

What can we learn

In terms of its organizational resilience and flexibility, its structure and communications, al-Qaeda is not unlike a successful, smart company – or even a venture capital firm. It has a clear message, a charismatic leader, a firm purpose and is not afraid to delegate. Recognizing how it works might be a useful step towards learning how to deal with the threat that terrorist groups pose in the modern age. By **Bruce Hoffman**

Few brand names today are more recognizable around the world than al-Qaeda. How Osama bin Laden, its founder and leader, achieved this feat sheds important light on the way in which terrorist organizations have evolved their structure in recent times, the new approaches and policies that are needed to counter this threat and even what we might learn from terrorist organizations in terms of organizational resilience and flexibility.

“All men dream, but not equally,” wrote TE Lawrence, the legendary Lawrence of Arabia. “Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.”

Bin Laden is indeed one of the dangerous men that Lawrence described. At a time when the forces of globalization, coupled with economic determinism, seemed to have submerged the role of the individual charismatic leader of men beneath far more powerful, impersonal forces, bin Laden cleverly cast himself as a David against the American Goliath – one man standing up to the world’s sole remaining superpower, able to challenge its might and directly threaten its citizens.

In his own inimitable way, bin Laden has cast this struggle as precisely the clash of civilizations that America and its coalition partners have laboured so hard to negate. “This is a matter of religion and creed; it is not what [George W] Bush and [Tony] Blair maintain, that it is a war against terrorism,” he declared in a videotaped speech broadcast over al-Jazeera television on November 3, 2001. “There is no way to forget the hostility between us and the infidels. It is ideological, so Muslims have to ally themselves with Muslims.”

To bin Laden’s followers, this analysis – and that presented in his seminal August 1996 fatwa, the “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places” – comes across as only more prescient and accurate today given the war against Iraq and the American, British and other coalition forces’ occupation of Iraq.

Nearly eight years ago, bin Laden argued that the “crusader military forces” of the United States and United Kingdom had established

a beachhead in Saudi Arabia from which they intended to impose a new imperialism on the Middle East in order to gain control over the region’s oil wealth.

To those already inclined to this view, recent events cannot unreasonably be seen to have provided further evidence of the acuity of bin Laden’s analysis. Given the long established sophistication of bin Laden and al-Qaeda’s propaganda efforts – employing multimedia vehicles (including pre-recorded video and audio tapes, CD-Roms, DVDs and the internet), dramatically choreographed and staged dissemination opportunities, and other mass outreach techniques – this message is now being peddled with increasing fervour for its motivational and recruitment value.

Bin Laden, though, is perhaps best viewed as a terrorist CEO, essentially having applied business administration and modern management techniques learned both at university and in the family’s construction business to the running of a transnational terrorist organization.

Bin Laden acquired this knowledge as a student at Saudi Arabia’s prestigious King Abdul-Aziz University, where in 1981 he obtained a degree in economics and public administration.

He then cut his teeth in the family business, harnessing the experience and on-the-job training in management and organization that later enabled him to transform al-Qaeda into the world’s pre-eminent terrorist movement.

Indeed, what bin Laden has done is to implement for al-Qaeda the same type of effective organizational framework or management approach adapted by many corporate executives throughout much of the industrialized world over the past decade.

Just as large, multinational business conglomerates moved during the 1990s to more linear, flatter and networked structures, bin Laden did the same with al-Qaeda.

Additionally, bin Laden defined a flexible strategy for the group that functions at multiple levels, using both top-down and bottom-up approaches. On the one hand, bin Laden has functioned like the president or CEO of a large multinational corporation by defining specific goals and aims, issuing orders and ensuring their implementation.

This mostly applies to the al-Qaeda spectacles – those high-visibility, usually high-value and high-casualty operations like 9/11, the

from the terrorists?



attack on the USS Cole and the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings.

On the other hand, he has operated as a venture capitalist by soliciting ideas from below, encouraging creative approaches and out-of-the-box thinking, and providing funding to those proposals he finds promising.

The attacks staged by al-Qaeda associate or affiliate groups such as Jemaah Islamiya in Bali in October 2002 and Jakarta last August; by Salafiya Jihadia in Morocco in May 2003; and by the Islamic Great Eastern Raiders Front in Turkey in November, attest to this.

Al-Qaeda, therefore, deliberately has no single, set *modus operandi* – which makes it all the more formidable. Instead, bin Laden built a movement that actively encourages subsidiary groups fighting under its banner to mix and match approaches, employing different tactics and varying means of attack and operational styles in a number of locales.

Underpinning al-Qaeda's worldwide operations is bin Laden's vision, self-perpetuating mythology and skilled acumen at effective communications. His message is simple. According to bin Laden's propaganda, the US is a hegemonic, *status quo* power that opposes change and props up corrupt and reprobate regimes that would not exist but for American backing.

Bin Laden also believes that the US is risk and casualty averse and therefore cannot bear the pain or suffer the losses inflicted by a terrorist attack. In this respect, bin Laden has often argued that terrorism works – especially against America.

He has cited the withdrawal of US military forces from Beirut following the 1983 truck bombing of a barracks that killed 241 American military personnel deployed in a multinational force there.

He has also cited how the deaths of 18 US Army Rangers (described in the best-selling book by Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*, and the film of the same title) prompted the precipitous US withdrawal from Somalia a decade later. Today, he pointedly draws the same parallel with Iraq.

It must also be said that, even in the post 9/11 era, when al-Qaeda has been relentlessly tracked, harassed and weakened, a corporate succession plan of sorts seems to have functioned.

Al-Qaeda thus appears to retain at least some depth in numbers as evidenced by its replenishment abilities to produce successor echelons for the mid-level operational commanders who have been killed or captured.

This may be a reflection of the vast reservoir of trained jihadists from which al-Qaeda, at least theoretically, can draw. In his January 2003 State of the Union address, president Bush himself referred to tens of thousands of persons who had been trained during the past decade in al-Qaeda camps in the Sudan, Yemen and Afghanistan, and thereby comprise this cadre.

More recently, a report by Congress put their number at some 70,000 worldwide. Even if this figure is grossly exaggerated in terms of those individuals who swore the oath of allegiance to bin Laden and were inducted into al-Qaeda proper, the potential pool of even a few

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thousand well-trained and battle-hardened fighters ensures at least a sufficiently deep well of expertise from which to continue to draw.

Moreover, in terms of al-Qaeda's finances, sufficient monetary reserves are likely to still exist. According to one open source estimate, some \$130 million of identifiable al-Qaeda assets to date has been seized or frozen.

Given that bin Laden reputedly amassed a war chest of billions of dollars, ample funds may still be at the disposal of his minions. At one point, for example, bin Laden was reputed to own or control some 80 companies around the world.

In the Sudan alone, he owned that country's most profitable businesses, including construction, manufacturing, currency trading, import-export and agricultural enterprises.

Not only were many of these managed to the extent that they regularly turned a profit, but this largesse in turn was funnelled to local al-Qaeda cells that in essence became entirely self-sufficient, self-reliant terrorist entities in the countries within which they operated.

In the final analysis, al-Qaeda's resiliency and longevity are not predicated on the total number of jihadists that it may have trained in the past, but on its continued ability to recruit, to mobilize and to animate both actual and would-be fighters, supporters and sympathizers.

In this respect, it is significant that, despite the punishment meted out to al-Qaeda over the past two years and more, it still remains a potent terrorist threat and destabilizing force in world affairs.

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Al-Qaeda's main challenge is to promote and ensure its durability as an ideology and a concept. It can do this only by staying in the news and launching new attacks.

In the post 9/11 environment, terrorism's power to coerce and intimidate, to force changes in our normal behaviour, and to influ-

ence our policies and affect how and on what we spend money, has increased enormously.

Although there is a world of difference between bombing a bank in Istanbul or a bar in Bali and laying the World Trade Center's twin towers to waste or attacking the Pentagon, the potential rejuvenating power of a terrorist spectacular – however crude and directed against a soft target – nonetheless demonstrates the ability of even one significant, new terrorist incident to re-ignite instantly worldwide fears and concern.

There is no doubt that the US and other governments have made significant progress in the war against global terrorism in recent months. Airports and planes are far better protected. Likely targets are surrounded by new barriers and other security measures. Many terrorists are in prison cells or in graves as a result of counter-terrorism work by the US and its allies.

But all that is needed is one new successful attack. In this respect, governments are only as good as their last failure. No matter how many attacks they prevent, no matter how many people are not killed daily by terrorists, what is remembered is the relatively small number of terrorist attacks that succeed.

In conclusion, whatever the future holds for bin Laden and al-Qaeda, it is indisputable that they have had a seismic effect on the US and the entire world. Bin Laden is one of few people alive who can claim to have changed fundamentally the course of history.

And, in this respect, the epic battle that he launched is not over yet. Indeed, because of what al-Qaeda sees as America's global war on Islam, the movement's sense of commitment and purpose today is arguably greater than ever. And this ineluctably points to a long, long struggle ahead in the war against terrorism. **GA**



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