HOW WILL AL-QAEDA END?
ANALYZING PATTERNS OF DECLINE AND DEMISE FOR TERRORIST CAMPAIGNS[©1]

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How do governments judge the status of a terrorist campaign? One of two approaches is typically favored. The first is to use the tools employed in warfare, including territory gained, casualties suffered, leaders killed, economic strength and so forth. Although this approach can provide insight, these 'metrics' may be insufficient to judge whether a terrorist group is advancing or declining, because terrorism relies upon shock--attacking innocent civilians so as to intimidate or impress an audience. There is no linear relationship between the metrics of war and a terrorist group's ability to make an impact upon an audience. Plus, with a terrorist campaign, we are forced to speculate about what has NOT happened, because sometimes merely the threat of violence advances a group's aims. The second approach is to use classic measures of law enforcement, such as number of incidents, plots foiled, successful prosecutions, and so forth. Again, there is some help there. But if the American government had used these kinds of numbers in the years before the 11 September attacks in the United States, we would have concluded that al-Qaeda was waning, because the number of confirmed attacks upon American targets to that point was four. And we would have been wrong.

My research takes a different tack. I believe that governments should approach the analysis of terrorist campaigns as if they were crafting a wide-ranging grand strategy, balanced between all the instruments of state power—including military, law enforcement, diplomacy, intelligence—and consciously oriented toward an endpoint. As Sir Basil Liddell Hart observed some sixty years ago, the best way to formulate any grand strategy is to look beyond the 'war' to the nature of the peace.[i] So, in the same sense, the best way to formulate a grand strategy in the midst of a terrorist campaign is to look beyond the tactical dynamics of attack and counterattack, toward a broader vision of how it will end. Studying how terrorism ends is the best way to immunize ourselves against the strategies of terrorism, to avoid the dysfunctional action/reaction dynamic that often serves the interests of the terrorists, to gain strength and perspective, and crucially, to identify and drive toward the most likely ending for the group.

But how exactly do you do that? There are classic patterns of ending for terrorist campaigns that become apparent after wide-ranging study of groups in modern history. Once you recognize those broad patterns and determine which one(s) best fit a particular campaign, you can better judge how you are doing against it. Processes of ending yield the best insights about what succeeds, what fails, and why. They also help policy-makers rise above the classic action/reaction tactics of a terrorist campaign, providing insights into not only what a group is doing, but also a fresh framework for what a state is doing. Fortunately, as I hope to demonstrate, understanding these classic patterns yields a good deal of insight into the status of al-Qaeda's terrorist campaign and how it might end.

But first let me explain how and why I did the research that led to these arguments.

BACKGROUND ABOUT THE RESEARCH ON HOW TERRORISM ENDS

My analysis of the endings of terrorist campaigns began informally in 2003, when I was Specialist on Terrorism in the Congressional Research Service, advising U.S. Congressmen about the evolving threat of al-Qaeda. Then, a few years later, when I was Director of Studies for the Changing Character of War programme at Oxford University, I wrote a number of articles as well as a book on the endings of terrorist campaigns.[ii] Since then I have updated individual case studies and done more field research; but the bulk of the foundational research on how terrorism ends was done during my two-year stint in Oxford (2005-2007). There is much more work to be done in studying such a large question covering such a wide range of campaigns throughout the world; but my goal has been at least to lay out a framework for addressing the major questions, as well as to suggest a few of the answers.

My work has had three major components: first, extensive historical research, consultations and field work; second, a series of controlled comparisons between case studies; and finally, the use of publicly-available databases of terrorist attacks, supplemented and cross-checked by other sources, then reformulated into a smaller, more narrowly-focused database developed specifically for my book.[iii] In other words, I used both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis in developing this work. This is a problem-driven, not a methodologically-driven study: no one research method has proved more authoritative than the others. Only together do they have any significance or relationship to reality, as each is a check upon the others. In particular, the weaknesses of Western terrorist databases are well known, and while their use is essential, I do not believe that balanced and accurate conclusions on this subject may be derived from statistical analyses *alone*, especially in the absence of careful study of the evolution of individual campaigns (i.e., some in-depth understanding of where the numbers came from). In other words, while I will shortly cite my own statistical results in what follows, these data are necessary but not sufficient to the conclusions I reached. Terrorism is an intensely political phenomenon, and there is no substitute for developing broad, reality-based knowledge of actual terrorist campaigns.

HOW WILL AL-QAEDA END? EXAMINING CLASSIC PATTERNS OF ENDINGS FOR TERRORIST CAMPAIGNS:

Six general pathways out of terrorism are covered by the six thematically-organized chapters in my book, *How Terrorism Ends*. The pathways are not mutually exclusive, as individual campaigns may display more than one pattern at a time. Below I will briefly summarize the major findings of each thematic area of study, and then explain how those conclusions apply or do not apply to al-Qaeda's ongoing campaign. These cases are necessarily abbreviated so as to tailor them for a conference presentation; those wishing a more in-depth explanations should seek them in the book.

1. 'DECAPITATION': THE CAPTURE OR KILLING OF THE LEADER

There are numerous examples of where getting rid of the leader through either arrest or assassination changed the trajectory of a campaign. There are many famous cases of capture and arrest, for example. These include the 1992 apprehension by the Peruvian government of Manuel Ruben Abimael Guzmán (popularly known as "Guzmán) of Sendero Luminoso (the Shining Path). Dressed in a striped uniform and presented to the press in a cage, Guzmán was tried in a military court and sentenced to life in prison. The number of attacks by Sendero Luminoso thereafter dropped sharply. Another notable case was the1999 capture by the Turkish government of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (or PKK). The decline sparked by Ocalan's capture, a masterstroke of counterterrorism, was dramatically reversed by broader destabilizing events and conventional hostilities in the region. Likewise, the 1995 arrest by Japanese authorities of Shoko Asahara, leader of Aum Shinrikyo, dealt the group a serious blow.

Cases of assassination are also numerous. These have included the U.S. and Philippine government's killing of leaders of Abu Sayyaf, including the killing of leaders Abu Sabaya and Ghalib Andang in 2002 and 2003. Russia's systematic killing of Chechen separatist leaders in March 2005 even included Aslan Maskhadov, formerly the democratically elected leader of Chechnya and arguably the only Chechen rebel leader with whom the Russians might

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conceivably have held talks. Israel's campaign of 'targeted killings' of Palestinian operatives has resulted in the intentional deaths of hundreds of Palestinians, with nearly as many killed unintentionally, in a preemptive policy that supporters term 'active self-defense' intended to protect Israeli civilians.[iv] There are numerous other historical examples.

Several conclusions about decapitation emerge. In undermining a group, a humiliating arrest has historically been more effective than killing a leader. Sometimes assassination backfires, creating a martyr and mobilizing public opinion. Groups that have ended through decapitation have been hierarchically structured, characterized by a cult of personality, on average younger than most groups, and lacking a viable successor. None of this describes al-Qaeda, so this first pathway is not the likely ending for the al-Qaeda terrorist campaign.

2. NEGOTIATIONS

Negotiations can lead to the achievement of some aims of a group and a short-term decline in terrorism. Examples included in the second chapter of the book include the Provisional Irish Republican Army (with the negotiations toward the so-called Good Friday Accords of 1998); the Israeli-Palestinian Peace process of the 1990s; the negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, as well as many others. But as these examples amply demonstrate, this pathway is much more complicated than just the pursuit of a negotiated agreement. Sometimes the long term goal (which is a viable political outcome) and the short-term goal (which is a reduction in violence) may be at odds. This pathway is often a necessary but insufficient means of reaching the end, with other elements entering into the equation along the way.

Some conclusions of the research in this chapter include the following. First, only a small percentage of groups negotiate at all—according to the statistical database, only about 18% of the group have engaged in talks. These groups tend to be longer-lived than the average terrorist campaign: while the average lifespan of hundred of groups in this study was about eight years, the average life span of groups that negotiated was about 20-25 years. It's also interesting

that of those groups that negotiated, only about 1 in 10 had the talks fail outright—meaning that both sides just gave up. Historically the predominant pattern is for talks to drag on, exhibiting some lower level of violence, without either resolution of the conflict or outright failure. So, the pathway toward negotiations appears to be a kind of diversion of the violence to another channel, while another dynamic typically enters the picture to help lead to the group's demise.

What about al-Qaeda? Obviously there is no possibility of negotiations with the core of al-Qaeda, meaning Osama bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri and the small number of fighters directly surrounding them in their current hide-out (probably in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan). Frankly there is nothing to negotiate over: the aim of these leaders, to establish a new Islamic Caliphate reminiscent of the 7th century, would require overturning the international system as we currently know it.

But with respect to individual local affiliates, some of whom were formerly concerned with local issues, the picture is more complex. The specific goals and concerns of groups in locations as disparate as Turkey, Malaysia, the Philippines, Kashmir, western China, Libya, and so forth, differ considerably. The narrow Salafist project envisioned by the Saudi bin Laden and the Egyptian Zawahiri holds little attraction for many of these groups. Some of them have aligned themselves with this movement opportunistically so as to draw recruits, increase their ability to collect resources, enhance their press coverage or draw greater notoriety. Space does not permit a more detailed discussion of each of these groups here. But suffice it to say that concentrating on local interests with local actors, disaggregating this threat and hiving away recent constituents, may hold promise in specific cases. There is a danger in over-simplifying this global movement because not everyone is equally enthusiastic about the Arab Islamist project at the core of it.[v]

3. SUCCESS

Sometimes organizations that have used terrorism fulfill their objectives, but this is a rare outcome. In my study, only about 5% of the groups examined achieved their aims (as they defined them).[vi] There are two extensive case studies examined in Chapter three of my book: Umkhonto, which was the military wing of the African National Congress and achieved its central aim with the ending of apartheid;[vii] and Irgun Zvai Le'umi (National Military Organization, also known either by its Hebrew acronym Etzel, IZL, or Irgun), which disbanded with the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948.[viii] Numerous lesser-known cases are discussed as well, including the EOKA (Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston, or National Organization of Cypriot Fighters), the Algerian FLN, and the Croat Ustasa. One interesting finding of the research is that successful transition to legitimate political status virtually always requires disavowing the tactic of terrorism—i.e., nonstate symbolic violence deliberately targeting civilians for political ends--effectively separating the emerging political leadership from its use. In other words, even if a campaign succeeds, 'terrorism' itself is widely recognized as illegitimate violence.

Al-Qaeda will not succeed in its ambitious global aims, including the establishment of a Caliphate that would require the overturning of the international system as we currently know it. This scenario is irrelevant to ending bin Laden's campaign.

4. FAILURE

Sometimes terrorist campaigns fail. It is difficult to keep a terrorist campaign going, for the challenges of a clandestine existence combined with the difficulty of operating under state pressure often tax the energy of an activity which, almost by definition, requires a high (even manic) level of energy and commitment. The most common reasons for failure involve a dysfunctional group dynamics that drive either inward or outward. Groups implode in upon themselves for many reasons, including failure to transition between generations, intra-group in-fighting and fractionalization, loss of operational

control, or even accepting individual or group exits such as disengagement programs or amnesties.

External dynamics imply a loss of popular support. Marginalization of a group leads to its demise because the environment within which it is operating becomes inhospitable, for terrorist campaigns always require some degree of active or passive support. Human political activities cannot exist in a vacuum. Active support includes things like providing money or physical refuge, giving intelligence about police movements or military operations, and especially providing fresh recruits for the organization. Passive support includes things like ignoring terrorist activities, failing to cooperate with police inquiries, sending money to front organizations, or expressing support for a group's political cause.

There are many reasons why people stop providing active and passive support. These include, on the one hand, vigorous government counteraction against a group--popular intimidation that makes support too difficult or expensive to provide; or on the other hand, offering a better alternative--as in instituting reform movements, increased economic spending, job opportunities for unemployed potential recruits.[ix] Groups that lose contact with "the people" are headed into a death spiral. Popular support can also evaporate when the cause espoused by a group loses its relevance. This was the case with groups that were associated with Soviet Marxism, for example: sometimes a sense of historical "ripeness" was lost, and the ideology became outmoded.

But most important among the reasons why popular support is lost is the group's own mistakes and miscalculations. By definition, targeting errors are endemic in terrorism. This kind of violence chooses as its victims those whose injury or death will attract attention and shock. When the killing of targets results in fury, not among those a group hopes to intimidate or impress but among the purported constituency of the group itself, there is likely to be a backlash against it. Among the many examples of attacks that caused popular revulsion and backlas are the 1970 PFLP-GC's attacking of a Swissair flight to Tel Aviv, the 1978 killing of popular Italian politician Aldo Moro by the Red

Brigades, the GAI's 1997 killing of 62 tourists in Luxor, Egypt, and the 1998 RIRA's Omagh bombing in Northern Ireland.

Failure is a promising scenario for al-Qaeda's end, because the group demonstrates both internal and external dysfunction. Internally, al-Qaeda is beset by in-fighting and competing agendas, especially sectarian disputes and resentment among members of different nationalities. There is also clear evidence of loss of operational control, including serious mistakes in targeting. A large percentage of the victims of publicly-claimed al-Qaeda attacks have been Muslims—for example, according to one study, between 2006 and 2008, 98% of their victims were non-Westerners from Muslim-majority states.[x] Zawahiri is very keenly aware of the dangers of this targeting of Muslims, and has repeatedly instructed al-Qaeda associates to stop offending the umma by the kinds of widely-publicized slaughtering that was witnessed, for example, in Iraq. The classic example of an al-Qaeda targeting error was the Amman Jordan hotel bombings orchestrated by al-Qaeda in Iraq on November 9, 2005, when 38 Members of a Muslim wedding party, including the parents of the bride and the groom were murdered, along with other Jordanians, Palestinians and Iraqis. This tragedy resulted in widespread outrage and public protests, and it severely hurt al-Qaeda's cause. All of these internal and external vulnerabilities echo classic dynamics in historical predecessors, and they could easily hasten al-Qaeda's end.

5. REPRESSION

Despite widespread misconceptions, careful study of the history of modern terrorism illustrates that repression is not unique to a particular kind of state or a particular era. Rightly or wrongly, most states have engaged some degree of repression, be it external repression (military intervention into the territory of other states) or internal (police or paramilitary crackdowns at home) in response to major terrorist attacks. Whatever its tactical purpose, terrorism is a direct challenge to state authority, because it demonstrates the inability of the state to protect its own citizens and because it threatens notions of sovereignty

based on a monopoly over the use of force.   It is virtually instinctive. But does it end terrorism?

Not that often. There are six case studies of repression included in my book: Russian and Narodnaya Volya, Peru and Sendero Luminoso, Turkey and the Kurdistan workers' Party (PKK), Uruguay and the Tupamaros, Russia and Chechnya, and Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood. These comparative case studies, as well as the statistical database on endings of campaigns, together demonstrate that repression rarely succeeds. While it has indeed resulted in severely damaging or ending a number of groups—including Narodnaya Volya, Sendero Luminoso, and various Chechen separatist groups—it carries with it a number of serious liabilities. Putting aside moral or ethical problems with state repression (another lengthy topic of its own), repression often exports problems to another region (as in Ingushetia and Dagestan with respect to the Chechens), works best in places where group members can be separated from the general population (thus requiring 'profiling'), and has a high cost (in every sense) that is difficult to sustain. External repression places a burden of costly military intervention abroad upon the targeted population. Internal repression places a strain on the fabric of the state itself, going against civil liberties and human rights. Over time, both may actually enhance a cause rather than snuff it out, depending at least in part upon how legitimate the actions of the state are considered to be.

As for al-Qaeda, the use of military force has definitely achieved operational aims, but it is unlikely to end the campaign. Although the military and intelligence services have made important progress in killing senior operatives, the subsequent evolution of the movement has demonstrated the limits of this approach.

6. REORIENTATION

Reorientation toward another type of behavior is the final pathway toward the "end" of terrorism. This shift of behavior can be in the direction of relying primarily upon criminal activity, for example. Many, even most, terrorist campaigns are using criminal activities to help finance their violence, especially in the wake of strong global measures to control terrorist financing and money-laundering in the wake of the 11 September attacks. As the traditional banking system has become inhospitable to their money flows, more terrorist groups have turned to such 'entrepreneurial' activities as organized crime, human trafficking, drug trafficking, counterfeiting and fraud. Criminal enterprises do not mobilize popular support in the same way that terrorist campaigns do: when groups replace their political goals with profit-making and greed as ends in themselves, their connections to local populations change as well.   Groups such as Abu Sayyaf and the FARC are two examples of this transition.

A second type of reorientation is escalation from terrorist activity to full insurgency or even conventional war, especially if a group is supported by a state. This happens when the group is able to control the behavior of a state according to its interests, or even when an act of terrorism has completely unintended consequences and sets off a broader conflict. Groups that have transitioned to insurgencies have included the Algerian GIA in the 1990s, and groups that have the potential to catalyze major war include Pakistan-based affiliates of al-Qaeda such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The latter's connection to Faisal Shahzad, the purported Times Square bomber whose attempt to detonate a car bomb in May 2010 might well have resulted in massive loss of life in the heart of New York city.   Had the attempt succeeded, it could well have triggered widespread US military retaliation against attacks in Pakistan, a nuclear state.

Some observers argue that al-Qaeda has already transitioned to a global insurgency, including affiliates in Iraq, Afghanistan, and throughout the world. While there are obviously ongoing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, I do not

believe that they are seamlessly integrated into the al-Qaeda movement. For this reason, I believe that it is counterproductive to speak of this movement as a global insurgency. Insurgencies are generally larger than terrorist groups, are strong enough to target military forces, are generally associated with territory, and typically operate against local governments or foreign occupying powers. Insurgency is also more legitimate types of violence than terrorism, resonating with the anti-colonial tradition of the past two centuries. Al-Qaeda, by which I mean the core that was responsible for the 11 September attacks led by Zawahiri and bin Laden, is a terrorist organization that kills innocent civilians and has a different agenda than many of their recently-acquired local affiliates. It would be a foolish mistake to gloss over the deep divisions among these groups and meet them with global counterinsurgency tactics.

CONCLUSION

This brief survey of the research on how terrorism ends indicates that Al-Qaeda will end either by imploding or transitioning to a more legitimate type of violence such as insurgency or conventional war. Our goal therefore must be to push it toward implosion, or at least to avoid making mistakes that interfere with this process. Policy makers who become caught up in the short-term goals and spectacle of terrorist attacks relinquish the broader historical perspective that is crucial to the reassertion of state power and legitimacy. Terrorism's classic strategies of leverage are deliberately designed to exploit such mistakes.

Instead of reacting instinctively, we must undermine this movement by preventing al-Qaeda's ability to mobilize support by engaging in a counter-mobilization of our own. Such an approach includes: clarifying to audiences exactly what al-Qaeda is and what it is not, avoiding labeling every attack as "al-Qaeda" when the ties are unclear or tenuous, emphasizing local interests rather than global ties, and consciously avoiding using the language and imagery of a global insurgency. In short, we must stop building the al-Qaeda brand and global myth. We also need to exploit local cleavages, hive off constituents, and highlight the very evident in-fighting occurring within this movement.

But most important of all, we should spotlight al-Qaeda's mistakes. Held up to the light, Al-Qaeda's strategy is self-defeating: it is killing the very people on whose behalf it claims to be acting. While we cannot merely sit back and wait for this movement to self-destruct, the history of terrorism clearly indicates that policies that work with and facilitate the backlash that is underway against al-Qaeda are a wise investment. Consciously driving a terrorist campaign like al-Qaeda's toward its end is much better than answering the tactical elements of the movement as it unfolds, and it is also far more likely to result in success.

ENDNOTES

[i] B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967, 2nd revised edition), p. 322.

[ii] Among others, these publications included "How Al-Qaeda Ends," *International Security*, Vol. 31, NO. 1 (Summer 2006), pp. 7-48; and *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

[iii] This is all much more thoroughly explained in the Appendix to *How Terrorism Ends*, especially pages 207-222.

[iv] The number of Palestinians killed through targeted killings is tallied at http://www.btselem.org/english/Statistics/Casualties_Data.asp?Category=19. See also Amos Guiora,"Targeted Killing as Active Self-Defense," *Case Western Reserve Journal of international Law* 36, nos. 2-3 (2004): 319-35.

[v] Chapter Two of *How Terrorism Ends* addresses this question in more depth.

[vi] Ibid, Chapter Three (especially pages 74-82).

[vii] This is a very complex case, with violence erupting even after the 1990 ANC renunciation of violence and declaration that its campaign had ended. Between 1990 and 1994, 14,000 people reportedly died in attacks, a much higher level of violence than at any time in the history of the antiapartheid conflict. William Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 276; and Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, October 1998. For further scholarly analysis see

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Howard Barrell, *The ANC's Armed Struggle* (London: Penguin, 1990); R. Harvey, *The Fall of Apartheid: The Inside Story from Smuts to Mbeki* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); and Adrian Guelke, *The Age of Terrorism and the International Political System* (London: Taurus Academic Studies, 1995).

[viii] The most interesting source on this topic is Menachem Begin, *The Revolt* (New York: Nash, 1997).

[ix] Of course, this is a complicated scenario for failure, as it greatly depends upon social, historical and cultural dynamics. Increased opportunities sometimes bring with them social instability and a sense of opportunity that increases the incentives to nudge history in the political direction of the group.

[x] See Scott Helfstein, Nassir Abdullah, and Muhammad al-Obaidi, *Deadly Vanguard: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence against Muslims*, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, December 2009; accessible at http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Deadly%20Vanguards_Complete_L.pdf.