HOT TOPICS

Terrorist Learning and Terrorist Destruction

With terrorism and insurgent violence becoming constant threats in the world today, U.S. policymakers are faced with the daunting task of developing policies that will effectively combat terrorism in an ever-changing and dynamic environment. Moreover, scarcity of resources and competition with other international policy concerns make it crucial for policymakers to prioritize the threat of terrorist organizations and implement counterterrorism activities that will conduct the war on terrorism as efficiently as possible. But while threats posed by terrorist organizations are frequently gauged according to their members, skills, and funds, to grasp the complete picture, it is necessary to consider another crucial aspect of an organization’s capabilities: the ability to adapt and learn.

A newly released RAND report, titled Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1: Organizational Learning in Terrorist Groups and Its Implications for Combating Terrorism, creates an analytical framework to help the intelligence and law enforcement communities better understand why, what, and how terrorist organizations learn, in order to identify new approaches of combating terrorist activities. By possessing a proficiency for learning, an organization can systematically act to fulfill its needs, strengthen its capabilities, and advance its strategic agenda. More importantly, it can purposefully adapt to ever-evolving circumstances by: 1) developing, improving, and employing new weapons or tactics that can enable it to change its capabilities over time; 2) improving its members’ skills in applying current weapons or tactics; 3) collecting and utilizing the intelligence information needed to mount operations effectively; 4) thwarting countermeasures and improving its chances of surviving attempts to destroy it; and 5) preserving the capabilities it has developed even if some of its members are lost.

In the face of this sort of adaptive threat, the intelligence and law enforcement communities must try to stay one step ahead of the enemy. With an increased understanding of group learning processes within terrorist organizations, intelligence analysts and security planners are better able to do this by addressing three critical challenges in counterterrorism activities: 1) assessing the level of threat posed by a terrorist organization, which can be radically altered by effective learning, 2) designing and implementing strategies for combating terrorism, including using knowledge about how terrorist organizations seek to “learn their way around” the countermeasures intended to defeat them; and 3) appropriately allocating resources for combating terrorism, since terrorist groups that can learn effectively can pose a more potent threat than organizations that are unable to change and adapt.

Although no single method or analytical approach will be applicable to all terrorist organizations in all circumstances, this analytical framework describing organizational learning will be a valuable addition to the intelligence and law enforcement “tool box” for analysis and operational planning efforts to combat terrorism.

A thorough review of the innovation and learning activities of the five terrorist organizations selected in this report can also be found in a companion volume, titled Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 2: Case Studies of Organizational Learning in Five Terrorist Groups.

READ MORE: Aptitude for Destruction: Volume 1 Aptitude for Destruction: Volume 2

Past Terrorist Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Weapons

Even before the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability by terrorist organizations has been the ultimate nightmare scenario for policymakers. Now with the recent revelations of A.Q. Khan’s global nuclear marketing efforts and Osama bin Laden’s contact with Pakistani nuclear scientists, concerns about the prospects of terrorists acquiring a nuclear weapons capability have increased precipitously.

In order to develop effectively a comprehensive strategy to prevent terrorist acquisition of nuclear capabilities, a thorough understanding of the historical record of terrorist efforts and opportunities to acquire these capabilities must be conducted. This RAND documented briefing, titled Aum Shinrikyo, Al Qaeda, and the Kinshasa Reactor: Implications of Three Case Studies for Combating Nuclear Terrorism, accomplishes this by examining past attempts by non-state actors to acquire nuclear material and fabricate nuclear systems. It concludes with a set of five observations that should provide policymakers with a better understanding of this important phenomenon.

READ MORE: Combating Nuclear Terrorism: Lessons from Aum Shinrikyo, Al Qaeda, and the Kinshasa Reactor

For over 30 years, RAND has been a world leader in terrorism research and analysis. To view RAND’s terrorism and homeland security research, go to http://www.rand.org/research_areas/terrorism/.

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