The Dynamic Terrorist Threat

An Assessment of Group Motivations and Capabilities in a Changing World

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Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government became engaged in a war on terrorism. Such a war has already required substantial military and diplomatic resources, and it is likely to require even more. Moreover, the war on terrorism will continue in the face of other competing U.S. strategic pursuits. It is essential, therefore, that the U.S. government prioritize its counterterrorism activities and conduct the war on terrorism as efficiently as possible.

The purpose of this report is twofold: first, it attempts to develop a matrix that helps policymakers identify the threat that terrorist groups pose to the United States; second, it assesses how terrorists adapt and change, to identify such groups' vulnerabilities. By combining these two approaches, the authors are able to suggest ways that the U.S. government can refine its counterterrorism policies. Thus, the report has direct relevance not only to the ongoing war on terrorism and those involved, but also to other audiences interested in the dynamic threat of terrorism.

UNDERSTANDING THE THREAT THAT TERRORISTS POSE TO THE UNITED STATES

To assess the various threats that terrorist groups pose to the United States, this report develops a threat framework, based on a step-by-step progressive analysis of terrorist groups' motivations and capabilities in the context of U.S. national security interests. The observation that militant organizations that employ terrorist tactics can be evaluated according to intent and capability is fairly logical. It is not

revolutionary to view terrorists through the lens of *either* intentions *or* capabilities. Yet terrorism analysis rarely combines the two across the range of potential threats: that is, placing intentions on an x-axis and capabilities on a y-axis to measure terrorist groups against each other for threat salience. Indeed, terrorist threats are often gauged according to a specific group's members, skills, funds, and rhetoric. This approach makes it difficult to filter through the "noise" of the multiple threats facing the United States and isolate the most dangerous groups. (See pages 18–20.)

By combining an assessment of the intentions of various terrorist groups with their capabilities, the following matrix provides U.S. decisionmakers with a tool for prioritizing the threat of these groups.

Figure S.1 attempts to clarify the terrorist groups that pose the greatest threat to the United States. These groups demonstrate the highest degree of both capability and anti-U.S. intentions, as indicated by
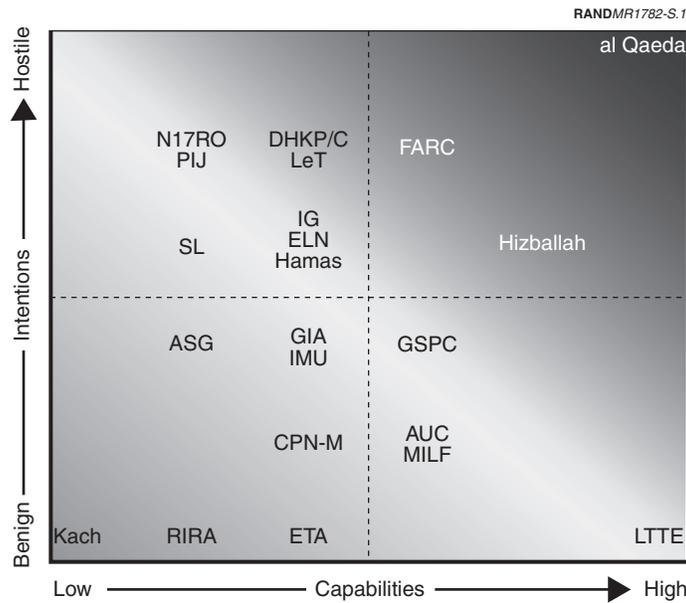

Figure S.1—Understanding the Relative Threats Posed by Terrorist Groups

the upper right-hand quadrant of the figure. According to the figure, three militant groups—al Qaeda, Lebanese Hizballah, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—meet these criteria. As Chapter Two will explain in more detail, these three groups have demonstrated the highest degrees of both hostility toward the United States and capability to carry out sophisticated attacks. But the figure also highlights the degree to which other groups threaten the United States, as compared with each other. Thus, it illustrates that some highly capable groups, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), do not pose a significant threat to the United States because they have not demonstrated high degrees of anti-U.S. sentiment. In contrast, other groups, such as Jemaah Islamiya (not plotted in the figure), are not as capable but have demonstrated a willingness to attack U.S. citizens overseas. We stress the clarity that the matrix brings to our understanding of terrorist threats can help refine counterterrorism activities. (See pages 21–23.)

FACTORS THAT AFFECT TERRORIST GROUPS' CAPABILITIES

Next, we turn to a discussion on the tools that terrorist groups need to sustain and/or increase their *capabilities*. In the context of the above framework, these tools are the factors that affect a terrorist group's position and development along the x-axis. Thus, this section not only provides a deeper understanding of terrorists' requirements but also identifies potential points of vulnerability that would allow policymakers to reduce a particular group's overall capabilities.

To do this, we first divide terrorist groups' activities into two categories: activities that sustain the group's existence as a cohesive entity and activities that allow terrorists to conduct a series of successful attacks. We chose these two categories because the division clarifies the potential use of, and goals for, U.S. counterterrorism policy. For example, if U.S. policymakers want to prevent a particular attack or alleviate an immediate threat, then counterterrorism activities should focus, in general, on the second category. In comparison, if they want to completely dismantle a terrorist group over the long term, then counterterrorism activities should include a significant emphasis on the first category. (See pages 25–29.)

Second, we propose a list of tools that allow terrorists to sustain group cohesion, defining these tools as *organizational.* Alternatively, our second list of *operational* tools highlights the instruments used by terrorists to sustain a series of successful attacks.[1] Finally, we explore our understanding of these requirements and how they relate to terrorist groups' capabilities by using four groups as case studies: the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA), the Palestinian group Hamas, FARC, and al Qaeda. We chose these groups because they represent different levels of operational capabilities, as indicated on the above matrix. As such, they illustrate a wide range of requirements for terrorist organizations. Table S.1 lists the organizational and operational tools. (See pages 29–59.)

THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF TERRORIST GROUPS

In our final chapter, we argue that the initial framework and the lists of terrorist requirements are still not quite enough. Policymakers can

Table S.1

Factors That Influence Terrorist Groups' Capabilities

Organizational Tools	Operational Tools
Ideology	Command and control
Leadership	Weapons
Recruitment pools	Operational space
Publicity	Training
	Intelligence
	Technical expertise and specialists
	External weapon sources
	Sanctuary
	Money
	Deception skills

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[1]Although this categorization is different, it should be noted that RAND has researched the strategies, objectives, organizational structures, and capabilities of terrorist groups for over 30 years. Therefore, this framework and analysis of group capabilities should be viewed not as revolutionary, but rather as building on past research and methods for analyzing terrorism.

implement a counterterrorism policy that focuses on groups that threaten U.S. interests and design that policy to reduce terrorists' overall capabilities, but this alone might not be the most effective strategy, since terrorist groups can sometimes adapt quickly. Therefore, we explore the potential adaptations of terrorist groups. To do this, we examine the evolutionary trajectories of four terrorist groups: Shining Path (or Sendero Luminoso [SL]) in Peru, Hizballah, Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), and the Philippine Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). We chose these groups because they exhibit different organizational structures, articulate different strategic objectives, and operate in different environments. Thus, similarities in their evolutionary trajectories are noteworthy. In particular, we focus on how the groups developed and strengthened, how they reacted to counterattacks and other state policies, and the factors that contributed to either their survival or their dissolution. We conclude that terrorist groups are the most vulnerable to counterterrorism activities when they go through periods of transition, especially if actions taken against them magnify the pressures forcing the evolution. (See pages 61–84.)

CONCLUSION

In sum, the purpose of this report is not to critique the U.S. security community or terrorism analysis in general. Rather, it is our belief that the very nature of terrorism makes it difficult to forecast new and emerging trends. Indeed, Bruce Hoffman highlights this difficulty in *Inside Terrorism*, stating, "The terrorist campaign is like a shark in the water: it must keep moving forward—no matter how slowly or incrementally—or die."[2] Thus, our purpose is to present a framework that allows policymakers to place parameters around the threat and yet still account for the dynamic nature of terrorist groups.

Notably, this tension between bounding the threat and maintaining the flexibility that terrorism analysis requires exists throughout the report. Yet the tension is by no means unique. RAND terrorism analysts have struggled with this challenge for more than 30 years—the

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[2]Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 162.

1985 report titled *A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Terrorist Groups* is an example of such an effort for dealing with the issue.[3] As such, this report should be read and understood as one of many tools that help policymakers develop and sustain an effective counter-terrorism strategy. (See pages 85–87.)

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[3]Bonnie Cordes, Brian Michael Jenkins, Konrad Kellen, Gail V. Bass-Golod, Daniel A. Relles, William F. Sater, Mario L. Juncosa, William Fowler, and Geraldine Petty, *A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Terrorist Groups*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-3151, 1985.