as agents within an organization.

Recruitment can gain operatives from many diverse social backgrounds. The approach to radical behavior or direct actions with terrorism can develop over the course of years or decades. One example is John Walker Lindh, the U.S. citizen captured in Afghanistan by U.S. military forces. His notoriety jumped into international attention, as did the situation of individuals from several counties that were apprehended in combat actions of Afghanistan. Lindh's change from an unassuming middle-class adolescent in the Western United States to a member of a paramilitary training camp in Pakistan and subsequent support for Taliban forces in Afghanistan spotlights that general profiling can be doubtful, and any assessment should be tempered with specific instances and a broad perspective. In the case of Jose Padilla, his

simplistic and voluntary efforts to detonate a bomb in the U.S. may illustrate al-Qaida techniques to support, finance, and use less than sophisticated means to conduct terrorist acts.



Figure 3-4. **Radicalization of U.S. Citizen**

Some groups will use coercion and leverage to gain limited or one-time cooperation from useful individuals. This cooperation can range from gaining information to conducting a suicide bombing operation.¹⁰⁸ Blackmail and intimidation are common forms of coercion. Threats to family or community members, as well as a targeted individual, may be employed.

Section II: Organizational Structure

Cellular Foundation

The cell is the smallest element at the tactical level of terrorist organization. Individuals, usually three to ten people, comprise a cell and act as the basic tactical component for a terrorist organization. One of the primary reasons for a cellular configuration is security. The compromise or loss of one cell should not compromise the identity, location, or actions of other cells. Compartmenting functions within 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 cannot provide sensitive information to infiltrators or captors.

Terrorists may organize cells based on family or employment relationships, on a geographic basis, or by specific functions such as direct action or intelligence. The terrorist group may also form multifunctional cells. Cell members remain in close contact with each other in order to provide emotional support and enhance 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 several cells that operate in local or regional areas, across national borders, or among several countries in transnational operations.

A home page of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) described its viewpoint of cellular organization. “Modeled after the Animal Liberation Front [ALF], the E.L.F. is structured in such a way as to maximize effectiveness. By operating in cells (small groups that consist of one to several people), the security of group members is maintained. Each cell is anonymous not only to the public but also to one another. This decentralized structure helps keep activists out of jail and free to continue conducting actions.”

¹⁰⁸ Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, rev. ed. (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 270-271.

Two basic methods define organizational structure of a terrorist group. These methods are hierarchical and networked models. A terrorist group may employ either type or a combination of the two models.

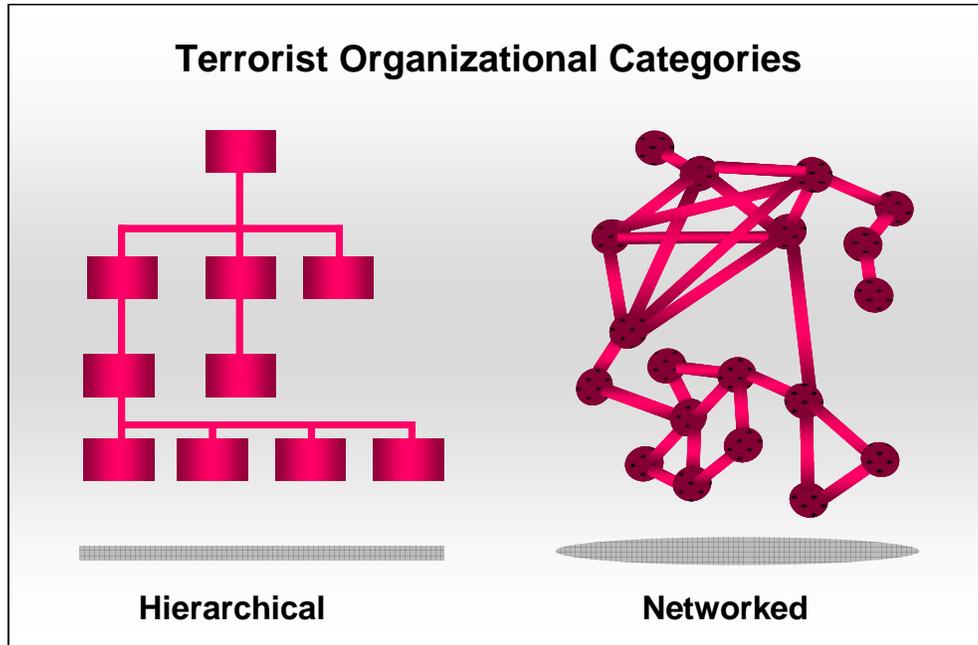


Figure 3-2. **Organizational Structure Categories**

Hierarchical Structure

Hierarchical structure organizations are those that have a well-defined vertical chain of command, control, and responsibility. Data and intelligence flows up and down organizational channels that correspond to these vertical chains, but may not necessarily move horizontally through the organization.

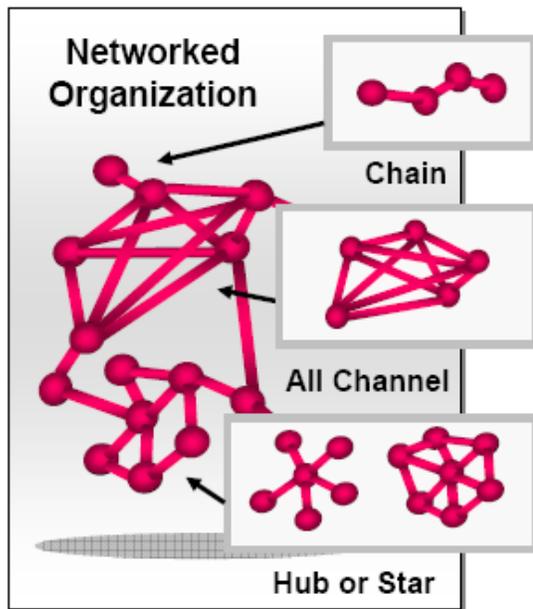
Hierarchical organizations feature greater specialization of functions in their subordinate cells such as support, operations, intelligence. Usually, only the cell leader has knowledge of other cells or contacts, and only senior leadership has visibility of the organization at large.

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 such as the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Irish Republican Army and the Basque separatist ETA group, conformed to this structure. 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 success. The necessity to

coordinate actions between various subordinate cells such as political offices or non-violent support groups favored a strong and hierarchical authority structure.

Networked Structure

Terrorists are increasingly using a broader system of networks than previously experienced. Groups based on religious or single issue motives may lack a specific political or nationalistic agenda. They have less need for a hierarchical structure to coordinate plans and actions. Instead, they can depend and even thrive on loose affiliation with 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 conduct action in support of these guidelines.



The effectiveness of a networked organization is dependent on several considerations. The network achieves long-term organizational effectiveness when cells share a unifying ideology, common goals or mutual interests.¹⁰⁹ A difficulty for network organizations not sharing a unifying ideology is cells can pursue objectives or take actions that do not meet the goals of the organization, or are counterproductive. In this instance, the independence of cells fails to develop synergy between their activities and limits their contribution to common objectives.

Figure 3-3. **Networked Organization**

Networks distribute the responsibility for operations and plan for redundancies of key functions. Cells do not contact or coordinate with other cells except for coordination essential to a particular operation or function. Avoiding unnecessary coordination or command approval for action provides ability for terrorist leaders to deny responsibility of specified acts of terror, as well as enhance operational security.

Networks are not necessarily dependent on modern information technology for effective command and control. The organizational structure and the flow of information and guidance inside the organization are defining aspects of networks. While information technology can make networks more effective, low technology means such as couriers, paper messages, and landline telephones can enable networks to avoid detection and operate effectively in certain circumstances.

¹⁰⁹ John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, ed., *Networks and Netwars* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 9.

Types of Structure.

There are various types of networked structure, depending on the ways elements are linked to other elements of the structure. There are three basic types: chain, hub, and all-channel. A terrorist group may also employ a hybrid structure that combines elements of more than one network type.

- **Chain Networks**

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



Fig. 3-4. **Chain Network**

- **Hub and Star**

Cells communicate with one central element. The central cell 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 cells in addition to the hub. A wheel configuration is a common feature of a financial or economic network.

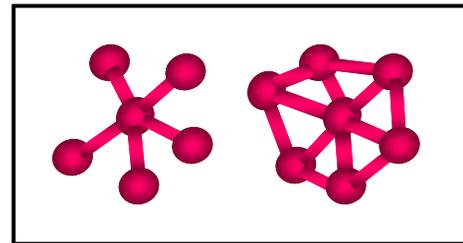


Fig. 3-5. **Hub and Star Network**

- **All-Channel**

All nodes are connected to each other. The network is organizationally flat indicating 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 be identified or tracked.

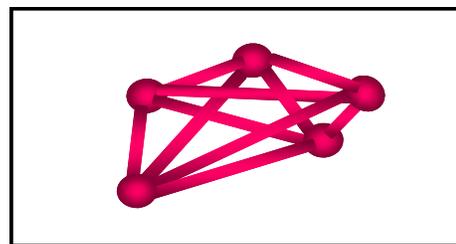


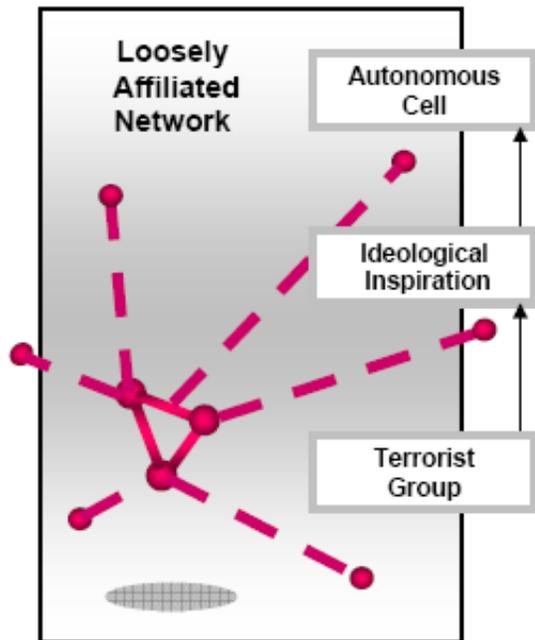
Figure 3-6. **All-Channel Network**

Despite their differences, the three basic types will be encountered together in hybrid organizations. 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.

Ideological Affiliation

A variation on network structure is a loosely affiliated method which depends more on an ideological intent, rather than any formalized command and control or support structure.



These semi-independent or independent cells plan and act within their own means to promote a common ideological position with terrorist organizations that may have regional, international, or transnational reach.

Individuals may interpret a theology and acquire an extreme viewpoint of how to promote the ideology with personal action. Cells may form from a general inspiration of al-Qaida or similar ideological announcements.

Other independent actors may act as individuals or small terror cells to demonstrate a specific issue such as domestic terrorism in Environmental Liberation Front (ELF) or Animal Liberation Front (ALF) movements.

Figure 3-7. **Affiliated Network**

Section III: Organizational Categories

There are many different categories of terrorism and terrorist groups and their levels of capability. This section addresses several common classifications of support to terrorist organizations and provides explanation relationships.

Terrorist Affiliation

Categorizing terrorist groups by their affiliation with governments provides indications of their means for intelligence, operations, and access to types of weapons. U.S. joint doctrine identifies three affiliations: non-state supported, state-supported, and state-directed terrorist groups.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Joint Pub 3-07.2. *Antiterrorism*, 14 April 2006, II-4.

- **Non-state Supported.** These are terrorist groups that operate autonomously, receiving no significant support from any government.
- **State Supported.** These are groups that generally operate independently but receive support from one or more governments.
- **State Directed.** These groups operate as an agent of a government and receive substantial intelligence, logistic, and operational support from the sponsoring government.



Association between or among terrorist groups increase their capabilities through the exchange of knowledge and other resources. 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. In 2001, three members associated with the IRA were arrested in Colombia. Traveling on false passports and with traces of explosives on their clothes and luggage,¹¹¹ the three individuals appeared to be an instance of inter-group terrorist support in use of explosives and other terrorist techniques. U.S. government reports state an IRA and FARC connection since at least 1998 with multiple visits of IRA operatives to Colombia. Terrorism techniques not previously observed as a norm in FARC operations, such as use of secondary explosive devices, indicate a transfer of IRA techniques.¹¹²

In order to disseminate knowledge, terrorist organizations often develop extensive training initiatives. By the 1990s, al-Qaida assembled thousands of pages of written training material, extensive libraries of training videos, and a global network of training camps.¹¹³ This training material was distributed in both paper copy or via the Internet.

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 attacks. However, this type of knowledge transfer is not restricted to just violent international terrorist groups. The same is true for many of the single issue groups located in the United States. The Stop

¹¹¹ Rachael Ehrenfeld, *IRA + PLO + Terror* [journal on-line] American Center for Democracy (ACD), 21 August 2002; available from <http://public-integrity.org/publications21.htm>; Internet; accessed 13 February 2004.

¹¹² Jan Schuurman, *Tourists or Terrorists?* [press review on-line] Radio Netherlands, 25 April 2002; available from <http://www.rnw.nl/hotspots/html/irel020425.html>; Internet; accessed 13 February 2004.

¹¹³ Ben Venzke and Aimee Ibrahim, *The al-Qaeda Threat: An Analytical Guide to al-Qaeda's Tactics and Targets* (Alexandria: Tempest Publishing, LLC, 2003), 7.

Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) group uses tactics initially used by British activists, which targets the homes of individuals that are related in some form to Huntingdon Life Sciences, an animal-testing lab. They use tactics just short of physical violence in terrorizing families and entire neighborhoods, such as showing up with sirens and bullhorns at 3 a.m., plastering the neighborhood with photographs of mutilated dogs, and posting home and work phone numbers on the Internet. An Oregon-based watchdog group, Stop Eco-Violence, stated that they are seeing a copycat effect within the eco-terror movement, with other groups now using similar tactics.¹¹⁴

These examples of knowledge exchange highlight the fact that assessments of terrorist threat capabilities cannot only be based upon proven operational abilities. Evaluating potential terrorist threats must consider what capabilities the specific terrorist cell may acquire through known or suspected associations with other groups.

Support

There are several types of support that provide information about a terrorist group's capabilities. These are measures of the strength of financial, political, and popular support for a group, as well as the number of personnel and sympathizers the group influences. These factors indicate an organization's abilities to conduct and sustain operations, gather intelligence, seek sanctuary and exploit the results of operations.

- **Financial.** Is the organization well funded? Money is a significant force multiplier of terrorist capabilities and involves the practical matters of income and expenditure. Many of the terror groups of significant durability such as the IRA, HAMAS, or Hizballah have large financial resources. Infrastructure costs consider the political and social support obligations that some groups promote to the population they exist within in order to gain active or passive support.



Fig. 3-8. Money Laundering

HAMAS is an example of a terrorist organization that has strong financial backing. Although the actual amount of money available to HAMAS is difficult to determine, estimates are that they receive several tens of millions of dollars per year. Sources for their funding include unofficial sources in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, including approximately several million dollars worth of support per year from Iran. They also receive funds that are siphoned from apparent charities or profitable economic projects.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Don Thompson, "British Ecoterror Tactics Spread to U.S. Activists," *The Mercury News*, 10 May 2003, 1-2; available from <http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/local/5832723.htm?1c>; Internet; accessed 21 April 2004.

¹¹⁵ "Hamas," International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Profiles of International Terrorist Organizations, n.d., 5-6; available from http://www.ict.org.il/inter_ter/orgdet.cfm?orgid=13; Internet; accessed 26 April 2004.



Fig. 3-9. **HAMAS and Hizballah Politics**

- **Political.** Does the organization have political sponsors or representation, either within international, state, or sub-state political bodies? This measures the degree to which a group is state sponsored or supported, and considers whether the organization has its own political representatives or party that support its aims and methods. Political support can blur the distinction between terrorism and other forms of conflict and can generate sympathy and reduce negative consequences.

- **Popular.** What is the level of popular support or empathy? Passive or active support for the organization among populations it affects or operates within shapes the organizational tempo of activities. Support from a constituency increases the effectiveness of other types of support and increases the legitimacy and visibility of a group. Popular support from populations the terrorists operate within reduces the security risks and complicates the tasks of detection and defeat for the opposing security forces.



Fig. 3-10. **IRA Poster**

The size of a group in terms of the number of personnel is important but less so than other aspects of support. A small, well-funded, highly trained group may effectively attack targets, whereas a larger poorly funded and untrained group may be no direct threat to U.S. targets other than those in immediate proximity to its base area of operations. For instance, the Japanese Red Army (JRA) conducted numerous attacks around the world in the 1970s, including an attempted takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. In 1988, the JRA was suspected of bombing a USO club in Naples, where 5 people were killed, including a U.S. servicewoman. Concurrent with this attack in Naples, a JRA operative was arrested with explosives on the New Jersey Turnpike, apparently planning an attack to coincide with the attack of the USO. Although the JRA conducted attacks around the world, the JRA only had six hard-core members, and at its peak, only had 30 to 40 members.¹¹⁶

Training

Training is the level of proficiency with tactics, techniques, technology and weapons useful to terrorist operations. Innovative application of tactics can render moderately harmless activities threatening. For example, the ability to stage a peaceful demonstration

¹¹⁶ Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002* (Washington, D.C., April 2003), 137.

may be used to set the conditions for a riot that will provide cover for sniper assassinations of responding security forces.



Training video tapes have shown al-Qaida operatives conducting live fire exercises for a number of scenarios. These scenarios include assassinations, kidnappings, bombings, and small unit raids on various types of targets. They often conduct detailed planning, diagramming, and walk-through rehearsals prior to the actual live-fire training exercise.

Fig. 3-11. **Training Video**

Proliferation of expertise and technology enables terrorist groups to obtain particular skills. In addition to the number of terrorists and terror groups that are willing and available to exchange training with one another, there are also experts in the technical, scientific, operational, and intelligence fields willing to provide training or augment operational capabilities on a contract basis.

The apocalyptic cult Aum Shinrikyo demonstrated its ability to produce weaponized chemicals and attempted to weaponize biological agents. Its most notable terrorist action was the release of sarin gas in five different subway trains in Tokyo in March 1995. However, the cult had released sarin previously in a Matsumoto residential area in June 1994. The cult had cultured and experimented with numerous biological agents, to include botulin toxin, anthrax, cholera, and Q fever. Fortunately these biological weapon efforts were unsuccessful.¹¹⁷

Weapons and Equipment

The weaponry and equipment available is an important part of any capabilities assessment of organizations that use violence. Terrorists use a broad range of weapons.



Virtually any type of firearm can be employed, as well as a wide variety of improvised explosive devices and conventional military munitions adapted for use in specific operational missions.

Fig. 3-12. **RPG-7 vs RPG-29**

See Appendix B, Firearms, and Appendix C, Conventional Arms and Munitions, of this Army TRADOC TRADOC G2 Handbook No. 1 for a sample of weapons data and illustrations used by terrorists.

¹¹⁷ Kyle B. Olson, "Aum Shinrikyo: Once and Future Threat?" *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 4 (July-August 1999): 513-514.

Terrorist intent to obtain and use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or effect is one of the most serious contemporary threats to the United States. The means of attack can span from a highly sophisticated weapon system such as a nuclear bomb to a rudimentary improvised radiological device. The specter of chemical contamination or biological infection adds to the array of weapons. Although high explosives have not been traditionally recognized as a WMD, high yield explosives have caused significant devastating effects on people and places. See the 2007 version of Army TRADOC G2 Handbook No. 1.04, *Terrorism and WMD in the Contemporary Operational Environment*, for a primer on weapons of mass destruction and terrorism.

The threat of WMD terrorism to the U.S. is present across the entire spectrum of conflict. Potential exists for WMD terrorism with individual acts of wanton damage or destruction of property or person, to operations conducted by organized violent groups or rogue states with social, environmental, religious, economic, or political agendas. As the United States confronts terrorism, both foreign and domestic, the most significant U.S. concerns are terrorist organizations with demonstrated global reach capabilities and their intention to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction. Yet, recent events have demonstrated that devastating weapon effects can be caused by one or two people with the will and a way to terrorize.

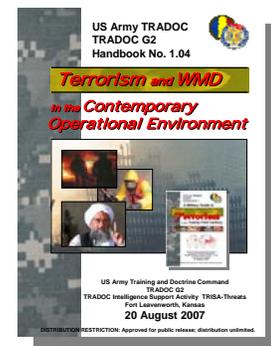


Figure 3-13. **WMD**

Conclusion

This chapter provided descriptions of the common organizational methods for terrorist groups. Discussion focused on hierarchical and networked structure. Levels of commitment exist within an organization and span senior leaders, active cadre, active supporters, and passive supporters. The cell is the foundation building block of either organization. Depending on how cells are linked to other elements, structure will display one of three basic configurations: chain, hub and star, or all-channel networks. Categorizing terrorist groups by their affiliation with governments can provide insight in terrorist intent and capability. Terrorist groups can align as state directed, state sponsored, or non-state supported organizations.

Know the Enemy. Principal themes in this knowing are: examine who will want to engage U.S. military forces with terrorism, (2) understand organizational models of significant terrorist groups, (3) determine probable capabilities of specific terrorist groups based on their affiliation with other terrorist groups or sovereign governments. Proactive knowledge and situational awareness of an operational environment enhances the ability for U.S. military forces to minimize the effects of terrorist activity in the conduct of unit missions.