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Exploring Terrorist Targeting Preferences

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Prepared for the
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Summary

Each year, federal, state, and local governments spend billions of dollars protecting the United States against acts of terrorism, with human, military, and capital resources allocated in ways that reflect the value and vulnerability of each potential target. Yet those buildings, institutions, and icons perceived as being of utmost value to the United States may not be perceived as such to its potential attackers. That one potential attack may hurt the United States more than another does not mean terrorists believe the first would advance their goals any more than would the second.

It may thus be helpful to understand what the targeting priorities of terrorists are. This monograph focuses on al Qaeda as an entity, which is presumed to have an overarching goal, a predominant method (i.e., terrorism), and one or more objectives that further the goal and that, in turn, can be advanced through terrorism. We define al Qaeda as the residual network imbued with the ideological outlook of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri and acting according to their strategic direction. All others associated with al Qaeda can be said to have degrees of membership with certain operatives relatively close to the leadership, and other operatives pledging their affiliation but having only tangential links to al Qaeda's leadership. Al Qaeda's stated overarching goal appears to be the re-establishment of an Islamic caliphate, which would eventually govern the *umma* (the entire Muslim community). Its rhetoric, though, also points to a companion goal: driving Western militaries and influences out of the *umma*. Although the monograph presumes that al Qaeda's targeting decisions are taken

solely to further its overarching goals, its rhetoric often justifies attacks in juridical terms (i.e., pain is imposed on the West to balance out the pain that the West has imposed on the Muslim world) and the possibility that terrorism has become an end in itself cannot be entirely ruled out.

Four hypotheses have been developed to explain how terrorism may advance al Qaeda's goals. The *coercion hypothesis* posits that al Qaeda believes the optimal means of fostering the creation of an Islamic caliphate is by coercing the United States and its Western allies to leave the Muslim world in general and the Arab heartland in particular. It does so by raising the human cost of remaining in the region. The *damage hypothesis* contends that al Qaeda seeks to reduce the ability of the United States to intervene in the Islamic world. Its targets and attack modalities would be designed to inflict a large amount of damage on the economic foundations of U.S. military, political, and commercial power. The *rally hypothesis* presumes that al Qaeda believes the optimal means of creating an Islamic caliphate is through the international radicalization of Islam, creating a coterie of those dedicated to overthrowing existing governments and eliminating U.S. presence from their countries. Its targets and modes of attack would be designed to inspire Muslims to engage in jihad against the West. The *franchise hypothesis* posits that although al Qaeda retains its influence and reputation, it lacks the resources necessary to carry out attacks itself or directly control the acts of others. Believing in the need to maintain fear and embolden supporters, al Qaeda serves as an inspiration, well-wisher, supporter, and perhaps clearinghouse for the plans and operations of affiliated jihadist groups. The franchise hypothesis applies to affiliates, which we use to refer to any militant jihadist entity, ranging from a small cell of a few individuals to a major organization that supports al Qaeda's goals but is not directly controlled by al Qaeda. The monograph attempts to determine the relative explanatory weight of each hypothesis by using three methods: (1) an analysis of major terrorist attacks associated with al Qaeda over the last dozen years, (2) an assessment of al Qaeda's statements, and (3) consultation with experts on al Qaeda.

Fourteen terrorist incidents ranging from the 1993 World Trade Center attack to the 2004 bombing of the Hilton Taba Resort in South Sinai, Egypt, were examined.¹ Before this analysis, a correlation was developed between the various hypotheses and the characteristics of the attack that might best fit each hypothesis. For instance, an attack consistent with the coercion hypothesis would tend to evidence large numbers of casualties; those consistent with the damage hypothesis would more likely be associated with direct and indirect economic damage. In the case of the franchise hypothesis, evidence about the actual perpetrators was brought into the analysis. Most attacks, upon analysis, were found to be associated with two or more hypotheses (e.g., the September 11 attack was consistent with the coercion, damage, and rally hypotheses). Our result is portrayed in Figure S.1. It must be cautioned that all attacks since September 11, 2001 have taken place overseas, a (fortunate) circumstance that may limit the ability to extrapolate from subsequent attacks to predict the nature of the next attack on the U.S. homeland.

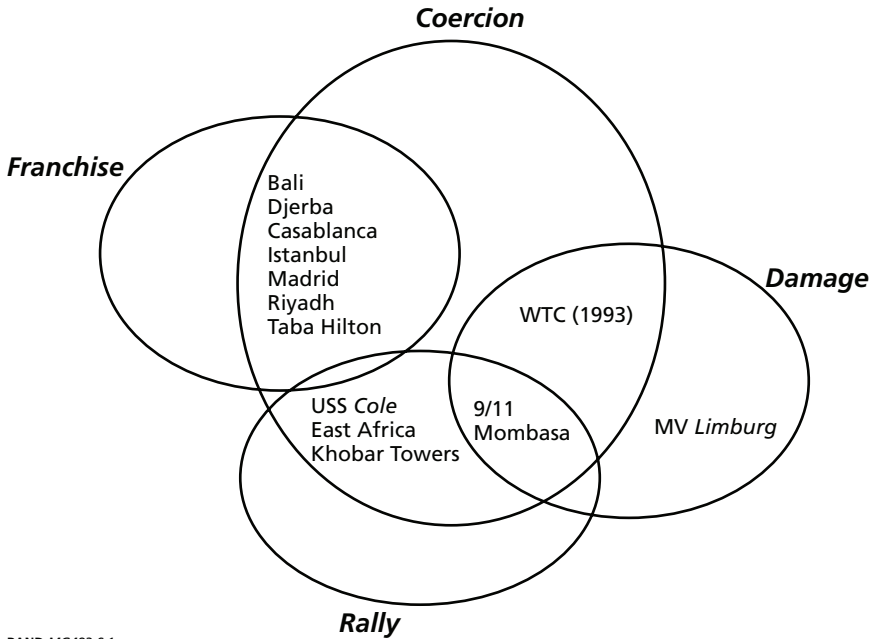
An analysis of al Qaeda statements, correlated with what experts observed, supports the relative importance of coercion and damage among the various hypotheses. Prior to 2004, many of the attacks were justified on the basis of pain for pain, with the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia, its blockade and then war against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian struggle referred to specifically. There was a coercive element implied by such statements. In 2004, however, bin Laden issued more direct statements, addressed to Europe and, then later, to the United States, that explicitly linked the cessation of violence to desired national actions.

Al Qaeda's desire to damage the U.S. economy has also been a long-standing theme (e.g., bin Laden called for a boycott of U.S. goods in 1996). This theme, however, became especially prominent after September 11, 2001, when the resulting damage to the U.S. economy surprised even bin Laden. Although it may seem absurd that terrorists would be capable of bringing the U.S. economy to its knees, many

¹ As of this writing, not enough was known of the July 2005 attacks in London and on the Sinai Peninsula to include them for analysis.

jihadists believe that the equally formidable Soviet Union was brought to collapse by their efforts in Afghanistan.

Figure S.1
Attack Distribution by Hypothesis



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Support for the rally hypothesis is relatively weak, at least as evidenced in al Qaeda rhetoric. Al Qaeda statements tend to credit either Allah or the faith of the perpetrators to explain the power of terrorism. Statements highlight the willingness of terrorists to sacrifice their lives in support of militant jihadist goals; this is meant to inspire others. It is more likely that the facts rather than the particulars of an operation are used for inspiration; thus, selecting targets to maximize inspiration does not appear to be a strong motive.

Support for the franchise hypothesis must be inferred from the pattern of attacks. Despite the rhetorical link between what the West has done to the Muslim community, the duty of all Muslims to support jihad, and the attacks themselves, there is little rhetoric that sup-

ports or disproves the notion that al Qaeda prefers that franchisees (rather than directly commanded jihadists) carry out attacks.

What are the implications of this analysis for targeting the United States? A good deal depends on who the next attackers are. If the next attacks are carried out by local jihadists with little or no direct al Qaeda input, the priorities will reflect those of the group itself.

If al Qaeda directs the next attack, however, then coercion and damage, and, quite possibly both, are likely to influence the nature of the target. Given al Qaeda's current resource limitations, there are reasons to believe it would favor the use of suicide bombers in the United States, not least because such attacks are believed by al Qaeda to rally supporters in the Muslim world. There may also be a focus on soft (poorly defended) targets, indicating that al Qaeda is willing to use the modality of attack (i.e., suicide bombers) rather than spectacular effect to rally supporters. Two types of attacks also merit attention. One would be an attack on the food industry, notably the agricultural sector, as being within al Qaeda's limited means and having the potential to cause severe social dislocation and economic damage. The other would be the use of radiological dispersion devices (RDDs), which also meets these two criteria.

We caution that our results are suggestive rather than conclusive. Al Qaeda has not taken great pains to lay out its targeting methodology or rationale in great detail, and the assumption that the organization has a well-thought approach to targeting is exactly that. The link between al Qaeda's ends and means may also have shifted over the last dozen years. Nevertheless, the pattern of attacks combined with al Qaeda's rhetoric suggests that the coercion and damage hypotheses have primary resonance, while the rally hypothesis is secondary. Whether or not the franchise hypothesis applies to targets inside the United States depends, in large part, on whether there are potential affiliates in this country, an aspect distinct from that of motivation.