The New/Old Terrorism

By Jeffrey Kaplan

With the death of Osama bin Laden on May 2, almost 10 years after the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., it would seem logical that the long-sought turning point in the American War on Terror had been reached. Yet amid media coverage and blogosphere reactions, there were no ticker tape parades, “Mission Accomplished” banners, or rallies in which crowds waved American flags as orators from political parties declared victory. Clearly, there would be no repetition of poorly stage-managed events such as the fall of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s statue by U.S. military at Firdos Square in Baghdad in April 2003. The U.S. reaction to bin Laden’s killing, extensive in some cases and muted in others, symbolizes what I call the new/old terrorism.
The use of hijacked planes as bombs on 9/11 was a form of terrorism that was tactically innovative but in no way new. Bombs are bombs; explosives (like fuel) are explosives. What changes are the delivery systems. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing was accomplished by truck bomb, as were the 1983 attacks on the American embassy and Marine barracks in Lebanon. The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were felled not by planes but by airplanes turned into manned bombs, a 21st-century version of Major Kong riding the bomb that begins the nuclear holocaust in the 1964 movie, Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.2

Equally innovative, although again not new by any means, was the announcement by President George W. Bush that the U.S. was engaged in a “War on Terror.” The first War on Terror actually occurred early in the 20th century; a reaction to the threat of anarchic terror and Soviet schemes, it took place domestically in response to the unsolved Wall Street bombing and the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and the government’s infamous Palmer Raids yielded few concrete results and had dire effects on civil liberties.3 The current War on Terror takes place on a global scale and includes military operations in three Islamic countries: Afghanistan, for refusing to turn over bin Laden, its leading guest of state; Iraq, on a possession charge about imaginary weapons of mass destruction and for the very real excesses of Hussein, a one-time U.S. ally against Iran; and Libya, for reasons yet to be fully defined.

Terrorism waves
University of California, Los Angeles Professor Emeritus of Political Science David Rapoport identified four waves of modern terrorism.4 1) The Anarchist Wave included terror “for the greater good” that stemmed from anarchist and socialist circles. It was catalyzed in 1878 by Vera Zasulich, who attempted to assassinate the governor of St. Petersburg, Russia, after he ordered the flogging of a political prisoner, and it ended with World War I. 2) The Anti-Colonial Wave began in 1919 as a result of the disappointment of the colonized world with the outcome of the Treaty of Versailles. One almost immediate development was the birth of this wave’s most successful movement, the Irish Republican Army (if success is measured in terrorist terms as simple longevity), followed by a long hiatus. Second-wave groups became more active in World War II, then gradually disappeared, often in the guise of ruling parties in newly emergent nation states, as the last of the European colonial empires collapsed. 3) The Leftist Wave was stimulated by the Vietnam War and eventually faded into the sepia tinged nostalgia of “children of the sixties.” 4) The Religious Wave started with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. This year also saw other global religiously based terror organizations such as the beginning of the hostage crisis in Iran and the burning of the U.S. embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, by Islamist militants. 9/11 is part of this wave.

In Rapoport’s theory, each wave lasts roughly 40 years. Because the Religious Wave, in contrast to all earlier waves of terrorism, appeals to faith, it shows no signs of flagging any time soon. This wave’s unique appeal to a popular constituency is cemented by the group leaders’ mastery of sacred text and their fervent desire to liberate sacred spaces from the malign grip of outsiders. These tendencies are particularly marked by Islamic and Jewish terrorist groups and have allowed terrorist leaders to connect directly with significant portions of
the populations of the countries in which they operate. This connection is deepened in the digital era via chat rooms, websites, streaming video, and Al Jazeera’s televised and Web-based news which, in a first for its kind, is free of government censorship.5

Additional theories
Well-funded online terrorism databases built entirely on open source literature also have appeared to serve governmental, academic, press and public interests.6 More traditional forms of terrorism research were undertaken as well, and from these new directions, the “new terrorism” referred to in the title of this paper emerged. And theory, for the first time, fed quickly into U.S. government and intelligence counterterrorism research.

A great deal of thought has gone into what might follow the Fourth Wave of modern terrorism. For a few years, some believed that terrorist spectaculars such as 9/11, and earlier calamities including the Oklahoma City bombing, Aum Shinrikyo’s attack on the Tokyo subway system beginning in 1994, and other mass casualty incidents amounted to a theory called “superterror.” It flashed across academic and governmental radars for a time (starting in the late 1990s) and was predicated on the supposition that 9/11 was the apex of a new kind of mass fatality event that would become increasingly typical of terrorist attacks. Superterror did not last long. For one thing, it ran counter to the history of terrorism. For example, did the campaign of the first-century A.D. Jewish terrorist group the Sicarii, which comes to us through the writings of Josephus and which constituted the first recorded instance of terrorism in its modern form, signify the first case of superterror? After all, it resulted in the Masada, the mass suicide of more than 900 Jewish rebels under siege by Roman forces. Collateral casualties included every Jew living in the Holy Land who was forced into exile. The inherent contradictions in superterror ultimately doomed it and the term dropped out of the vocabulary of terrorism scholars, despite its wondrously trenchant appeal to the media as a striking sound bite.7

More recently, a bitter argument arose between Georgetown University professor Bruce Hoffman, who directs the Center for Peace and Security Studies at its School of Foreign Service, and Marc Sageman, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute with a background in intelligence. The argument began, or more precisely became public, at a terrorism conference in 2008. The issue was, on the surface, a disagreement about the structure of Al Qaeda while bin Laden was still among the living and thought to be ensconced in the wilds of the Pakistani tribal territories. Hoffman contended that Al Qaeda and bin Laden were still very much in control of the terrorist network. If that were true, the organization, beheaded by bin Laden’s killing, would be in its death throes as I write this article. The brand name, however, remains very much alive and to date there have been only minor local repercussions following bin Laden’s demise. Sageman saw Al Qaeda as a flag of convenience picked up by a “bunch of guys” in Internet chat rooms and online jihadist video archives; they were the real enemy upon which American resources should be focused. Here, as much as I am loathe to admit it, given Sageman’s unaccredited lifting of part of the title, and many of the ideas, of my own “Leaderless Resistance” article in Terrorism and Political Violence,8 my work has proved prescient.

Terrorism is what it has always been: a tactic of desperation by the weak in defiance of the strong. The key is not the weak versus the strong, however. Rather, the key is understanding that terrorism is, in fact, a tactic.

The Hoffman-Sageman argument might seem somewhat arcane, but given its timing, it was extremely important. Hoffman is to be admired for his vast knowledge of political terrorism and because he remained an adviser to the military in Iraq when many other academics, disgusted by the Bush administration’s invasion of the country, simply walked away or didn’t answer the phone when contacted for help to begin with. Sageman, a psychiatrist and sociologist by training, collected biographical material on some 400 Al Qaeda terrorists and has consulted for numerous branches of the federal government. He challenged Hoffman intentionally during the changeover from the Bush to the Obama White House administrations. The fight played out among academics and policymakers in the pages of Foreign Affairs and received coverage in The New York Times. At stake was not only a considerable amount of private wealth in consulting fees, but also of far greater importance, the direction of American policy in the global War on Terror. The Obama administration went with the more known quantity in Hoffman and U.S. policy opted for the audacity of stasis.

Ongoing dangers
In the end, there is no New Terrorism. Terrorism is what it has always been: a tactic of desperation by the weak in defiance of the strong. The key is not the weak versus the strong, however. Rather, the key is understanding that terrorism is, in fact, a tactic. Had President Bush declared on the rubble of the Twin Towers a decade ago that the U.S. would engage in a War on Terrorists rather than a War on Terror, the death of bin Laden would have been game, set and match. Instead, the U.S. committed to an existential battle, modeled very much on the Cold War struggle, on a tactic, not a group, nation, side or even a “bunch of guys,” as Sageman would have it.

My own contribution to this expanding body of theory about terrorism concerns the emergence of a new form of tribalism in places like Africa, where increasingly vicious or outright genocidal conflicts are taking place in Sudan, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and for which Rapoport’s Four Waves theory fails to account. My Fifth Wave theory finds the ultimate goal of each of the movements to be nothing less than the creation of a new and perfected people, making all who do not belong to the respective group and the reconstituted “tribal Golden Age” subject to the intent of extermination. The signature weapon of the Fifth Wave is rape in the same way that air hijacking was to the Third Wave or suicide bombing has been to the Fourth Wave.10

Terrorism has been with us always. We can no more create a new terrorism than we can cleanse the earth of terrorists. Terrorism is what it always was. So are people. Until that changes, one can only think of the immortal observation of the German writer Friedrich von Schiller from centuries ago: “Against stupidity the gods themselves contend in vain.”

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For footnotes, go online to www.phikappaphi.org/forum/fall2011.