

CHAPTER FOUR DETECTING AL-QA'IDAH: PAST, PRESENT, POWER AND PERCEPTION

Deterrence occurs above all in the minds of men. – Henry Kissinger¹

Introduction

Following the September 11 attacks, it became quite common (one might even say fashionable) to speak of a U.S. intelligence failure, since many people have difficulty accepting that a plot of such lethal magnitude and broad international dimensions could have gone unnoticed by the various government agencies responsible for national security. But whatever the failure to foresee, September 11 represents first and foremost a failure to *deter*,² for “the best way to deal with a contingency is to avoid it.”³ Deterrence – one of four stated key policy goals of American defense strategy in general,⁴ and an explicit goal of American counter-terrorism strategy in particular⁵ – clearly was not accomplished; the terrorists were not deterred from committing murder.

¹ Henry A. Kissinger, “Conditions of World Order,” *Daedalus*, XCV (Spring 1966), reprinted in *International Politics and Foreign Policy: A Reader in Research and Theory*, James N. Rosenau, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 263.

² This is in contrast to a failure of deterrence or of deterrence theory, which is a more serious charge. The difference has been the subject of intense debate among political scientists. See George H. Quester, “Some Thoughts on ‘Deterrence Failures,’” *Perspectives on Deterrence*, Paul C. Stern et al, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 54.

³ Paul K. Davis and John Arquilla, *Thinking about Opponent Behavior in Crisis and Conflict: A Generic Model for Analysis and Group Discussion* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991), 1.

⁴ United States, Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report 30 September 2001* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense), 12-13.

⁵ Unclassified abstract of Presidential Decision Directive 39 (PDD 39), reproduced verbatim in United States, General Accounting Office, *Combating Terrorism: Federal Agencies’ Efforts to Implement National Policy and Strategy*, GAO/NSAID-97-254 (Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office, 1997), 70.

The Department of Defense defines deterrence as “a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction.”⁶ Credibility of threat has everything to do with perception, and it is clear from al-Qa’idah’s decision to act that the organization’s leadership was insufficiently impressed by American power. For it seems unlikely that al-Qa’idah believed that the September 11 attacks would lead to an American military and legal response that would leave the organization’s infrastructure, training camps, financial operations and other assets in ruins, its host country filled with Western ordnance and soldiers, and its leadership and rank-and-file dead, captured or on the run. If one posits that the attacks were designed to bring about a large-scale war between Islam (however defined) and the United States, it is also obvious that bin Laden cannot have expected that no such war would materialize or that he might lose such a war. In other words, given that the current state of affairs, from al-Qa’idah’s perspective, is seemingly worse than the *status quo ante bellum*, one may reasonably conclude that if bin Laden and the leadership of al-Qa’idah had known in advance the effects September 11 would have on their own fortunes, they probably would not have pursued such a course of action.⁷ Built into this assumption is one more: that bin Laden and al-Qa’idah are instrumentally rational; there is every reason to believe that these men consciously take specific actions in order to achieve specific, logically following ends.⁸ The obvious and related questions about whether and how al-Qa’idah can in fact be deterred and about al-Qa’idah’s attitudes towards risk, and the less

⁶ United States, Department of Defense, *DOD Dictionary of Military Terms*, Internet: <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/>.

⁷ A similar point is made in Paul K. Davis, “Synthetic Cognitive Modeling of Adversaries for Effects-Based Planning,” *Proceedings of the SPIE 4716* (July 2002).

⁸ It is, of course, possible that bin Laden was counting achieving on precisely the kind of lionization that he has experienced since September 11, and in this sense can be seen to have scored a victory of sorts. However, given his instrumental rationality and the post-September 11 constraints on his resources and actions, it seems unlikely that this type of limited victory is what drove him and his followers to act.

than obvious answers to these questions will form the focus of this chapter and the next.

Approach and Hypotheses

In this chapter, we shall present a historical and theoretical examination of the U.S.-al-Qa'idah interaction – both al-Qa'idah's perception and its sources as well as the American understanding of its own image in the eyes of al-Qa'idah – and how the synergy between them contributed to the deterrence shortfall. This historical review is informed by the deterrence and political psychology literature, both of which lend a great deal of insight into the difficulties inherent to deterring a group like al-Qa'idah. In large part, deterrence was not achieved because al-Qa'idah is highly motivated, driven by a messianic zeal and convinced that the United States is the cause of many of its problems and is at its core a weak, timid state, vulnerable to terror and divinely destined for destruction. Additionally, al-Qa'idah leaders might have felt its risks were relatively low due to an inflated, though not unfounded, high estimation of the group's own stealth. American deterrent self-understanding was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the United States had never suffered such an attack previously. A mix of other reasons contributed to the failure to deter al-Qa'idah as well. Some of these reasons are based in U.S. policy decisions. Other, perhaps more structural reasons stem from the nature of the American policy-making system. Still others are born of the nature and psychology of al-Qa'idah's membership. The distinction here is largely analytical, for in practice all of these factors are interrelated. We shall examine these factors in turn, linking them to likely reasons that their implications at times have been difficult to see.

Again relying on the deterrence literature, we conclude the chapter with an analysis of the question, Can groups like al-Qa'idah be deterred? Prescriptive issues are tricky here, as much of the deterrence literature assumes that both the defender and the challenger are state actors. In some instances, the fact that al-

Qa'idah is a sub-state actor appears to be unimportant. In others, however, there is reason to believe that prescribed actions intended to enhance state-to-state deterrence in fact would undermine deterrence against a terrorist group like al-Qa'idah. Consistent with other recent work on this topic, we have found that the deterrability of the various membership components of al-Qa'idah is context-specific and defies generalization.⁹ The next chapter includes an analysis of more specific policy options and their potential impact on deterrence. There we attempt to identify the conditions and policy levers which would both help and hurt American deterrent efforts against al-Qa'idah or other similarly structured and motivated organizations.

America's Wary Trigger Finger: The Powell/Weinberger Doctrine and the Use of Force

In the years since the Vietnam War, and strongly reflecting the lessons learned from that conflict,¹⁰ American foreign and military policy has been guided to a varying degree by what has come to be known as the Powell Doctrine – so named because then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell explained the concept in a now famous *Foreign Affairs* article.¹¹ Though associated with now Secretary of State Powell, the concept has been articulated by many and goes by different names. In his memoirs, Powell himself attributes its formulation to former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and its underlying principles to Clausewitz.¹²

Powell lists six “tests” for using U.S. forces abroad:

⁹ Paul K. Davis, “A Framework for the ‘Influencing’ Aspect of Counterterrorism Strategy,” unpublished background paper, 2002.

¹⁰ Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 148-9.

¹¹ Colin L. Powell, “U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead,” *Foreign Affairs* Winter 1992/93: 32-45.

1. Commit only if our or our allies' vital interests are at stake.
2. If we commit, do so with all the resources necessary to win.
3. Go in only with clear political and military objectives.
4. Be ready to change the commitment if objectives change, since wars rarely stand still.
5. Only take on commitments that can gain the support of the American people and the Congress.
6. Commit U.S. forces only as a last resort.

Or, as Powell summed up, "In short, is the national interest at stake? If the answer is yes, go in, and go in to win. Otherwise, stay out."¹³

Weinberger's drafting of these guidelines came in the wake of the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, which left 241 dead. This is particularly noteworthy, as the Beirut attack is mentioned in bin Laden's 1996 "Declaration of War" as an example of American weakness. Specifically, the American decision to withdraw from Lebanon is cited as illustrative of the American unwillingness to suffer casualties, even among its armed forces.¹⁴ What about post-Beirut (that is, ostensibly in the era of the Powell/Weinberger Doctrine) confrontations between al-Qa'idah and the United States? How did the overt encounters between the two parties conclude and how did each side understand those conclusions? What does this suggest about the implementation of the doctrine and its effectiveness?

¹² Powell, *My American Journey*, 207-8, 303.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁴ Usama bin Laden, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," 23 August 1996, Internet: <http://66.96.205.195/~azzam/html/articlesdeclaration.htm>. Paul K. Davis and John Arquilla point out that Saddam Hussein mentioned the Beirut example in a speech discussing American weakness five months before his invasion of Kuwait. Paul K. Davis and John Arquilla, *Deterring or Coercing Opponents in Crisis: Lessons from the War with Saddam Hussein* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991), 56.

A History of Confrontation and Non-confrontation

The earliest recorded al-Qa'idah attack on Americans came in 1993 in Aden, Yemen, where a hotel was bombed with the unrealized goal of killing American soldiers on their way to Mogadishu, Somalia. As it happened, the soldiers had already left the hotel.¹⁵ While the deployment of the U.S. military in Mogadishu extended over months, involved a mix of forces and witnessed a number of operations on the ground, the most important incident there was the 17-hour battle on October 3-4, 1993 that has been the focus of the book, and now the motion picture, *Black Hawk Down*.¹⁶ Eighteen American servicemen lost their lives in that battle with Somali Islamists trained in part by al-Qa'idah, which was followed soon thereafter by a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia. One could argue that the decision to send troops to Somalia was hardly exemplary of the Powell/Weinberger Doctrine; the mission fails a number of the six tests listed above and, indeed, the decision to leave appears to reflect the doctrine more than the decision to go in the first place.

From bin Laden's point of view, there was no difference between the U.S. response to the Beirut attack and to the tragic outcome of the Mogadishu battle: the Americans suffered casualties and turned tail; in Somalia less than 20 fatalities were enough to drive the Americans out. Thus, in 1998, when then-Secretary of Defense William Perry responded to the bombing of the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, in which 19 Americans were killed, by stating that the attack only strengthened his resolve, bin Laden was skeptical:

¹⁵ Yonah Alexander and Michael S. Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida: Profile of a Terrorist Network* (Ardsley, NY: Transnational Publishers, 2001), 33.

¹⁶ Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999, 2000).

We say to the Defence Secretary that his talk can induce a grieving mother to laughter! and shows the fears that had enshrined you all. Where was this false courage of yours when the explosion in Beirut took place on 1983 CE (1403 A.H). You were turned into scattered pits and pieces at that time; 241 mainly marines solders were killed. And where was this courage of yours when two explosions made you to leave Aden in less than twenty four hours!

But your most disgraceful case was in Somalia; where after vigorous propaganda about the power of the USA and its post cold war leadership of the new world order you moved tens of thousands of international force, including twenty eight thousands American solders into Somalia. However, when tens of your solders were killed in minor battles and one American Pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you. Clinton appeared in front of the whole world threatening and promising revenge, but these threats were merely a preparation for withdrawal. You have been disgraced by Allah and you withdrew; the extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear. It was a pleasure for the "heart" of every Muslim and a remedy to the "chests" of believing nations to see you defeated in the three Islamic cities of Beirut, Aden and Mogadishu.¹⁷

On August 7, 1998, al-Qa'idah attacked the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, killing over 300 and wounding over 5,000. On August 20, the U.S. responded forcibly by launching approximately 78 cruise missiles at al-Qa'idah targets in Afghanistan and the Sudan. The act was presented by the administration as a major policy shift, for this was the first time the U.S. "unreservedly acknowledged a preemptive military strike against a terrorist organization or network."¹⁸ President Clinton publicly justified the American military response in terms of deterrence:

¹⁷ Bin Laden, "Declaration of War." Grammatical errors are in the original translation.

¹⁸ Raphael F. Perl, *Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?* CRS Report to Congress 98-733F Updated September 1, 1998 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service), 1.

But of this I am also sure; the risks from inaction to America and the world would be far greater than action, for that would embolden our enemies, leaving their ability and their willingness to strike us intact. In this case, we knew before our attack that these groups already had planned further actions against us and others.¹⁹

Cruise missiles hold a special mystique in the American perspective. Their combination of destructive power (each Tomahawk carries a 1000-pound warhead), accuracy and range mean that – under ideal conditions – specific targets can be hit without endangering unintended personnel. Further, these can be employed without risking pilots or getting into a ground war. But these virtues in the eyes of American citizens, soldiers and decision-makers, are an indication of weakness to our al-Qa'idah adversaries. Not only were the response attacks largely ineffective (especially against the al-Qa'idah leadership and camps in Afghanistan), they were seen as another small and cowardly step by a wounded paper tiger:

The American bombardment had only shown that the world is governed by the law of the jungle. That brutal, treacherous attack killed a number of civilian Muslims. As for material damage, it was minimal. By the grace of God, the missiles were ineffective. The raid proved that the American army is going downhill in its

¹⁹ William J. Clinton, "Address to the Nation by the President," (Washington, DC: The White House Office of the Press Secretary, August 20, 1998), Internet: http://www.state.gov/www/regions/africa/strike_clinton980820a.html . The April 14, 1986 U.S. attack on Libya was also presented as "a preemptive strike, directed against the Libyan terrorist infrastructure and *designed to deter* acts of terrorism by Libya...." The important difference here is that Libya is a state, while al-Qa'idah is a substate actor. Ronald Reagan, *Use of United States Armed Forces in Libya: Communication from the President of the United States Transmitting Notification of the Employment of United States Armed Forces in Libya, Pursuant to 50 U.S.C. 1543(a)*, House Document 99-201 (Washington, DC: 16 April 1986). Emphasis added.

morale. Its members are too cowardly and too fearful to meet the young people of Islam face to face.²⁰

Of course, it could be argued that both Clinton's and bin Laden's statements are merely attempts at public diplomacy. As a measurement of deterrence, though, actions speak louder than words, and the bottom line is that al-Qa'idah continued to strike. In the last successful al-Qa'idah attack on the United States prior to September 11, the USS *Cole* was attacked on October 5, 2000 in the port of Aden, killing 17 American sailors. To this attack there was no American military response.

Year	Attack	Overt U.S. Military Response
1983	Beirut	Withdrawal
1993	Aden	-
1993	Mogadishu	Withdrawal
1998	Al-Khobar Towers	-
1998	Kenya/Tanzania	Cruise missile attacks
2000	USS <i>Cole</i>	-
2001	September 11	Operation Enduring Freedom

Some Islamist Attacks and U.S. Responses

In some respects, it is difficult to find fault with al-Qa'idah's take on the historical record. The fact is that American military responses prior to September 11 were either very limited or nonexistent, sending a weak deterrent message. Operation Enduring Freedom is several orders of magnitude larger than any response to Islamist terrorism that came before it. The very need for such an operation, though, represents the failure to deter. As John Garnett put it, "...the use of military force represents the breakdown of military power. The physical

²⁰ "Wrath of God: Osama bin Laden Lashes Out against the West," *Time* 11 January 1999, Internet: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/asia/magazine/1999/990111/osama1.html>.

use of deterrent power shows not how strong a country is but how impotent it has become.”²¹ It is interesting to note, then, how American counter-terrorism policy has been understood by some in the United States. A 1999 RAND study conducted for the U.S. Air Force asserted that “Apart from the ordeal of the U.S. embassy hostage crisis in Tehran and the failed attempt at intervention, *the leading image* of U.S. counterterrorism policy is the 1986 Operation El Dorado Canyon against Libya....”²² Given that Libya differs in many respects from the ideal held up by al-Qa’idah and that the American attack can be seen as a demonstration of U.S. resolve, it is hardly surprising that the attack is not mentioned in bin Laden’s “Declaration of War.” Clearly, though, the leading image of U.S. counter-terrorism policy in the minds of bin Laden, al-Qa’idah members and others (even in the United States) is not one of action or even reaction, but of inaction. Both sides appear to be victims of selective filtering in order to validate their own policy choices.²³ That is, Americans focused on Operation El Dorado Canyon while bin Laden focused on everything else.²⁴

Psychological Inclinations

Even to the extent that the American message of commitment was made, however, a number of motivated and unmotivated biases acted against its being interpreted as intended. Ideologically speaking, al-Qa’idah’s interpretation of history – namely, that the United States is weak and cowardly – fits the organization’s worldview perfectly. The West is *supposed* to be weak, cowardly and prone to defeat by faithful Muslims waging *jihad* in the name of Islam,

²¹ John Garnett, “The Role of Military Power,” *Contemporary Strategy I: Theories and Concepts*, John Baylis, et al., (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987), 84.

²² Ian O. Lesser, “Countering the New Terrorism: Implications for Strategy,” *Countering the New Terrorism*, Ian O. Lesser et al. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), 112. Emphasis added.

²³ This phenomenon is discussed in Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 574.

²⁴ Of course, this is a generalization. Before September 11, the Clinton and Bush administrations both worried about the real and perceived erosion of America’s ability to defend itself against terrorism in general, and against bin Laden in particular.

precisely the way al-Qa'idah understands itself. Indeed, as noted in Chapter Three, what is seen as the rise of Judeo-Christian power at the expense of Islam is contrary to one of the most deeply held tenets of Islamic faith: Islam was revealed to supersede its monotheistic predecessors and, as bin Laden himself has put it, "He who God guides will never lose."²⁵ Moreover, such a perceived match between belief and data is predicted in the political psychology literature,²⁶ and exacerbated through the process of attitude polarization, which in turn can lead to overconfidence, a widely observed phenomenon in cases where deterrence was not achieved:²⁷

[P]eople not only assimilate incoming information to their existing beliefs... but do not know they are doing so. Instead, they incorrectly attribute their interpretations of events to the events themselves; they do not realize that their beliefs and expectations play a dominant role. They therefore become too confident because they see many events as providing independent confirmation of their beliefs when, in fact, the events would be seen differently by someone who started with different ideas. Thus people see evidence as less ambiguous than it is, think that their views are steadily being confirmed, and so feel justified in holding to them ever more firmly.²⁸

²⁵ "Bin Laden: America 'Filled with Fear,'" CNN 7 October 2001, Internet: <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/10/07/ret.binladen.transcript/>.

²⁶ "When an event occurs, it is a stimulus that may be legitimately perceived in several different ways. The perception that actually occurs is the one that requires the least reorganization of the person's other ideas." Joseph de Rivera, *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968), 22.

²⁷ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Rational Deterrence Theory: I Think, Therefore I Deter," *World Politics* 41.2 (January 1989): 215; Richard Ned Lebow, "Deterrence: A Political and Psychological Critique," *Perspectives on Deterrence*, 39-40; See also Janice Gross Stein, "Calculation, Miscalculation, and Conventional Deterrence I: The View from Cairo," *Psychology and Deterrence*, Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, eds. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 41-5. There is also something of a vicious circle here: "It is a characteristic of human reasoning... that 'low-probability' risks are thresholded-out when the reasoner is eager for action." Davis and Arquilla, *Deterring or Coercing Opponents*, 47.

²⁸ Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," *International Security* 7.3 (Winter 1982-1983): 21.

Moreover, this take on events also jibed with another chapter in Islamist history: in the very land where al-Qa'idah found refuge and support, the *mujahidin* from which al-Qa'idah drew and grew had defeated another Christian (though atheist) superpower and precipitated its ultimate collapse. Russian, American and other analysts can attribute the Soviet defeat to internal politics, Afghanistan's terrain and climate and the role of Stinger missiles, but for al-Qa'idah, such technical details are probably secondary.

Al-Qa'idah's reliance on its particular interpretation of history as a guide to future action also might be an example of the widespread phenomenon of planning for the last war, a kind of mental inertia. Jervis, Ernest R. May and Yehezkel Dror all pointed out years ago that this common problem plagues strategic studies, particularly in the United States. Simply put, humans in general and decision-makers in particular naturally look to the past as a guide to the future, and as we have seen already, preconceptions are remarkably resistant to change, even in the face of contrary evidence.²⁹

Historical and psychological inertia are not the only possible reasons for al-Qa'idah's mistaken prediction of America's response to September 11. American foreign policy in general and the Powell/Weinberger Doctrine in particular are complex, both in terms of their various messages and their formulation. For the six interrelated Powell/Weinberger questions to yield responses that would lead to the commitment of U.S. forces abroad, a great deal of analysis, money,

²⁹ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 217-87; idem, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat," *Psychology and Deterrence*, 13, 22; Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Yehezkel Dror, *Crazy States* (Lexington, MA: Heath Lexington Books, 1971), 4-5.

planning and international, domestic and public diplomacy are required.³⁰ The painful lessons of Vietnam aside, this is appropriate for a large democracy blessed with the power and burdened with the tremendous international responsibilities of the United States. Especially in cases where the questions' answers are not so clear, however, coming to a decision to commit takes time, a fact that makes employing a tit-for-tat strategy against terrorist (and other) provocations difficult.³¹ Additionally, since the United States is not at war in the traditional sense, and because the United States tends to be risk averse,³² the status quo means not engaging in military action. Jervis notes the common phenomenon of preconceptions distilling such complex policy grays into black-and-white:

But even if the actions are carried out as the decision-maker wants them to, precision is often defeated by the screen of the other side's perceptual predispositions. As a result, while subtlety and sophistication in a policy are qualities which observers usually praise and statesmen seek, these attributes may lead the policy to fail because they increase the chance that it will not be perceived as intended. It is hard enough to communicate straightforward and gross threats; it will often be impossible to successfully apply complex bargaining tactics which involve detailed and abstruse messages. Decision-makers often underestimate these difficulties and so try to develop plans that are too intricate to get across. Furthermore, because it is very hard to tell what others have perceived, statesmen often fail to see that they have failed to communicate.³³

³⁰ A September 1998 Congressional Research Report for Congress specifically lists [the possibility of a lack of] "consultation with Congress over policy shifts [i.e., the move to a proactive, deterrent policy towards terrorist groups] which may result in an undeclared war" as a "central issue of concern." Perl, *Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?*, 5-6.

³¹ Davis, "Synthetic Cognitive Modeling."

³² Dror, *Crazy States*, 17.

³³ Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," 27. See also Jervis, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat," 18-24; and Richard Ned Lebow, "Conclusions," *Psychology and Deterrence*, 205-6. Brian Michael

Preconceived notions, then, not only are resistant to change and affect the reading of history, as discussed above, but also serve as a crucible for incoming complex policies, boiling them down to an essence remarkable for its similarity to the preconceived notions themselves, and often having little to do with their senders' intended messages. With the details and nuances of American foreign policy lost in the mix, its inherent reluctance to use force – which Americans usually see as a sign of power, prosperity and responsibility – only confirmed al-Qa'idah's low estimation of American deterrence credibility.

At the most fundamental level, credibility is based on the perception of commitment. That is, in order for deterrence to be achieved, the challenger must believe that the defender will turn threat into reality, as discussed by Thomas C. Schelling:

As a rule, one must threaten that he *will* act, not that he *may* act, if the [deterrent] threat fails. To say that one *may* act is to say that one *may not*, and to say this is to confess that one has kept the power of decision – that one is not committed. To say only that one *may* carry out the threat, not that one certainly will, is to invite the opponent to guess whether one will prefer to punish himself and his opponent or to pass up the occasion.³⁴

Jenkins made this point in the context of dealing with terrorists over twenty years ago. See his *Talking to Terrorists* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1982), 7, 15.

³⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 187. It bears mentioning that the stakes here are very high. Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing point out the dilemma decision-makers face: "commitment maximizes the chances of winning but flirts with disaster [i.e., going to war]; option preservation maximizes the chances of avoiding war or extreme levels of destruction but risks being bested in the crisis contest of wills." *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 212.

By definition, for deterrence to work the defender must have both the commitment and the capability to punish. In this light, the verdict on the Powell/Weinberger Doctrine is decidedly mixed. To the extent that when the United States goes to war, it will use its unequaled military force to “go in to win,” the doctrine enhances deterrence. That is, there are probably few that doubt the American capability to inflict tremendous damage on an opponent that can be identified and targeted. On the other hand, as noted above, prior to September 11, genuine American inaction as well as the perceived and actual hand-wringing about the use of force and the generally lumbering speed of American foreign policy have left the unmistakable impression that when attacked the United States *may or may not* respond with force, either because of a predilection for half-way measures or because of the difficulties in reliably targeting al-Qa’idah. This half of the doctrine, reflecting what is perceived as an uncertain American commitment, undermines deterrence.

The implications are ominous. Jervis posits that since preconceptions are resistant to change, “trying to change a reputation for low resolve [i.e., the way al-Qa’idah has interpreted U.S. behavior] will be especially costly because statements and symbolic actions are not likely to be taken seriously.”³⁵ Additionally, as Richard Ned Lebow notes, “Even the most elaborate efforts to demonstrate prowess and resolve may prove insufficient to discourage a challenger who is convinced that a use of force is necessary to preserve vital strategic and political interests.”³⁶ In this light, flexible deterrent options (e.g., moving carrier battle groups and other mobilizations and other types of muscle flexing, even, evidently, launching cruise missiles) and forms of coercive

³⁵ Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception,” 9.

³⁶ Lebow, “Deterrence: A Political and Psychological Critique,” 39.

diplomacy are likely to be severely constrained and/or ineffective, and seen as indications of weakness.³⁷

Can It Be Done?

Having reviewed some plausible reasons why al-Qa'idah was not deterred, the question remains – is it possible to deter such an organization? The answer is hardly straightforward. As noted in the preceding pages, a number of necessary conditions for deterrence were not met prior to September 11. These conditions alone, though, are insufficient to guarantee deterrence. In the remainder of this chapter we will examine a number of these and additional conditions and their limitations as well as a mix of methodologies for assessing the likelihood of their sufficiency in various circumstances. In the next chapter, we will discuss specific policy options and methods with an eye to maximizing deterrence success.

In his insightful, though unfortunately titled, *Crazy States*,³⁸ Dror discusses both the desirability of and difficulty in achieving deterrence against such actors – he explicitly includes terrorist groups in this category – and lists a number of important considerations when trying to do so. First among these is that the challenger must be instrumentally rational, which we believe to be self-evident about al-Qa'idah. The group very obviously makes use of the means at its disposal – wealth, manpower, technical know-how, various grievances held by some, many or all Muslims, etc. – to fight an asymmetric battle against the United States, which it holds responsible for a rather specific list of offenses,

³⁷ Two examples of backfiring FDOs are the deployment of unarmed aircraft to Saudi Arabia in 1979 and the exercise carried out in July 1990 in the Persian Gulf. See Paul K. Davis, "Improving Deterrence in the Post-Cold War Era: Some Theory and Implications for Defense Planning," *New Challenges for Defense Planning*, Paul K. Davis, ed. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1994), 219-220. See also Dror, *Crazy States*, 80-1.

³⁸ Dror makes very clear that he does not use the term "crazy" in the common, psychological sense. Neither does the word "state" limit the scope of his analysis to state actors. That is, a crazy state need not be a state and it "can behave rationally in the instrumental sense... it can pick instruments which are highly effective for its (crazy) goals." See Dror, *Crazy States*, 23-30.

including the stationing of American forces in Saudi Arabia.³⁹ Al-Qa'idah's terrorist actions against the United States are, from its perspective, a straightforward attempt at compellance.

Bin Laden's acute awareness of variously resonant grievances and their incorporation into his televised and printed statements suggest strongly that he and his group, like Hamas, Hizbullah, the Algerian FIS and other local Islamist groups, have earthly audiences and interests, and act on their behalf as well as in the name of God. One of the primary problems he purports to want to correct is very much of this world – preserving the material (and mineral) wealth of the Arabian peninsula and distributing it to those outside the Saudi family. The timing of his mentioning the suffering in Iraq, Palestine and among the “hundreds of thousands of the unemployed [university] graduates [in Saudi Arabia]”⁴⁰ is undoubtedly practical, which is not to say insincere or illegitimate. The fact that these points are included in statements that bin Laden goes to great lengths to distribute widely (and in high quality, e.g., in well-produced videos)⁴¹ illustrates a very rational need for public support.

Dror goes on to note that crazy states are prone to high-risk policies, a fact that makes deterrence against such attackers particularly difficult.⁴² Indeed, the ideal deterrence situation would be the inverse, pitting a risk-averse challenger against

³⁹ Magnus Ranstorp, “Interpreting the Broader Context and Meaning of Bin-Laden’s *Fatwa*,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 21 (1998): 325.

⁴⁰ Bin Laden, “Declaration of War.” Joseph Kostiner notes that the Islamist opposition in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s had as a common denominator “their academic background, mostly students, academics or higher education graduates working as professionals or administrators, and who could be regarded as members of the new ‘middle class.’” Joseph Kostiner, “State, Islam and Opposition in Saudi Arabia: The Post-Desert Storm Phase,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 8.2 (Summer 1996): 80.

⁴¹ John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.

⁴² Dror, *Crazy States*, 81.

a (somewhat) risk-seeking (or at least so perceived) defender.⁴³ That said, classifying al-Qa'idah as risk-seeking simply because of the suicidal actions of a very small number of its members is a gross oversimplification. First of all, suicide is not necessarily irrational, nor is having the group's pawns kill themselves (Did the use of kamikaze pilots make the Japanese irrational?). As for the al-Qa'idah leadership and fighters in Afghanistan, while they might be less risk-averse than the United States, this is not to say that they are necessarily risk-seeking – especially at the tactical level; they too have demonstrated risk-averse behavior. Namely, when given the opportunity to fight American forces head-to-head (as was claimed to be hoped-for in earlier bin Laden statements), many in al-Qa'idah retreated, hid and/or tried to slip out of the country. That is, they did their best to *survive*, rather than martyr themselves in battle with the Americans. Similarly, in April 2002, even among the Palestinians holed up in the Jenin refugee camp who declared that they would fight the Israelis to the death, the majority (more than 1,000) chose to surrender.⁴⁴ Reportedly, Hizbullah went so far as to offer to trade a captive Israeli businessman in exchange for Israel's sparing the lives of the last 100 Palestinians holding out in the camp.⁴⁵ For many in both al-Qa'idah and the Palestinian groups (and Hizbullah), their ostensibly risk-seeking behavior is constrained by very reasonable and not uncommon bounds, a fact that bodes well for deterrence.

To hedge against a risk-seeking (or, for our purposes, less risk-averse) crazy state adversary, Dror adds three more requirements to his deterrence substrategy.⁴⁶

⁴³ See Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966, 36-43.

⁴⁴ Amos Harel and Amira Hass, "1,000 Palestinians Surrender to IDF in Jenin," *Ha'aretz English Edition* 11 April 2002, Internet:

<http://www.haaretzdaily.com/hasen/objects/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=150700> . See also Seth Gitell, "Turning Point," *The New Republic* 10 April 2002, Internet:

<http://www.tnr.com/docprint.mhtml?I=express&s=gitell041002> .

⁴⁵ "Hezbollah: End Jenin Action in Exchange for Captive Israeli," Associated Press 11 April 2002.

⁴⁶ Dror, *Crazy States*, 81-2.

The first is aiming the deterrent threat at targets held dear by the challenger. Dror suggests targeting large parts of the population, the ruling elite, or the leaders themselves. These are plausible targets and though a group like al-Qa'idah does not have a formal constituent population the way a national government does, the fact that bin Laden's actions and statements betray his need for public support suggests that that public might be used against him as well. While Al-Qa'idah does not have major targets of value as does a state (e.g., power plants, permanent bases, big ticket hardware), it does have other worldly interests that can also be considered for targeting. We shall return to the specifics of this point in the next chapter.

Dror's second and third conditions for deterring an ideologically driven, relative risk-seeker are related to the subject of commitment and echo the observations, noted above, of both Jervis and Lebow:

[1.] Credibility has to be achieved through obvious actions that cannot be ignored even by highly biased ideologically shaped perceptions of reality. Therefore, declarations and minor symbolic acts cannot [be] relied upon to establish credibility for a massive countercraziness deterrence....

[2.] It is not enough that deterrence should be perceived as possible or even highly probable. Deterrence has to be assured, especially when the involved crazy state has a high-risk propensity. Visible irreversible commitments to undertake defined actions in clearly identified circumstances are, therefore, required.... Because of the differences in culture between crazy and normal states, no tacit signals can be relied upon.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Dror, *Crazy States*, 82. The need for costly or risky actions as a means to establish deterrent credibility is also discussed in Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); and James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41.1 (February 1997): 68-90.

What stands out in the literature is that in discussions of the variety of sources of deterrence failure noted above – ideological or religious biases, mental inertia, overconfidence, lost complexity of messages, risk-seeking behavior – the prescription nevertheless remains constant: demonstrated, unequivocal, consistent and automatic commitment to make good on the threat of unacceptable violence upon the challenger.⁴⁸ Again, this is easier to do against a state than a cellular terrorist group or network, but these latter rarely act without the assistance of a former. Operation Enduring Freedom, while not yet complete, has demonstrated that both can be credibly, forcefully and painfully attacked when it has been decided to do so.

Speed is also of the essence. Arquilla and Davis emphasize the importance of challenger initiative in deciding whether or not to attack, and note further that in the cases they examined the initiative was restricted by the defender only when the military was brought to bear on the problem. They conclude that failing to do so early-on “may actually encourage aggression.”⁴⁹ Until September 11, al-Qa’idah undoubtedly held the initiative vis-à-vis the United States.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, this does not mean that simply applying more force in advance of or in response to terrorist acts will end the problem of a group like al-Qa’idah, for as Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke put it, “The process of interpretation is far more important for the correctness of the perception than the

⁴⁸ See Lebow, “Deterrence: A Political and Psychological Critique,” 40; Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception,” 9.

⁴⁹ John Arquilla and Paul K. Davis, *Extended Deterrence, Compellence and the “Old World Order,”* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992), 30; Davis and Arquilla, *Thinking about Opponent Behavior*, 13.

⁵⁰ To some extent, by their nature terrorist groups will always maintain the initiative. Even with the massive response to al-Qa’idah in Afghanistan that has kept the organization’s manpower preoccupied with survival, “sleeper cells” in the United States and elsewhere, while possibly under greater pressure from law enforcement, nevertheless control the initiative as pertains to the attack or attacks that they are planning.

inherent strength or clarity of the stimuli.”⁵¹ In fact, when dealing with such groups, the threat or use of force carries significant risks as well. Specifically, such a group might have turned to violence in the first place because it viewed the status quo to be less acceptable than taking on the risk of a massive American response.⁵² It is possible that bin Laden and other al-Qa’idah decision-makers understood that the U.S. would respond more or less as it did to the September 11 attacks, but less effectively and with less support, and were willing to risk it because of the perceived weight of their grievances against the United States. It might be that al-Qa’idah feels *that* strongly about the Saudi regime and the presence of American forces in the kingdom. If this is the case, the kind of deterrent threat discussed above might actually increase the sense of injustice and/or desperation and thus the risk-seeking of al-Qa’idah.⁵³

Similarly, if and when overwhelming force is used to achieve the goal of wiping out an organization like al-Qa’idah and destroying all it holds dear, a likely result is a situation in which the surviving group members – and there will always be at least some survivors – have nothing left to lose (i.e., the defender burns the challenger’s bridges – a la Schelling – for him) and no choice but to fight. Terrorists in this position may be both strategically undeterrable and virtually unconstrained in their potential use of violence. Such “brutalized groups” comprise one of the main categories Ehud Sprinzak considers likely to

⁵¹ George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 573.

⁵² This is reminiscent of the Syrian/Egyptian decision to go to war in 1973 and the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbor, cases in which the defender’s military superiority were beyond question. See Lebow, “Conclusions,” *Psychology and Deterrence*, 214-5.

⁵³ Lebow, “Deterrence: A Political and Psychological Critique,” 27. An example of this phenomenon is the American-Japanese interaction prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. For an analysis see Lebow, “Conclusions,” *Psychology and Deterrence*, 221-3. Davis and Arquilla also discuss factors behind the variability in risk acceptance. See Davis and Arquilla, *Thinking about Opponent Behavior*, 14.

make use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.⁵⁴ Though it is difficult to assess al-Qa'idah's current state of mind or organizational effectiveness accurately, from the open-source material it does seem likely that the group could fall into this category. Having failed to deter the September 11 attacks, the United States may now find that the force of its reaction has removed the prospect of deterring al-Qa'idah at all. Perception and preconceptions play a role here too, as noted by Gordon H. McCormick:

It is usually only when a nation is faced with military defeat, or in victory suffers such staggering losses that change is forced upon it, that the catalyst is provided to re-examine its strategic assumptions. Even under these circumstances, however, the process of re-examination and reform is colored by cultural and historical imperatives over which the nation has little cognizance and less control."⁵⁵

Linking these two cases together is the fact that for terrorists who have no interest in or prospects for non-violent political participation (as opposed to domination) as a means of advancing their goals – especially when these goals are of a holistic, religious nature – quitting is simply not an option. This is not always easy to see. Thus, in the third week of military operations in Afghanistan, one member of the Joint Staff expressed that he was “a bit surprised at how doggedly they’re [the Taliban] hanging on to their – to power.... For Mullah Omar to not see the inevitability of what will happen surprises me.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ehud Sprinzak, “The Great Superterrorism Scare,” *Foreign Policy* Fall 1998, Internet: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/issue_SeptOct_2001/sprinzaksuperterrorism.html .

⁵⁵ Gordon H. McCormick, “Surprise, Perceptions, and Military Style,” *Orbis* 26.4 (Winter 1983): 835.

⁵⁶ “DoD News Briefing – Rear Adm. Stufflebeem,” 24 October 2001, Internet: http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2001/t10242001_t1024stu.html .

While some members of terrorist groups might have mercenary or other less “pure” motives, most cannot just retire to the private sector. Brian Michael Jenkins points out that terrorist groups tend to be populated by self-selectors who are attracted by the prospects for action and for whom the idea of renouncing violence would be organizationally suicidal: “The broader and vaguer the stated goals of an organization (e.g., world domination in the name of a religion), the more that it is the violence that holds the group together and the more difficult it is for the group to quit. On the other hand, the more precise and the more achievable the political goals of the group, the easier it is for the group to quit.”⁵⁷ Fighting groups like al-Qa’idah might be necessary, but such warfare will not deter the hardest-core membership of the group and is actually likely to lead group members to employ even greater violence. For them, engagement validates their group’s *raison d’être*. This does not change the opening assumption of the chapter (i.e., that al-Qa’idah would not have attacked if it knew the United States would respond as it did) for al-Qa’idah undoubtedly wanted to engage the United States on the terms it understood to prevail (i.e., with very limited or ineffective American responses). This is also not an argument against the use of force against terrorist groups. The point is simply that the deterrent value of such fighting might be extremely small.

The obvious question here is How can policy-makers determine the appropriate strategy and minimize the likelihood of such deterrence backfires? For even if it were possible to undertake conventional deterrent actions that were so powerful that they completely defied subjective interpretation (a highly improbable proposition), it would still be necessary to know if these actions were likely to end up damaging rather than ensuring deterrence. This distinction takes place in

⁵⁷ Brian Michael Jenkins, personal interview, 14 April 2002. Bruce Hoffman, on the other hand, points out that there are examples of terrorist groups whose members were demobilized through what might best be termed an incentive package. See Bruce Hoffman, “All You Need Is Love,” *The Atlantic Monthly* December 2001, Internet: <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/12/hoffman.htm> .

the minds of the challengers, and as Jenkins put it, “We do not have an x-ray of a man’s soul.” Fortunately, we do have analytical tools that can assist us in seeing through an opponent’s eyes with an improved, useful degree of clarity.

Neustadt and May’s placement methodology is one such tool.

In the next chapter, we shall present a number of specifics for putting the prescriptive ideas outlined in this chapter into practice, focusing specifically on al-Qa’idah, but with obvious implications for confronting other similarly motivated and operating groups.