



# HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

## TERRORISM AND THE NEW WAR

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# THE ORGANIZATION MEN

## ANATOMY OF A TERRORIST ATTACK



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The September 11 attacks underscore some long-range trends in terrorism and tell us a great deal about the perpetrators' mindset, organization, capabilities, and intentions. The attacks also demolish some things we thought we knew while raising fresh questions for analysts to ponder.

It will take many months of investigation before we can assemble all of the details of what happened, and we will probably never know the entire story. Even without access to classified intelligence, however, it is possible to offer a preliminary sketch based on news reports and past testimony. There has been an avalanche of reporting by the news media, often based on their own massive investigations. One must handle this information with care, for it carries the potential for hidden and not-so-hidden agendas. It is collected and reported under time pressure, unfiltered and often unchecked. It varies greatly in quality. It is space-constrained. Uncertainty is banished, and a shorthand phrase, an elegant quote, or a colorful metaphor can trump analysis. Nonetheless, it is rich ore to be mined. It can be supplemented, moreover, with material that has emerged from investigations, indictments, and trials of other terrorists.

This last point presumes that the people behind the September 11 attacks were associated with those behind other recent strikes, but such a link seems clear. The hijackers seem connected to those who sponsored and executed the 1995 bombing of the Military Cooperation Program building in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; the foiled terrorist plot to carry out bombings in the United States

and elsewhere at the turn of the millennium; and the October 2000 attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* in Yemen—in other words, Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants.

For this not to be the case, the United States, the nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other allies, and the world's skeptical and aggressive news media would all have to have signed on to a massive disinformation campaign. Ingenious and elaborate conspiracy theories will always be on offer, but a propaganda conspiracy of that magnitude stretches credulity. At the same time, it is probable that bin Laden, despite his undoubted role and newfound celebrity status, is not the Ian Fleming supervillain he has been made out to be. Leadership among self-appointed fanatics is always more complex than that.

We are deluged with material but still know too little. And this chapter, written only a month after the event, can be only analysis on the fly, a blurry snapshot rather than a diagram. Nevertheless, one can look at what happened and how it happened and learn something about the terrorists' capabilities. One can then proceed to the "why"—the mind-set, motives, and strategy behind the attack, examining things from the terrorists' point of view. Discerning the logic behind their terrible violence, of course, in no way lessens condemnation of their acts. Cold-blooded mass murder requires cold-blooded analysis, the careful selection of words to convey precise meaning uncluttered by emotional rhetoric.

## **A LOW-TECH AFFAIR**

On September 11, four separate teams of terrorists, 19 men in all, hijacked four airliners. They crashed two of them into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York and one into the Pentagon just outside of Washington, D.C. In the fourth aircraft, passengers realized what the hijackers intended to do and struggled to regain control of the plane. It crashed in Pennsylvania, killing everyone on board.

We may never know exactly how the hijackers seized control

of the aircraft. The little evidence we have suggests that they did it with small knives and box cutters along with claims that they had a bomb. The hijackers may have walked through airport screening procedures with these items (which passengers at the time were allowed to carry on board), or they may have had confederates at the airports who handed the items to them on the other side of security checkpoints or concealed them aboard the planes in advance. Some of the hijackers had trained in the martial arts; they were the muscle while the others, trained as pilots, flew the planes. They may or may not have worn red bandannas.

Add to their weapons, real and imagined, the element of surprise, the fact that they were a team rather than a lone hijacker, the likely swift initial act of violence to intimidate would-be challengers, the typically low passenger loads on Tuesday morning transcontinental flights, and the history of previous hijackings, which suggested that compliance rather than foolish resistance was the safest course of action.

The takeovers had to be coordinated in time. With the first crash, the authorities would realize what was up. Security would tighten. Airliners might be grounded—as in fact they were. Jets might even scramble to shoot down the hijacked planes before they reached their destination. The attacks had to be carried out in quick succession.

This simple account, if fairly accurate, suggests that the hijackers had knowledge of airport security procedures, which would have been easy to obtain through observation. How they persuaded or coerced the pilots to surrender the controls we do not know, but the hijackers expected no difficulty in entering the cockpits—they knew the doors were flimsy—and, unarmed, expected no surprises on the other side of the door. Security was fatally predictable.

Familiarity with passenger loads could have been gained through conversations with booking agents and through trial runs. Confederates among airport ground staff may or may not have been used, but their recruitment would not have presented any great obstacle. The “weapons” they used were readily available items.

The coordination of the final attack required communications between the teams. The operation itself required clear weather in both New York and Washington. Bad weather could have delayed flights, destroyed simultaneity, and obscured their targets. The hijackers had to be able to postpone the operations days, if not hours, beforehand if the weather looked bad. Cell phones would have sufficed to coordinate this aspect of the attacks.

In previous operations, we know there were separate teams: A surveillance unit reconnoitered possible targets and gathered intelligence, possibly years in advance. Its reports included careful evaluations of security. A higher echelon selected targets and reviewed plans. A logistics team provided support. And an attack team carried out the operation.

Indeed, this was fundamentally a low-tech affair. Ingenuity rather than technological sophistication enabled the terrorists to enter the domain of mass destruction, killing more than 5,000 people without resorting to chemical or biological weapons or improvised nuclear devices.

## CASUALTIES OF EPIC PROPORTIONS

Those who had previously forecast that terrorist violence would escalate were right. The September 11 attacks conformed to a trend of escalating lethality even as the volume of international terrorism had declined. Large-scale indiscriminate violence had become the reality of contemporary terrorism before this most recent strike. Previously, terrorists had achieved this in one of two ways: by detonating truck bombs or by smuggling small bombs aboard commercial airliners. The worst incidents tell the story: 325 people killed in the 1985 crash of an Air India flight; more than 300 killed in 1993 by car bombs in Bombay; 270 killed in the 1988 crash of Pan Am flight 103; 241 killed in 1983 by a truck bomb in Beirut; 171 killed in the crash of a UTA flight in 1989; 168 killed by a truck bomb in Oklahoma City in 1995; 115 in the 1987 sabotage of a Korean airliner.

These were ominous but rare events. Of more than 10,000

incidents of international terrorism recorded since 1968, only 14 prior to September 11 had resulted in 100 or more fatalities. This suggests that self-imposed constraints limited terrorist violence; in the past, terrorists could have killed more but chose not to. Why? Because wanton violence could be counterproductive. It might have tarnished the group's image, threatened its cohesion, alienated perceived constituents, and provoked ferocious crackdowns. The increasing incidence of large-scale violence before September 11 suggested that these constraints were eroding. Terrorism requires shock, which was increasingly difficult to sustain in a world that had become inured to the growing volume of violence, and so escalation was necessary.

A fundamental change in terrorist motives had further eroded the constraints. Terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s was driven largely by ideology or the narrow nationalism that spawned separatist violence. Toward the end of the century, however, proclaimed religious beliefs increasingly provided its context. This shift is significant. Those convinced that they have the mandate of God to kill their foes have fewer moral qualms about mass murder and care less about constituents. They have no political agenda to promote. And in the minds of the devout, death in God's cause brings reward in the hereafter. Suicide attacks and mass murder often go hand in hand. For these reasons, analysts predicted that religiously inspired terrorists would be capable of the worst destruction, and they were correct.

Islam, a peaceful religion, has no monopoly on horrific violence. Advocates of the sword (or the bomb, or poison) can be found in every religion. But in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the continuing bloody quarrels of the Middle East were increasingly framed in religious terms, which were in turn exploited to inspire and excuse higher and higher levels of violence, directed against the West in general and the United States in particular. Analysts correctly assumed that Middle Eastern religious fanatics posed the greatest terrorist threat to America.

In February 1993, a local conspiracy of religious fanatics, assisted by a man named Ramzi Yousef, set off a huge truck bomb in the underground parking garage of the World Trade Center.

Their hope had been to topple one of the towers into the other, killing tens of thousands of people. The bomb caused extensive damage but killed only six. Yousef took flight and then later turned up in the Philippines, where he planned to sabotage 12 U.S. airliners flying in the Asia-Pacific region. This plan was breathtaking in its ambition; had it succeeded, it would have resulted in thousands of fatalities. Through sheer luck, Philippine authorities discovered the plot and special security measures prevented its execution. Yousef fled to Pakistan, where he was later apprehended. These events alerted us to the new terrorist mindset we faced. It sought casualties of epic proportions.

Even when terrorists tried, however, killing in quantity proved hard; the upper limit of several hundred fatalities seemed difficult to breach. Many, therefore, became convinced that terrorists seeking higher body counts would eventually resort to so-called weapons of mass destruction: chemical, biological, or even nuclear devices. As the recent anthrax mailings demonstrate, that possibility still cannot be dismissed, but too often overlooked was another, technologically less demanding solution: the multiple coordinated attack.

Coordinated terrorist attacks are not new. Almost 31 years before the events of September 11, on September 6, 1970, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked three airliners and a fourth one the next day. Three of the hijackings succeeded; one failed. The three hijacked aircraft were flown to a desert airfield in Jordan, giving the hijackers several hundred hostages, all of whom were eventually released. Palestinian terrorists planted bombs aboard two separate Pan Am flights in August 1982. Sikh separatists tried to bring down three flights in June 1985. In 1994, Ramzi Yousef wanted to bring down 12 airliners. In 1998, followers of Osama bin Laden simultaneously attacked two American embassies in Africa.

Coordinated attacks enable terrorists to enter higher domains of violence, but they often fail. They have come to be seen as a kind of terrorist feat, an opportunity to demonstrate organizational skills. Sincerity of belief in one's God and implacable hatred for one's foe do not preclude sheer showmanship, especially when

that showmanship may not only bring perverse acclaim from other terrorists but also enhance a leader's reputation among people who feel that they have suffered defeat and humiliation.

Those who approved and supported the September 11 attacks may well have anticipated an even higher level of casualties than actually occurred—something in the realm of tens or hundreds of thousands. The attacks were designed to have been a blow unprecedented in the annals of terrorism, beyond the carnage of war: the cruel punishment, the ultimate payback. In that sense, we were lucky.

### **THE TERRORISTS' SECRET WEAPON**

The terrorists' secret weapon on September 11 was not high technology but human resolve. Coordinated attacks can succeed only if those carrying them out are willing to sacrifice their own lives. That the attackers did so wiped out several assumptions about suicide attacks. Analysts had previously viewed suicide attacks as not easily exportable. Suicide attackers themselves were thought to be a form of guided missile, but the kind requiring direct observation and targeting to be effective. The recruitment and psychological maintenance of a suicide attacker required handlers. Suicide attacks had to be launched close to the target. Without isolation and reinforcement, time and distance would erode the attacker's resolve.

The principal perpetrators of the September 11 attacks, however, had lived in the United States for months beforehand, leading apparently normal lives, interacting with society, in some cases traveling abroad. They had ample temptation and opportunity to change their minds, but they did not do so. We do not yet know if any associates dropped out of the plot before its denouement.

Group suicide attacks are extremely rare. And yet on September 11, at least 19 perpetrators went to their deaths. It is possible that as many as 13 did not know it was a suicide mission. Only six suicide notes have been discovered, and it is possible that the



final letter urging the hijackers "to crave death" was not read by all. Perhaps some were told only that they would hijack an airplane, although questions about where they would go and how they would continue to hold their hostages without weapons must have crossed their minds. Their knowledge of previous terrorist operations might also have raised the suspicion that this was a one-way mission. Testimony from relatives and friends that they did not appear suicidal is meaningless. We may never know the truth, but no matter; at least six were determined to kill themselves in order to carry out their mission.

The profile of the September 11 attackers also differs from the profile of the typical suicide bombers seen in the Middle East, who for the most part appear to have been poor, not very well educated, and possibly psychologically damaged young men in their early 20s. Analysts believed that with greater maturity, status, and education, the proclivity to suicide would decline. This would normally have been a good bet, but the September 11 attackers were older—particularly those who clearly knew it was to be a suicide mission. They had better educations and appear to have been far more sophisticated than their predecessors. The profile of suicide attackers now requires revision.

Part of the explanation for the radical differences of the September 11 attacks lies in the nature of the bin Laden network, which taps into a much larger human reservoir than any previous terrorist organization. Previous terrorist groups could field perhaps several dozen, at most a few hundred active members, but the war in Afghanistan created a network that spanned the Arab world and drew in recruits from the most fanatical elements in the more distant corners of Islam. Not all were members of a single bin Laden organization, but the contacts among them enabled operations to draw on multiple resources. Analysts estimate the number of activists in the bin Laden network to be several thousand, an order of magnitude larger than the largest traditional terrorist group. This is sufficient to permit specialization: scientific, military, aviation, or, in another form, the willingness to commit suicide. With several thousand potential volunteers, 5 to 20 willing to die can be found.

The cultural context, moreover, cannot be overlooked. All cultures have produced their share of martyrs and heroes who readily sacrificed their lives for causes in which they believed. The fanatical obedience of the assassins who nine centuries ago struck terror in the minds of their foes is but one example. In recent years, suicide has become the benchmark of religious devotion and political commitment among "true believers" in the Middle East.

### **PAVING THE WAY OR STRATEGIC DECEPTION?**

Training for the September 11 attacks began more than a year before the hijackings. It seems likely that the operation was laid out and approved some time before that. We know from testimony at the trial of those charged with the bombings of the American embassies in 1998 that bin Laden's network started moving assets into place for those attacks not later than 1994. One of bin Laden's key associates reportedly visited the United States in 1995 to check on the status and reliability of the local cells. This would mean that planning and preparations for the embassy bombings, the intended millennium attack at the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), and the bombing of the U.S.S. *Cole* overlapped with planning and preparations for the September 11 attack. If other plots uncovered by authorities or believed to have been aborted are added, then this is an organization dealing with several major operations at the same time. It also raises the possibility that other terrorist operations were in various stages of preparation when the September 11 attacks took place; we may not learn about these plans for weeks or months or years.

Security considerations would require that the projects be kept compartmentalized. Operatives in one operation could not be allowed to know about other operations. The September 11 attacks were clearly the most audacious and had to be protected at all costs. This raises important questions. Were the actual and planned embassy bombings, the airport attack, and the attack on

the *Cole* part of campaign building to the climactic attack of September 11? Were the other operations used to test responses and provide opportunities for the terrorists to learn lessons even if the operations themselves failed?

Were there two sets of terrorists involved: one or more terrorist "B teams" who carried out lower-level, albeit still spectacular actions, while a separate "A team" prepared the strategic September 11 strike? Is it conceivable that the other operations functioned as diversions to distract authorities from the September 11 attack? But then the planned attack at LAX, which was prevented only by a U.S. Customs Service official's fortunate discovery of explosives in the trunk of a terrorist's car, seems very risky. Had the LAX attack succeeded, it might have provoked heightened aviation security, thereby making the September 11 attacks more difficult. Yet the terrorist planners might have been confident that aviation security would not fundamentally change. As indeed it did not: The clear signal that bin Laden's terrorists were looking at airports produced no security changes. Lulled by luck, we slept. Could it be that the LAX bomber was supposed to be apprehended, to provide a false sense of security?

## **BIN LADEN'S PURPOSE**

Terrorist operations must be judged not on the basis of what they do to the targets but what they do for the terrorists' leaders. What purpose did killing more than 5,000 people serve? Hatred provides a partial explanation. Bin Laden and his lieutenants speak often of punishment, which in their view is willed by God. More important, punishment is popular in the Middle East, where hatred of America is widespread and deeply felt. Bin Laden has also spoken of a more specific goal: bringing about the withdrawal of American military forces from the Middle East. His forces cannot drive them out, but the American public, if sufficiently terrified and confronted with growing anger in the Middle East, could decide that staying there is not worth the cost. That would make bin Laden the first Arab leader since Saladin to

liberate sacred ground. The attacks would also demonstrate that America is not invincible, that it can be struck at the very symbols of its economic and military might. This result would enhance bin Laden's personal reputation as the only man able to strike such blows. We must keep in mind that these are people who drove the Soviet Union, then a superpower, out of Afghanistan.

U.S. leaders may have unwittingly enhanced bin Laden's reputation by labeling him the pre-eminent organizer and financier of international terrorism, thereby sending hundreds, even thousands, of recruits to his tent. The September 11 attacks and America's reaction to them could help bin Laden advance his own particular interpretation of Islam, which sanctifies violence as just and necessary, and facilitate his recruitment of young fanatics, thereby restocking his human arsenal.

The attacks of September 11 have also led to war, a war that bin Laden has characterized (and many in the Middle East see) as a U.S. assault on Islam, further elevating bin Laden's appeal and authority. The same "religious war" may well discredit the governments of Saudi Arabia (bin Laden's bitter foe), Egypt, Algeria, and others if they sign on with the U.S.-led coalition.

## **TERROR, INC.?**

In the 1990s, analysts began to talk of a new kind of terrorist organization, one that was less structured and more fluid than the quasi-military terrorist organizations of earlier decades. To describe relationships that were not strictly hierarchical, one spoke of universes of like-minded fanatics in which there were galaxies and constellations from which ad hoc conspiracies and individual actors emerged. Such descriptions applied to the conspirators in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, who prior to the attack had belonged to no terrorist organization. They applied to Timothy McVeigh and his co-conspirators in the Oklahoma City bombing. Ramzi Yousef's ability to plug into the World Trade Center conspiracy and then to Muslim fanatics in the Philippines seemed to confirm a loosely structured terrorist intranet.

Only with great caution should we apply this looser construct to Osama bin Laden's enterprise, however, for it comprises several things at once. The deployment of salaried operatives worldwide, the collection of intelligence, the acquisition of false documents, the provision of stipends for sleeper agents (those taking flight training in the United States), the movement of funds and terrorist recruits, the operation of training camps, and the coordination of multiple attacks require a lot of organization. There is evidence of formal membership (new members take oaths), of a hierarchy (an approval process), of specialization by function (intelligence, logistics, training), and of division of responsibilities (into religious and legal matters, public affairs, training and operations). The network appears to have the equivalent of a "board of directors" in the form of a powerful advisory group, line managers, and employees who, according to one former disgruntled insider, display all of the attributes of bureaucracy—gripes about compensation and working conditions, jealousies, corruption, and betrayal.

This enterprise does not look quite like a military headquarters, although some of its attributes are similar. It differs from a Mafia crime family, although there are some similarities. It more closely resembles a multinational corporate structure, which would fit with bin Laden's business background. At the same time, it is vitally concerned with proselytization—making it more like a political campaign headquarters. And yet it also appears very traditional, with powerful personalities and family, clan, and long-standing local connections providing the basis for loyalty and influence.

Al Qaeda (its name means "the base") has a structure designed to move money through formal financial institutions and traditional, informal means. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill described this financial network as "spider webs."

Al Qaeda's funds, which derive from bin Laden's own investments and from wealthy supporters, are spent supporting religious schools, business enterprises in which bin Laden may have a purely financial or future operational interest, terrorist training camps, the salaried agent network, deserving allied organizations, support for the Taliban, and terrorist operations. The last

probably account for a small portion of the total budget. Terrorism is not costly. A few hundred thousand dollars would have sufficed to cover the September 11 operation.

Cutting across the more formal structure is a horizontal network of relationships with other organizations who subscribe to bin Laden's bellicose interpretation of Islam. These groups enable bin Laden to tap into local resources for operational support and provide recruits for training camps where the international connections are cemented, giving the enterprise a vast alumni base to draw on. Through these links with other groups and by carrying out operations, bin Laden gets to put his brand on the entire enterprise, which adds to his personal reputation, spreads his form of Islam, and attracts more recruits to the cause.

We do not know the operational code of bin Laden's "politburo," whether he has absolute power or is a non-executive chairman—the "commander" or the "face." Nor do we know the role played by "board" or "committee" members, or exactly how decisions are made.

The September 11 attacks, however, must have been handled differently from the others. An operation of this magnitude and consequence must have been approved at the highest level of the organization, by bin Laden himself, with the support of his advisers. It must have been closely monitored. The September 11 attacks would certainly have affected all other activities, and all those other activities must have been adjusted or suspended in accord with the main attack's trajectory.

## **THE END GAME**

In recent videotaped messages, Osama bin Laden has increasingly referred to the Palestinian cause as the basis for his campaign. He sees it as an issue that is likely to win broad support in the Arab world. These public messages and shifts in explanation show a politician seeking a constituency. Terrorism is not his end, and religious belief, however sincere, is not his sole motive for violence. His is the politics of mass mobilization. Without constituents, terrorist violence becomes meaningless. But constituents

impose constraints. The violence unleashed on September 11 inspires some, but bin Laden must weigh the risks of going too far. The deaths of innocent fellow Muslims in the attack cannot be easily dismissed. It must be explained, justified. Not every Muslim buys into bin Laden's brand of Islam or his assertion of religious leadership; in fact, most do not.

The attacks on the American embassies in Africa prompted a salvo of cruise missiles. The attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* brought no response. From the terrorists' perspective, the United States did not seem eager to engage bin Laden militarily. But bin Laden and his lieutenants knew that the September 11 attacks would bring a ferocious reply. Their strategy depended on provoking the United States into what would be seen in the Muslim world as an assault on Islam, and we may reasonably guess that they prepared for it.

They must have known that their network would come under enormous pressure from the United States, its allies, and those it could enlist in its campaign. To survive, the organization has probably protected its key operatives, arranged alternate routes of finance, and prepared hideouts, escape plans, and deception operations. All these arrangements would have been in place before September 11.

The survival of the leadership, especially bin Laden, would be paramount, not because they fear death more than those who slammed the planes into the World Trade Center, but because they believe that continuation of the struggle depends on their leader's survival. To remain the rallying point of the Islamic uprising requires that they also be able to continue communicating—hence bin Laden's videotaped messages. And it would inspire the masses and enrage their foes still more if, even while hunted by U.S.-led forces, they could carry out further terrorist attacks, doomsday operations counting down to launch without further instruction from the center. September 11 must be viewed as the beginning of Osama bin Laden's end game. It was almost certainly not planned to be his last move.