Untangling the Terror Web: Identifying and Counteracting the Phenomenon of Crossover between Terrorist Groups

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Untangling the Terror Web: Identifying and Counteracting the Phenomenon of Crossover Between Terrorist Groups

Matthew Levitt

Counterterrorism should be seen not as an effort to rid the world of terrorism, but as an ongoing struggle to constrict the operating environment in which terrorists raise funds, procure documents, engage in support activities, and conduct attacks. One of the most effective ways to constrict the operating environment and crack down on terrorist financing is to target the network of interlocking logistical support groups. Many of these groups are not particular to a single terrorist organization. In fact, militant Islamist organizations from al Qaeda to Hamas interact and support one another in an international matrix of logistical, financial, and sometimes operational terrorist activity. This matrix of relationships is what makes the threat of international terrorism so dangerous. Prosecuting the war on terror, whether on the battlefield or in the courtroom, demands greater attention to the web of interaction among these various groups and state sponsors. Indeed, as this paper suggests, concerted action against terrorist financing is one of the best ways to advance not only the war on terror, but other national security priorities such as pursuing the Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the stabilization of Iraq.

Pundits and politicians alike tend to think of the war on terror against al Qaeda as a completely disparate phenomenon from the battle against other terrorist groups. This is, in part, a logical supposition as groups like Hamas and Hezbollah do not belong to the more tightly knit family of al Qaeda-associated terrorist groups. Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist groups do not conduct joint operational activity with al Qaeda, and despite some ad hoc cooperation and personal relationships, they have no official or institutional links. Nonetheless, these groups are no less benign for their independence from al Qaeda.

Indeed, the overall strength and effectiveness of the war on terror is undermined by the failure to appreciate these overarching connections. The interconnectivity between radical Islamist terrorist groups, including those that do not plan and implement attacks together, demands a more coordinated and comprehensive counterterrorism strategy than simply trying to target each of these groups individually, one at a time. Though histori-

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cally this proved effective in the battle against leftist European groups in the 1970s and 1980s, the links between radical Islamist groups are qualitatively different than the informal links that existed between leftist European terrorist organizations.

Networks and relationships best describe the current state of international terrorism. This matrix of relationships between terrorists who belong to one or another group is what makes the threat of international terrorism so dangerous today. For example, while there are no known headquarter-to-headquarter links between al Qaeda and Hezbollah, the two groups are known to have held senior level meetings over the past decade and to maintain ad hoc, person-to-person ties in the areas of training and logistical support activities. As recent attacks in Casablanca and Istanbul reemphasized, these relationships—not particular group affiliations—are the driving force behind al Qaeda’s continued ability to conduct devastating terrorist attacks, even after two and half years of the war on terror.

Too often people insist on pigeonholing terrorists as members of one group or another, as if such operatives carry membership cards in their wallets. In reality, much of the “network of networks” that characterizes today’s terrorist threat is informal and unstructured. Not every al Qaeda operative has pledged an oath of allegiance (a bayat) to Osama bin Laden, while many terrorists maintain affiliations with members of other terrorist groups and facilitate one another’s activities. This analysis applies to Palestinian terrorist groups as well. Groups like Hamas have no concrete connections to the al Qaeda “network of networks.” However, in the area of terrorist financing and logistical support there is significant overlap and cooperation between these and other terrorist groups.

Between “Operatives” and “Supporters”

September 11 drove home the central role logistical and financial support networks play in international terrorist operations. Clearly, individuals who provide such support must be recognized as terrorists of the same caliber as those who use that support to execute attacks. To be sure, taken together the plethora of individuals, organizations and other fronts that provided logistical and financial support to the 9-11 plotters combine to form the single most significant enabling factor behind the September 11 attacks. Indeed, prior to September 11, officials frequently made the mistake of distinguishing between terrorist “operatives” and terrorist “supporters.” Several of the September 11 plotters were identified as terrorist “supporters” prior to the attacks, but were not apprehended because they were not considered terrorist “operatives.”

By now it should be clear to investigators, intelligence officers and decision makers alike that the logistical and financial supporters of terrorism warrant increased attention, not only because they facilitate acts of terror and radicalize and recruit future terrorists, but because distinguishing between “supporters” and “operatives” assures that the plotters of the next terrorist attack—today’s “supporters”—will only be identified after they conduct whatever attack they are now planning—and are thus transformed into
“operatives.” In particular, any serious effort to crack down on terrorist financing, so critical to disrupt terrorist activity, demands paying special attention to these support networks.

**Key Nodes in the Matrix of Terror Financing**

A close examination of these networks reveals there are key nodes in this matrix that have become the preferred conduits used by terrorists from multiple terrorist groups to fund and facilitate attacks. Shutting down these organizations, front companies and charities will go a long way toward curtailing logistical support and stemming the flow of funds to and among terrorist groups.

Many critics of the economic war on terrorism mistakenly suggest that because the amount of money that has been frozen internationally is in the low millions, very little has actually been accomplished. The dollar amount frozen, however, is a poor litmus test. Terrorist groups will always find other sources of funding. A more telling yardstick that the amount of money frozen and put into an escrow account is whether authorities have shut down the key nodes through which terrorists raise, launder and transfer funds.

Indeed, similarly unrealistic litmus tests are applied to the war on terrorism itself. Too often people talk about winning the war on terrorism, defeating al Qaeda, or ending terrorism. But the fact is, one cannot defeat terrorism. Terrorism in one form or another has been around for centuries and will be around for many more. It has not, however, always presented as critical a national security challenge as it does today—nor will it necessarily continue to do so. Bringing the phenomenon of terrorism back down to tolerable levels is a very attainable goal.\(^1\) Counterterrorism, therefore, is not about defeating terrorism, it is about constricting the operating environment—making it harder for terrorists to operate at every level, such as conducting operations, procuring and transferring false documents, ferrying fugitives from one place to another, and financing, laundering, and transferring funds. Authorities need to make it more difficult for terrorists to conduct their operational, logistical and financial activities, and to deny them the freedom of movement to conduct these activities. In fact, one can so constrict a terrorist group’s operating environment that it will eventually suffocate. In its day, the Abu Nidal organization was the al Qaeda of its time, and it no longer exists. A time will come when the primary international terrorist threat will no longer be posed by al Qaeda, but by other nascent groups.

If, therefore, we are serious about constricting terrorists’ operating environment and cracking down on terrorist financing, then we need to look at key nodes in the network of terrorists’ logistical support groups.
Many of these organizations are not particular to one terrorist group. Militant Islamist groups from al Qaeda to Hamas interact and support one another in an international matrix of logistical, financial, and sometimes operational terrorist activity. As former National Security Council terrorism czar Richard Clarke recently testified, “al Qaeda is a small part of the overall challenge we face from radical terrorist groups which associate themselves with Islam. Autonomous cells, regional affiliate groups, radical Palestinian organizations, and groups sponsored by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards are engaged in mutual support arrangements, including funding.”

In short, inattention to any one part of the web of militant Islamist terror undermines the effectiveness of measures taken against other parts of that web.

**Links between Terror Groups: The Network of Relationships**

September 11 produced a political will, markedly absent after previous attacks, to take concrete action to counter and disrupt the terrorist threat to America and its allies. These efforts, however, tend to focus on al Qaeda to the exclusion of other groups. Al Qaeda and these other groups, however, maintain logistical and financial links that reveal a matrix of illicit activity on an international scale. Indeed, if authorities are serious about cracking down on terrorist financing, they must not only prevent the purportedly political or social-welfare wings of terrorist groups from flourishing; they must take concrete steps to disrupt their activities. Accomplishing this requires an appreciation of the network of relationships that exists between various terrorists groups.

Consider the following examples of the terror web:

- In November 2001, the U.S. government designated the al-Taqwa banking system as a terrorist entity for “provid[ing] cash transfer mechanisms for Al Qaida.” But al-Taqwa also financed the activities of several other terrorist organizations, including Hamas. In fact, not only was al-Taqwa originally established in 1988 with seed money from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but Hamas members and individuals tied to al Qaeda feature prominently among its shareholders. According to the February 2002 testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Juan C. Zarate, “$60 million collected annually for Hamas was moved to accounts with Bank al-Taqwa.” Six years earlier, a 1996 report by Italian intelligence had already linked al-Taqwa to Hamas and other Palestinian groups, as well as to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group and the Egyptian al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya.

- According to court documents, two men played central roles in radicalizing, training and funding the cell of American Muslims in Portland that tried to enter Afghanistan via China and Hong Kong to fight alongside al Qaeda and the Taliban against U.S. forces. In another sign of the crossover between terrorist elements, one of
these men is associated with Palestinian terrorism, the other with al Qaeda. According to court documents, Ali Khaled Steitiye, a Hamas supporter who underwent terrorist training in South Lebanon and an unindicted coconspirator in the Portland case, engaged in weapons training with members of the Portland cell. Steitiye possessed several weapons, “which were used by members of the conspiracy to engage in weapons training to prepare the conspirators to assist the forces in the territory of Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban, including those associated with al-Qaida, against the United States and its allies.”

Steitiye’s collaborator was Sheikh Mohammed Abdirahman Kariye, a co-founder of the designated al Qaeda front organization Global Relief Foundation. According to an FBI affidavit, cell members were secretly recorded describing how Kariye, the Imam of the local mosque, instructed his followers to fight with their fellow Muslims against Americans in Afghanistan. Kariye provided $2,000 to cover the travel costs of the cell members, money he acquired from members of the mosque. According to the affidavit, one cell member, Jeffrey Battle, explained that in the wake of Steitiye’s arrest in October 2001, “Kariye directed the group of jihadists to return to the United States if they were unable to enter Afghanistan.”

- In May 2003, several individual European countries joined the United States in freezing the assets of the al Aqsa International Foundation, a Hamas front organization funding “Palestinian fighters” while recording its disbursements as “contributions for charitable projects.” Significantly, al Aqsa’s representative in Yemen, Mohammed Ali Hasan al-Moayad, was arrested not only for funding Hamas, but also for providing money, arms, communication gear and recruits to al Qaeda. According to an Israeli report on Hezbollah’s global activity, the head of the al Aqsa International Foundation office in the Netherlands indicated the office raised funds for Hezbollah in coordination with the group’s main office in Germany.

The Matrix of International Terror in Context: the War on Terror, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and War in Iraq

Three critical and interrelated national security priorities currently dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda: the war on terror, the war in Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, each is made that much more difficult to navigate by the complicating factor of the dizzying matrix of relationships between various terrorist groups, fronts, and individual members that define international terrorism today.

Again, consider a few examples:

War on Terror: Working Through Organizational Crossover
Hamas funding comes from sources closely tied to other groups, especially al Qaeda. Take for example Muhammad Zouaydi, a senior al Qaeda financier in Madrid whose home and offices were searched. Spanish investiga-
Networks of Relationships Case Study: Abu Musab al Zarqawi

The case of Abu Musab al Zarqawi (aka Fadel Nazzal Khalayleh) offers a particular insightful perspective on the scope of the informal links, personal relationships, and organizational crossover between disparate terrorist operatives and groups. As the Zarqawi case makes abundantly clear, such networks of relationships are both geographically and organizationally diverse.

Following Secretary of State Colin Powell’s February 6 address to the United Nations Security Council, some questioned his description of the “sinister nexus between Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network.” In fact, the relationship between Baghdad and terrorism mirrors the way in which today’s international terrorist groups function: not as tightly structured hierarchies, but rather as shadowy networks that, when necessary, strike ad hoc tactical alliances, bridging religious and ideological schisms. Osama bin Laden’s calls on Muslims to come to Iraq’s defense, even as he derided the “infidel” regime in Baghdad, are a case in point.

One of the more active terrorist networks in recent years has been that of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. At least 116 terrorist operatives from Zarqawi’s global network have been arrested, including members in France, Italy, Spain, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. For example:

Turkey: On February 15, 2002, Turkish police intercepted two Palestinians and a Jordanian who entered Turkey illegally from Iran on their way to conduct bombing attacks in Israel. Zarqawi had dispatched the three men, reportedly members of Beyyiat al-Imam (a group linked to al Qaeda) who fought for the Taliban and received terrorist training in Afghanistan, while he was in Iran. More recently, Abdelatif Mourafik (alias Malek the Andalusian, or Malek the North African), a Moroccan Zarqawi associate wanted for his role in the May 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings, was arrested in Turkey in the fall of 2003. Indeed, according to early assessments by Turkish officials, Zarqawi was the planner behind the two sets of double suicide bombings in Istanbul in November 2003.

Germany: Although the al-Tawhid terrorist cell apprehended in Germany in April 2002 has been tied to Abu Qatada in Britain, Zarqawi controlled its activities. Eight men were arrested, and raids yielded hundreds of forged passports from Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Denmark, and other countries. According to German prosecutors, the group facilitated the escape of terrorist fugitives from Afghanistan to Europe and planned to attack U.S. or Israeli interests in Germany.

Jordan: While in Syria, Zarqawi planned and facilitated the October 2002 assassination of U.S. Agency for International Development official Lawrence Foley in Amman. Jordanian prime minister Abu Ragheb Ali announced that the Libyan and Jordanian suspects arrested
in December in connection with the attack received funding and instructions from Zarqawi and had intended to conduct further attacks against “foreign embassies, Jordanian officials, some diplomatic personnel, especially Americans and Israelis.” Moreover, during his UN address, Powell revealed that after the murder, an associate of the assassin “left Jordan to go to Iraq to obtain weapons and explosives for further operations.” In addition, a key Zarqawi deputy called Foley’s assassins on a satellite phone to congratulate them while he was driving out of Iraq toward Turkey, a mistake that led to his capture and confirmation that an al Qaeda cell was operating out of Iraq.

Poison plots: Powell also disclosed that Abuwatia, a detainee who graduated from Zarqawi’s terrorist camp in Afghanistan, admitted to dispatching at least nine North African extremists to Europe to conduct poison and explosive attacks. European officials maintain Zarqawi is the al Qaeda coordinator for attacks there, where chemical attacks were thwarted in Britain, France and Italy. Similarly, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet has stated that the Zarqawi network was behind poison plots in Europe this year.

Although Zarqawi’s active role in organizing terrorist operations suggests that he himself is a major terrorist leader, it is useful to clarify his links to other groups so as to better understand how international terrorism works. There is no precise organizational or command structure to the assemblage of groups that fall under al Qaeda’s umbrella or that cooperate with the organization. Hence, whether Zarqawi swore allegiance (bayat) to bin Laden makes little difference in whether the two would work together at promoting a common agenda.

The range of actors who have given Zarqawi safe haven and support clearly illustrate the current modus operandi of terrorist networks. Consider his movements since he first surfaced as a terrorist suspect in 1999, when he led Jund al-Shams, an Islamic extremist group and al Qaeda affiliate operating primarily in Syria and Jordan.

Jordan: Zarqawi has been a fugitive since 1999 when Jordanian authorities first tied him to radical Islamic activity leading Jund al-Shams. In 2000, a Jordanian court sentenced him in absentia to fifteen years of hard labor for his role in the al Qaeda millennial terror plot targeting Western interests in Jordan.

Taliban-ruled Afghanistan: In 2000, Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan, where he oversaw an al Qaeda training camp and worked on chemical and biological weapons. Such camps served as open universities, educating terrorists from a wide array of local and international groups. These students in turn established relationships and networks, like the anti-Soviet mujahedin before them. With every success in the war on terrorism, such networks become increasingly essential to al Qaeda, providing a new cadre of terrorist operatives.

Iran and Iraq: In early 2002, Zarqawi was wounded in the leg while fighting against U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. He es-
caped to Iran, then traveled to Iraq in May 2002, where his wounded leg was amputated and replaced with a prosthetic device. According to Secretary Powell, Zarqawi then spent two months recovering in Baghdad, during which time “nearly two dozen extremists converged on Baghdad and established a base of operations there. These al Qaeda affiliates, based in Baghdad, now coordinate the movement of people, money, and supplies into and throughout Iraq for his network, and they’ve now been operating freely in the capital for more than eight months.”

Prior to the war in Iraq, Zarqawi had returned to the Ansar al-Islam camp in northern Iraq run by his Jund al-Shams lieutenants. There, he enjoyed safe haven and free passage into and out of Ansar-held areas. Zarqawi is now said to be back in Iran, where he continues to operate with the full knowledge of the regime in Tehran.

Syria and Lebanon: From Baghdad, Zarqawi traveled to Syria and possibly Lebanon. U.S. intelligence officials have definitively linked Zarqawi to Hezbollah, magnifying their concerns about the ad hoc tactical relationship brewing between Iran’s Shi’i proxy and the loosely affiliated al Qaeda network.

In September, when U.S. authorities designated Zarqawi and several of his associates as “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” entities, they revealed that Zarqawi not only has “ties” to Hezbollah, but that plans were in place for his deputies to meet with both Hezbollah and Asbat al Ansar (a Lebanese Sunni terrorist group tied to al Qaeda) “and any other group that would enable them to smuggle mujaheddin into Palestine” in an effort “to smuggle operatives into Israel to conduct operations.” Zarqawi received “more than $35,000” in mid-2001 “for work in Palestine,” which included “finding a mechanism that would enable more suicide martyrs to enter Israel” as well as “to provide training on explosives, poisons, and remote controlled devices.”

At the same time, the Zarqawi network was planning attacks on Jewish or Israeli targets in Europe. According to the Treasury Department, Zarqawi met an associate named Mohamed Abu Dhees in Iran in early September 2001 “and instructed him to commit terrorist attacks against Jewish or Israeli facilities in Germany with ‘his Zarqawi’s] people.”

tors found a five-page fax dated October 24, 2001, revealing Zouaydi was not only financing the Hamburg cell responsible for the September 11 attacks, but also Hamas. In the fax, which Zouaydi kept for his records, the Hebron Muslim Youth Association solicited funds from the Islamic Association of Spain. According to Spanish prosecutors, “the Hebron Muslim Youth Association is an organization known to belong to the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas which is financed by activists of said organization living abroad.” Spanish police also say Zouaydi gave $6,600 to Sheikh Helal Jamal, a Palestinian religious figure in Madrid tied to Hamas.
U.S. authorities detained Abdurahman Muhammad Alamoudi, head of the American Muslim Foundation, on charges he was engaging in financial transactions with Libya, a state sponsor of terror subject to U.S. sanctions. According to court documents, $340,000 in cash was seized from Alamoudi on August 16, 2003, as he attempted to board a plane in London bound for Damascus. An unidentified Libyan delivered the cash to Alamoudi in his hotel room the previous night. According to the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the money may have been “intended for delivery in Damascus to one or more of the terrorists or terrorist organizations in Syria.” Alamoudi has publicly lauded Hezbollah and Hamas, expressed his preference for attacks that “hit a Zionist target in America or Europe or elsewhere but not like what happened at the Embassy in Kenya,” and was an officer of charities in Northern Virginian tied to Hamas and al Qaeda. Alamoudi laundered and transferred hundreds of thousands of dollars through charities he ran to terrorist groups, including al Qaeda and Hamas. In 2000, for example, a group that received $160,000 from a charity run by Alamoudi was implicated in the millennial plot foiled that December. In 2002, two of Alamoudi’s other organizations, the Success Foundation and the Happy Hearts Trust, sent $95,000 to Hamas front organizations in Jordan and Israel, including the Humanitarian Relief Association and Human Appeal International. Beyond this, court documents assert that tens of thousands of dollars more went through other organizations run by Alamoudi to Hamas.

Similar crossover between funding for Hamas and al Qaeda was recently exposed in the case of Soliman Biheiri, another individual at the center of the massive terror financing investigation in Northern Virginia. Biheiri, described by U.S. officials as “the U.S. banker for the Muslim Brotherhood,” headed a since defunct investment company called BMI Inc. in New Jersey. The original investors in the company, suspected of financing Hamas, al Qaeda and perhaps other designated terrorist groups, include Yassin al Qadi and Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzook (both listed as specially Designated Global Terrorists by the U.S. government), as well as Abdullah Awad bin Laden (Osama Bin Laden’s nephew and the former head of the U.S. offices of suspected al Qaeda front the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, WAMY).
Such links are not a new phenomenon. The leader of a Pakistani jihadi organization openly admitted to having “person-to-person contacts” with other groups, adding, “sometimes fighters from Hamas and Hezbollah help us.” Asked where his group meets groups like Hamas and Hezbollah,” the Pakistani answered, “a good place to meet is in Iran.” Offering insight into the importance of interpersonal relationships between members of disparate terrorist groups, he added, “We don’t involve other organizations. Just individuals.”

Another such link was revealed when U.S. immigration officials briefly detained Muhammad Jamal Khalifa, bin Laden’s brother-in-law and a senior IIRO official and al Qaeda financier, in San Francisco in December 1994. Among the material found in his belongings “were extensive discussions of assassination, the use of explosives, military training and jihad as well as details of Islamist movements such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.” Khalifa maintained relations with Hamas members working for the IIRO in the Philippines even after he left the organization to open a branch of the Muwafaq Foundation there.

Iraq: Foreign Jihadists and Domestic Baathists Teaming Up to Attack Americans

Even as coalition forces try to plant the seeds of a pluralistic society in Iraq, these trends are being uprooted by swarms of radicals from across the Muslim world who enter Iraq—primarily from Syria and Iran but also from Saudi Arabia—to take advantage of Iraq’s newfound status as a failing state. Iraq has now become a magnet for Baathists, Sunni terrorists, Shia radicals and others opposed to the development of a peaceful, pluralistic society in Iraq, much like Afghanistan, Somalia, parts of Yemen, Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, Chechnya and other undergoverned territories.

These destabilizing forces include individual radicals and terrorist groups, but also neighboring states, such as Syria and Iran, both of which allow terrorist elements to cross their borders into Iraq. U.S administrator Paul Bremer, also a noted authority on international terrorism, recently told CNN, “We’ve certainly seen foreign fighters who sort of fit the al Qaeda profile—people traveling on documents from Syria, Yemen, Sudan, in some cases Saudi Arabia, some of the terrorist groups we’ve attacked in the west of the country.”

According to press reports, coalition intelligence agencies intercepted conversations between radical Islamists from Saudi Arabia and Iraqi Baathists. Officials were reportedly surprised by this, noting the conservative fundamentalist ideology of Saudi extremists, while Baathists are more often moderate if not secular Muslims.

But such cooperation borne of opportunism and a narrow mutual interest in targeting coalition forces should be no surprise. Almost as soon as coalition forces crossed into Iraq, reports leaked out of thousands of Arab irregular forces—some volunteers, some members of terrorist groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Fatah splinter groups—crossing the Syrian border into Iraq to battle coalition forces. Coalition commanders commonly referred to these irregulars as “Syrians” because so
many of them were Syrian, and many carried Syrian travel documents, in some cases specifically marked “reason for entry: Jihad. Length of stay: Indefinite.” In one case, U.S. military forces captured a large group of Syrians and confiscated seventy suicide jackets—each filled with twenty-two pounds of military grade C4 explosives, and mercury detonators. In another case, soldiers found several hundred thousands dollars on a bus that came from Syria, together with “leaflets suggesting that Iraqis would be rewarded if they killed Americans.” Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara explained his country’s facilitating terrorists’ travel to Iraq by asserting quite plainly, “Syria’s interest is to see the invaders defeated in Iraq.”

In case some planners were still unclear on the developing trend, Osama Bin Laden issued a tape-recorded message to the “mujahideen brothers in Iraq” in February stressing “the importance of the martyrdom operations against the enemy.” Most recently, Sunni clerics meeting in Stockholm in mid-July at a conference of the European Council for Fatwa and Research approved the use of suicide attacks in Iraq (and Palestine and Kashmir).

**Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Likely Cross-group Cooperation in Gaza Bombing**

The recent bombing of a U.S. convoy in Gaza on October 15, 2003, which killed three American contract employees of the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv and injured a fourth, was neither unprecedented nor unexpected. Indeed, U.S. embassy employees narrowly escaped injury in a similar attack last June, when unknown assailants detonated two bombs near their vehicle. No group has claimed responsibility for the October 15 attack. But Palestinian security officials quickly arrested several members of the Popular Resistance Committee (PRC), a conglomeration of former and current members of Fatah, Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the various Palestinian security forces. Whether the PRC is responsible is unclear. But such a strike would certainly be in keeping with its methods: The group’s most daring and successful attack was a February 14, 2002 roadside bombing that demolished an Israeli armored tank. Indeed, that attack was executed with the assistance of a Hezbollah agent who infiltrated Palestinian territory to provide the PRC with technical and operational advice.

Although Hezbollah has not killed Americans recently, it does target them, as CIA Director George Tenet testified in February 2002. Indeed, throughout the 1990’s Hezbollah operatives were especially active surveilling American and other interests throughout Southeast Asia. Moreover, according to statements by captured operatives and other information made public by Israeli intelligence, Hezbollah and Lebanon-based operatives from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have recruited a network of rogue Fatah cells to serve as Hezbollah’s West Bank cadres. Hezbollah is particularly well known for its skill at manufacturing and placing sophis-
icated roadside bombs, a skill the group has now transferred to the West Bank and Gaza. Aside from Hezbollah’s role in the aforementioned 2002 tank bombing, in mid-2002 Israeli authorities discovered a type of mine in Hebron that had previously been used only by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israeli authorities conducting a search in Hebron during that same month arrested Fawzi Ayub, a Hezbollah operative who had entered the territories by sea using his own Canadian passport.60

Authorities are also concerned al Qaeda operatives could link up with Palestinian militias and terrorist groups to target Israeli and American interests there. Recently released information indicates that the Mombassa attacks were no aberration, and that al Qaeda is intent on entering the Israeli-Palestinian arena. In August, Israel submitted a report to the UN stating that it had thwarted several attempts by al Qaeda operatives carrying foreign passports to enter Israel in order to gather intelligence and conduct attacks.61 Israel also noted that it had captured Palestinians recruited by al Qaeda abroad to conduct attacks in Israel. Moreover, pamphlets signed by the “Bin Laden Brigades of Palestine” have been found in Palestinian areas encouraging Palestinians to continue “in the footsteps of Osama bin Laden.”62 Last month, such reports found support in the United States: The U.S. Treasury Department highlighted al Qaeda plans and funding for attacks in Israel, including “training on explosives . . . and remote-controlled devices” such as the one employed on October 15 in Gaza.63

Regardless of who bombed the U.S. convoy in Gaza, the attack highlights the increasingly international nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the devastating cost of failing to identify and confront the increasingly common crossover between otherwise disparate terrorist groups.

The Terror Matrix as an Impediment to Fighting the War on Terror

To be sure, failure to understand the crossover and cooperation between international terrorist groups has already undermined efforts to prosecute the war on terror, both on the global battlefield and in the courtroom.

Failure to understand the crossover and cooperation between international terrorist groups has already undermined efforts to prosecute the war on terror.

For example, this lack of understanding has frustrated efforts to curb the flow of funds to al Qaeda and other terrorists. A senior delegation of U.S. Treasury officials traveled to Europe in November 2002 to solicit European cooperation in a trans-Atlantic effort to block the international assets of about a dozen of the most egregious terror financiers. The effort failed however, because European officials were unsatisfied with the fact that the majority of evidence the Americans presented to support their request focused on these financiers’ support of groups like Hamas. Material pointing to their financing of al Qaeda activi-
ties was limited out of fear of exposing sensitive sources and methods behind such intelligence, while evidence of their funding of Hamas was more readily available. The Americans were told they would have to produce evidence these financiers were funding more than just Hamas (i.e., al Qaeda) if they expected European cooperation.⁶⁴

Similarly, the EU has yet to designate the al Aqsa International Foundation as a terrorist entity, despite its known ties to Hamas, al Qaeda and possibly Hezbollah.

Myopic perspectives such as this, blind to the crossover between terror networks, have also undermined criminal prosecutions of terrorists, including several cases in the United States.

As the myriad of companies, charities, and other suspected terrorist front organizations now under investigation in Northern Virginia highlight, there is a critical need to break away from the tendency to adhere to a strict compartmentalization of terrorist groups in investigating terrorism cases. Investigating the family of organizations in Northern Virginia—including the Safa Group, SAAR Foundation, Success Foundation and many more—strictly as a Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), or al Qaeda cases—clearly did not work. Indeed, the tentacles of this entrenched network are suspected of providing tremendous logistical and financial support to a variety of international terrorist groups.

Tracing these financial trails, however, proved immensely difficult given the various groups’ proactive efforts to layer their transactions and obfuscate the terrorist intentions of their many transactions. More than anything, the links between various personalities tied to these organizations on the one hand and to a laundry list of terrorist groups, fronts and operatives on the other, keyed investigators into the network’s terror financing and support activities.

Progress on this complex web of front organizations appears to have developed only with the passage of the USA Patriot Act, which facilitated the sharing of intelligence among prosecutors and permitted cross-referencing of information across previously compartmentalized terrorism investigations.

**Conclusion**

Money has not been a constraint on the activities of al Qaeda, Palestinian terrorist groups, or the jihadists and Ba’athists fighting coalition forces in Iraq. This will continue to be the case until more serious action is taken toward restricting the financing of terrorism, which is indeed one of the most effective ways to advance the war on terror, the Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the stabilization of Iraq.

The principal terrorist threat today stems from the web of shadowy relationships between loosely affiliated groups. The sponsors of such groups further complicate the web, be they states or substate actors. Indeed, there is no precise organizational or command structure to the assemblage of groups that cooperate with al Qaeda or fall under the organization’s
umbrella. Given the multifarious links between international terrorist
groups and their relationships with state sponsors of terrorism such as Iran
and Syria, the war on terror will be most effective if it has a strategic focus
on the full matrix of international terrorism rather than a tactical focus
on al Qaeda. Prosecuting the war on terror, whether on the battlefield or
in the courtroom, demands greater attention to the web of interaction
among these various groups and state sponsors.

Notes

1 Without trying to quantify current and tolerable levels of terrorism, one can safely as-
sert that reducing the threat of radical Islamic terrorism, the source of the vast majority
of terrorist threats today, would significantly reduce the threat level from one in which
each day brings several new terror threats to one in which such threats, while perhaps no
less dangerous, are far less frequent.

2 Richard A. Clarke, “Statement before the United States Senate Banking Committee,” 22

3 John B. Taylor, “Statement from the US Department of the Treasury,” 7 November 2001,

4 “The United States and Italy Designate Twenty-Five New Financiers of Terror,” Depart-
ment of the Treasury Office of Public Affairs, PO-3380, 29 August 2002,
<www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/083380.htm> and Lucy Komisar, “Shareholders in the
Bank of Terror?” Salon.com, 15 March 2002; and Mark Hosenball, “Terror’s Cash Flow,”

5 Testimony of Juan C. Zarate, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Terrorism and Violent Crime,
U.S. Department of the Treasury, House Financial Subcommittee Oversight and Investi-
gations, 12 February 2002.

6 Ibid.

7 United States of America v. Jeffrey Leon Battle et al., United States District Court for
the District of Oregon, No. CR 02-399 HA, 2 October 2003.


9 “Treasury Designates Al-Aqsa International Foundation as Financier of Terror: Charity
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