Chapter 10

Functioning of Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the ways in which terrorist groups operate in today’s world. The chapter focuses on the operation of terrorism and the different elements that play a role in this operation, including terrorist groups’ missions and their significance in recruitment, what they hope to achieve, their cause, their organizational structure and leadership, the recruitment of terrorists online and offline, including the framing of messages to specific audiences, the reasons why people join their movements, the involvement of women in these operations, and the relationships among organizations. This chapter presents a solid overview of these topics while borrowing examples from a range of organizations to illustrate the different elements of terrorist operations. It highlights specific examples of historically significant events from various parts of the world that mark changes in overall terrorist operations. These include the migration from a centralized operation structure to a decentralized structure in organizations such as al-Qaeda, where its sub-organizations are ideologically aligned but loosely connected. To understand terrorism today, the chapter looks at how terrorist groups have operated historically and examines current developments and trends that will influence the future of terrorist operations.

INTRODUCTION

How do terrorist organizations function? This chapter will take a closer look behind the scenes to explore how organizations labeled as terrorist are managed by their members and leadership. Within the context of how these organizations function, the chapter will touch upon the role of communication in terrorism, the goals and motives of the organizations, the recruitment of future members, the tactics used, and the funding that sustains these organizations.

What is a terrorist organization? Since an international definition of terrorism has proven very difficult to achieve, individual nation states have developed their own lists of foreign terrorist organizations, based on current or perceived threats to their national security. These lists are updated on a regular basis as organizations shift their goals, strengthen in power, or cease to exist. At the time of writing this chapter, the U.S. list was last updated in January of 2012.

The lists of foreign terrorist organizations compiled by different nations are far from identical.

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There is usually, however, some overlap between these lists, as there are many cases where a number of countries agree on designating a specific organization as “terrorist.” A comparison of the United States’ list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) (U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2012) with the Proscribed Terror Groups or Organisations list of the United Kingdom (Home Office: Counterterrorism, 2013) reveals some interesting findings. The United States has 50 organizations designated on this list, compared to 58 on the United Kingdom’s. Of the U.S.’s 50 organizations, 29 (58%) appear on UK’s list. The biggest notable difference between these two lists is U.K.’s designation of 14 northern Irish groups as terrorist groups while the U.S.’s list only includes one, the Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA). The United States has some interest and connection to these organizations, as a small portion of Irish Americans residing in the United States has supported the northern Irish cause of expelling the British from Ireland. The influence of these Irish Americans, however, has been minimal to the overall mission of CIRA and its sister organizations.

The perceived threat of extremist organizations varies between nations based on the individual experiences of the nation, geographical proximity to the organization, and the ideological threat that organization poses to the nation. An organization like al-Qaeda, although headquartered thousands of miles away in Afghanistan, has targeted the United States on its land as well as its representatives and allies abroad. Thus, geographical proximity in the case of this organization is irrelevant, while ideological threat maintains significance.

Communication is at the heart of all terrorist acts, and a critical element in organizational function. Consequently, impairments in communication severely hinder organizations from achieving their goals. Communication happens both internally within the organization and externally with outside audiences. Internally, the organization needs to communicate with its members in order to convey relevant information, update them on its latest achievements, and motivate them. Face to face communication continues to be the most secure and reliable type of communication that terrorist organizations rely on, especially for radicalization. However, over the past 10 to 15 years, there has been a trend towards increased reliance on the Internet and other mass media tools by the organizations. Externally, the organization needs to communicate with future recruits, donors, and most importantly the media. The media provide the organization with the opportunity to achieve its goal of publicizing its terrorist activity and terrorizing the enemy and its allies.

It is important to note that much of the communication of these organizations is in fact strategic communication. It is systematic, deliberate, and addresses targeted audiences at carefully chosen times. In his study of the communication strategies of Jihadist organizations, Bockstette (2008) explained that as part of their short-term goals, they rely on persuasive techniques to heighten an Islamic identity by positioning the Muslim world against the “West.” This is targeted communication that addresses a specific audience. It is taking place during a time where the “West” has been increasing its efforts in understanding the Muslim world. This technique allows the group to unite against the enemy. He concluded in his analysis that the organizations were strategic in their use of communication as they “defined communication objectives, developed communication tactics and established needed strategies and many Jihadist documents demonstrate that the Jihadists do analyze their communication and media operations in order to enhance its overall effect on mission” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 20).

In the context of the functioning of terrorism, this chapter will briefly touch upon some of the ways by which the Internet had aided terrorist organizations in moving their goals forward.