

Freedom Fighters and Zealots: Al Qaeda in Historical Perspective

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Murderous organizations have increased in size and scope; they are more daring, they are served by the more terrible weapons offered by modern science, and the world is nowadays threatened by new forces which, if recklessly unchained, may some day wreak universal destruction.

British police officer, 1890s¹

At his trial, the terrorist explained that he had bombed the crowded café because he harbored a “profound hatred, intensified every day by the revolting spectacle of society where all is base, all is cowardly.” He explained that women and children were legitimate targets because his enemies never spared civilian lives. Although he was surely headed for execution, the terrorist issued ominous warnings for civilization, predicting that his movement would never die. It was “everywhere, which makes it impossible to capture.” It would end only when justice was achieved—and when its enemies were dead. His fanaticism seems entirely typical of twenty-first century terrorism, which seems far more dangerous and threatening to society than any that has come before.

As it turns out, however, this bomber was no religious fanatic of the twenty-first century. He was Emile Henry, a secular terrorist no less dedicated to his anarchist cause than today’s religious militants.² Although it is fashionable to argue that the world has entered a new phase or “wave” of extremist violence, in fact “sacred” or religious terrorism does not constitute a new phenomenon. In fact, all of history’s terrorist groups have fallen into one of two broad, analytically

¹ Quoted by Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1987), 313.

² The quotations are from Martin A. Miller, “The Intellectual Origins of Modern Terrorism in Europe” in Martha Crenshaw, ed., *Terrorism in Context* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 46–47.

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powerful categories: nationalists that kill on behalf of their nation or ethnicity, and ideological groups, or those that are motivated by ideas, broadly defined. As far as terrorism is concerned, there is nothing particularly new under the sun, al Qaeda notwithstanding.

This simple binary typology helps to illuminate many aspects of terrorism, such as basic group characteristics, likely strategies, tactics, and trajectory. In part because nationalists generally consider themselves to be engaged in a legitimate struggle for independence, they employ limited strategies that are fairly rational responses to extreme power asymmetry; the irrational, unlimited ends of ideological groups inspire similarly unlimited means. It is a mistake to consider such groups to be *strategic* in any meaningful sense of the term. In addition, for a number of reasons, nationalist groups generally live longer than ideological groups, whose life cycle is usually quite short.

The two types of groups also demand different counterterrorism approaches. Democracy might help bring nationalist terrorism to a halt, but it is likely to be irrelevant to the struggle against ideological groups. On the other hand, unlike nationalists, ideological groups do not survive long after the loss of their leaders, who are vitally important to group operations, cohesion, and motivation. Strategic nationalist terrorism shares so little in common with the irrational, cathartic ideological variety that the two may often seem to represent completely different phenomena. At the very least, acknowledgement of the distinction is crucial for scholars and practitioners alike.

TYPLOGIES OF TERRORISM

Although few academic enterprises have generated more attention over the last decade than the quest to understand terrorism, not many generalized, widely held conclusions about the subject exist. Scholars infamously cannot even agree on a definition of what exactly terrorism is, for instance, and what it is not.³ Perhaps just as important from a strategic perspective, no typology of terrorist groups has ever been devised that has met with general satisfaction. Often scholars proceed as if the subject were either a unified phenomenon, monolithic in its important aspects, or too complex for useful classification. A workable, parsimonious typology of terrorist groups would be of great benefit to those seeking to progress in the attempt to understand and ultimately to prevent terrorism.

³ Definitions are often the last refuge of academic scoundrels, especially when it comes to this subject. There seems to be little need to review the long history of this definitional debate for purposes of this paper. Terrorism is simply *violence against civilians by non-state actors for political purposes*. It does not target military forces; it cannot be perpetrated by states. So-called state terrorism, which confounds international attempts to come to a common agreement on definition, is repression, not terrorism. This is not to say that repression is justifiable, or that it is somehow less morally reprehensible—only that it is not terrorism. This definition is similar to the one used by Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter in “The Strategies of Terrorism,” *International Security* 31 (Summer 2006): 52.

Typologies in their simplest forms are classification systems that by grouping phenomena according to essential characteristics help to illuminate their subject. They are only interesting to the extent that they are analytically useful, or that they help explain or predict phenomena under consideration.⁴ In general, the simpler the typology the better, as long as it does not sacrifice intellectual depth for the sake of parsimony. Though to date no typology of terrorist groups has accomplished these goals, this is not due to lack of effort. From the very beginning of the academic study of terrorism, scholars have created a variety of typologies to differentiate between terrorist groups, some of which organize according to the choice of targets,⁵ purpose,⁶ political ideology,⁷ technologies they employ,⁸ strategic assumptions,⁹ and motivations.¹⁰ Groups have been classified into anywhere between two and a dozen categories.¹¹ Despite these attempts, no formulation has yet proved to be of lasting influence.

One reason that typologies of terrorism have been of limited utility to this point is that they have usually been offered as sidebars to arguments, or as parts of broader definitions of terrorism, and rarely as the foundation for the cumulation of knowledge. Typologies have been peripheral to terrorism scholarship, not central; prefaces to arguments, not organizing features. As a result, not only have all previous attempts failed to gain traction either in the academic or policy worlds, but only rare exceptions have ever been replicated in other studies. The frameworks that scholars have developed thus far

⁴ On reasoning with typologies, see Betty H. Zisk, *Political Research: A Methodological Sampler* (Lexington, MA: DC Heath and Co., 1981), 228; and Colin Elman, "Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Politics," *International Organization* 59 (Spring 2005): 293–326.

⁵ Ariel Merari, "A Classification of Terrorist Groups," *Terrorism* 1 (1978): 332–341; Bard E. O'Neill, "Towards A Typology of Political Terrorism: The Palestinian Resistance Movement," *Journal of International Affairs*, 32 (Spring/Summer 1978): 35–37; and Richard J. Chasdi, "Middle East Terrorism 1968-1993: An Empirical Analysis of Terrorist Group Behavior," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 17 (Fall 1997): 73–114.

⁶ A number of purpose-driven typologies are reviewed in Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature* (New York: Transaction Press, 1988), 50–57. See also Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State*, 2d ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 57–59.

⁷ Ideology provides perhaps the most common variable for division of terrorist groups. For a recent attempt, see Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism," *International Security* 27 (Winter 2002–2003): 39–40.

⁸ Mathew J. Littleton, *Information Age Terrorism: Toward Cyberterror* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 1995).

⁹ Max Abrahms claims that terrorism comes in two forms, "strategic" and "redemptive," in "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," *International Security* 32 (Fall 2006): 46.

¹⁰ Richard Shultz, "Conceptualizing Political Terrorism: A Typology," *Journal of International Affairs* 32 (Summer 1978): 9–11.

¹¹ A particularly useful summary of early typologies of terrorism—and one with an analysis that could be extended to cover those that were to follow—is Peter A. Fleming, Alex P. Schmid, and Michael Stohl, "The Theoretical Utility of Typologies of Terrorism: Lessons and Opportunities" in Michael Stohl, ed., *The Politics of Terrorism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1988), 153–195.

have had very little impact, and have failed the most basic tests for useful social science.

Many of the previous mistakes can be avoided, and analytical cumulation may prove possible, though the employment of a binary division of terrorist groups simplifies the subject and minimizes the assumptions used. Simply put, terrorist groups fall into two categories: those motivated by nationalist causes, and those motivated by ideology. This division of groups is not stunningly new, and should not prove to be overly controversial.¹² Although at times some groups have appeared to draw inspiration from both nationalist and ideological causes simultaneously, rarely is decisive classification difficult. As will be explained below, there are few (if any) examples of groups whose primary motivation does not place it neatly within one of these two categories.

No typology that sacrifices practical (or even predictive) utility for parsimony would be very interesting. This framework helps organize terrorism analysis in useful ways, since groups almost always share similar characteristics, strategies, and tactics with the others in their category. They also have similar life cycles and expectancies, and they respond in predictable ways to counterterrorism approaches. Exceptions exist, of course, but they are quite rare. This framework therefore should help scholars and analysts understand the phenomenon while simultaneously offering clear predictions and recommendations about how best to proceed to maximize chances of minimizing terrorist violence. One widely cited and reasonable reaction to the attacks of September 11 was a call for "praxis" between scholars and practitioners; this typology is an attempt to answer that call.¹³

Nationalist and Ideological Terrorist Groups

Four specific factors differentiate nationalist from ideological terrorist groups. Nationalist groups (sometimes referred to as ethnonationalist, or nationalist-separatist groups) act on behalf of a people, nation, or ethnic group; their goals are territorial, usually as part of an attempt to carve out a homeland from an existing state or occupied territory; their goals, therefore, have limited, rather than universal, application. Finally, nationalists target the interests of the perceived occupier of their territory. Ideological terrorists differ along each of

¹² Fleming, Schmid and Stohl come close to discussing this distinction with their typology of typologies in "The Theoretical Utility of Typologies of Terrorism," 171. Similar typologies were suggested by Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Liberty and Terrorism," *International Security* 2 (Autumn 1977): 56-67; Paul Wilkinson, "Terrorist Movements" in Yonah Alexander, David Carlton, and Paul Wilkinson, eds., *Terrorism: Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 99-117; Jerrold M. Post, "Terrorist Psycho-Logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces" in Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 25-40; and Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," 52-78.

¹³ Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Need for Praxis: Bringing Policy Relevance Back In," *International Security* 26 (Spring 2002): 169-183.

these points: They agitate on behalf of an idea, not a people; they have no specific territorial aims; their goals have no natural restrictions; and, as a result, their targets can be drawn from the universe of non-members, or non-believers in the cause.

Nationalist terrorists are comparatively easy for outsiders to understand, since they act on behalf of an ethnically distinct group and hope to extract a variety of concessions from state governments.¹⁴ Whether the groups desire independence, autonomy or unification with a neighboring country, their similarities far outweigh their differences, since territorial control is their ultimate goal. Like guerilla armies, nationalist terrorists feel that they engage in a legitimate struggle for independence by non-traditional means, and often display paramilitary characteristics and even hierarchical structures, as seen in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Irgun in Israel.¹⁵ Such groups often deny that they are terrorists at all, preferring instead to be thought of as “freedom fighters” waging a just war of liberation on behalf of their people.¹⁶ Ideological terrorists, on the other hand, are much more likely to embrace the label, if sometimes with gusto and other times with regret.

Walter Laqueur observed that nineteenth-century terrorism was “either nationalist-separatist in inspiration or left wing, as in tsarist Russia.”¹⁷ Similarly, early twentieth-century terrorism was either nationalist-separatist or right-wing;¹⁸ by the middle of the century, it was either nationalist-separatist or left-wing; by century’s end, it was either nationalist-separatist or religious.¹⁹ Although the label has changed over the years, in reality there is little that distinguishes groups in the second major category of terrorism. Ideological terrorists are motivated primarily by ideas, whether political, religious or otherwise,

¹⁴ For a good recent discussion of such groups, see Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca, “The Dynamics of Nationalist Terrorism: ETA and the IRA,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (September 2007): 289–306.

¹⁵ Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13 (July 1981): 392.

¹⁶ It is nationalist groups to whom people refer when resurrecting the old saying that “one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.” Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism*, 207.

¹⁷ Walter Laqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105.

¹⁸ Careful distinction must be made between right-wing terrorist groups and those that act as surrogate, quasi-official arms of the state. Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the United States, the Ulster Unionists in Northern Ireland, and the various pro-government groups in Argentina and Colombia in the 1970s and 80s are best thought of as state actors, not terrorists. Since their terror is sanctioned and often tacitly or directly supported by the state apparatus, it falls outside the scope of this definition of terrorism. As argued above, repression—though reprehensible—is not terrorism. Scholars would do well to resist the temptation to declare all unjust and unacceptable violence to be terrorism. For more, see Richard Gillespie, “Political Violence in Argentina: Guerrillas, Terrorists, and *Carapintadas*” in Crenshaw, ed., *Terrorism in Context*, 216.

¹⁹ A similar argument is made by David C. Rapoport in “The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism” in Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes, eds., *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 46–73.

and seek to transform society rather than establish a separate homeland.²⁰ Of course, as Benedict Anderson and others have argued, nationalism itself is little more than a shared idea. All terrorism is therefore in some senses motivated by ideas; the labels for this typology divide the kinds of ideas that provide motivation. Nationalism is in a category all its own.

Ideological groups can come from any point on the political spectrum, from the far-left anarchist groups of a century ago and their twentieth-century successors, to the far-right “Christian Identity” movement in the United States. Every major religion (as well as quite a few minor ones) has produced ideological terrorists, from the Zealots, Thugs, and Assassins of ancient times to modern killers on God’s behalf.²¹ At other times, the exact origins of terrorist ideas can seem somewhat murky, as was the case with the Manson Gang, and as remains so for the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda. Despite their seemingly wide range of goals and motivations, these groups display a remarkable degree of similarity across many analytical categories. The table below, which is of course hardly exhaustive, fits some of the more prominent recent terrorist groups into the typology.

Ideological terrorism tends to come in waves—or movements—according to intellectual and religious fashion.²² The first major ideological terrorist movement in the modern era was, of course, the anarchist movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it was far from the last.²³ A left-wing terrorist movement spawned groups on nearly every continent in the 1970s and ’80s, while right-wing terrorists hounded Europe prior to World War II and the United States toward the end of the century. Today, ideological groups often (but not always) build from a quasi-religious base, sometimes having splintered off from more-established faiths. Al Qaeda presents a clear example of this, but the U.S. militia movement also draws strength from a fringe perversion of a major religion.

There are very few truly mixed groups. The primary goals of any terrorist organization are almost always easily distinguishable from its secondary or even tertiary motivations. The IRA may have employed Marxist ideological rhetoric during the 1960s, for instance, but it is absurd to suggest that it (or

²⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

²¹ On the ancient groups, see David C. Rapoport, “Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions,” *American Political Science Review* 78 (September 1984): 658–677.

²² On waves, see Rapoport, “The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism.”

²³ “Modern” terrorism, which began at the end of the nineteenth century, differs in important ways from that which came before, not only in terms of motivations and tactics but also in the reliability of sources. Terrorism changed drastically with the advent of the age of mass journalism and the potential for widespread publicity. Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, 12. Another common marking point for modern terrorism is July 1968, when the Palestinian terrorists first began hijackings airplanes. See Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 67–69. Hoffman makes the distinction between pre-modern and modern based on the political and international nature of the act.

TABLE 1

A Dozen Representative Examples of Both Types of Groups

<i>Ideological Groups</i>	<i>Nationalist Groups</i>
Narodnaya Volya	Irish Republican Army (IRA)
Red Brigades	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE)
Shining Path	Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA)
Baader-Meinhof Gang	Kashmiri Militants (HUM, JEM)
November 17	National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA)
Weathermen	African National Congress (ANC)
Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)	Irgun
Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord	Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)
Aum Shinrikyo	Eastern Turkistan Islamic Party
al Qaeda	Hamas
Abu Sayyaf	Chechen Separatist Groups
Egyptian Islamic Jihad	Palestinian Islamic Jihad

any of its more-radical off-shoots, like the Irish National Liberation Army) was first and foremost a Marxist group.²⁴ Religious beliefs reinforced the nationalist goals of both Sikh and Chechen groups, but liberation of their homeland was always their primary goal.²⁵ All of these groups sought liberation of a specific territory, and limited their attacks to the interests of their perceived oppressor.

Similarly, some Palestinian liberation groups, like Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, may seem at first glance to exhibit both nationalist and Islamic fundamentalist (ideological) characteristics. However, the stated goal of Hamas and its brethren is to liberate the Palestinian people from Israeli occupation, not spread their version of Islam. They limit their attacks, targeting the interests of the occupying power. Hamas's struggle is not with the West in general, nor is it with modernity. In other words, Hamas and the other groups that oppose Israel are nationalist terrorists with an ideology, rather than ideological groups.

By contrast, although al Qaeda members occasionally express a desire for the establishment of a new Islamic Caliphate, its members do not seem to be motivated by any particular nationalist or ethnic identity. Al Qaeda's struggle against the infidel has no borders; it does not seek a homeland for a particular people or the end of occupation by outsiders.²⁶

²⁴ O'Brien argues that the Marxist tone of the IRA was the result of a single highly articulate person who was influential with the Chief of Staff. By 1969, however, it had become clear that many members "were not interested in the ideology of their spokesmen." O'Brien, "Liberty and Terrorism," 59.

²⁵ Islamic fundamentalists joined the Chechen cause between the Russian assaults, which allowed Moscow to claim that its struggle was part of the broader war against al Qaeda. Chechens, however, opposed the czar, the communists, and now Putin, primarily for nationalist, not religious reasons. They want freedom for their people, and independence for their homeland. Chechen terrorists are a nationalist movement that happens to be Islamic, not an Islamic movement that happens to desire liberation.

²⁶ For a good review of the current scholarly opinion on this issue, see Assaf Moghadam, "Suicide Terrorism, Occupation and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of Dying to Win," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (December 2006): 707-729.

The fact that its members are Muslims first and Arabs second is made manifest by their willingness to work for and with non-Arabs, in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Central Asia. Theirs is a struggle on behalf of a cause, not a people; they are not trying to liberate a particular territory; and their goals are global, not national. Their war is with the ideologies of the West and, in particular, with those among the *umma* who have adopted Western ideologies and infidelities. Their local conflicts are but part of a much larger, global struggle that has no boundaries and no end except the annihilation of the competing ideas. "Under no circumstances should we forget this enmity between us and the infidels," Osama told his followers in November 2001. "For the enmity is based on creed."²⁷ Al Qaeda, therefore, is an ideological organization that occasionally espouses nationalist goals. As we will see, this distinction has rather important implications for those seeking to bring its operations to an end.

Unfortunately, there is no satisfying way to apply this typology to the universe of terrorist groups, because no such generally accepted compilation exists. There are a couple of important reasons why this is so. First and foremost, a canonical list is impossible as long as scholars are unable to arrive at a consensual definition of the subject at hand. All previous attempts to identify the universe of groups have generated substantial controversy over inclusion/exclusion decisions, invariably distracting from the analyses that follow. Official collections of terrorist groups—such as the U.S. State Department's "Foreign Terrorist Organizations" list—are often at least as much political as they are analytical. This does not stop some empirically minded scholars from using such lists, of course, but it does call their conclusions into some question.²⁸

The University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and the Responses to Terrorism (START) is the current state of the art in data collection about terrorism. START demonstrates the second major difficulty with listing terrorist groups: providing a truly accurate count is an all but impossible task. Terrorist groups are secretive and opaque by nature and by necessity, and rarely announce their existence or demise to the scholarly community. Tiny groups can form, merge, rename, and dissolve virtually without anyone knowing. Imposters are often indistinguishable from the genuine. Many groups, especially ideological ones, emerge and die with such stark rapidity that the analyst is left wondering whether they ever in fact existed at all, as if they were purely theoretical subatomic particles. START's databases list over 6,000 terrorist incidents between 1998 and 2004, inclusively, perpetrated by nearly 360 groups. If the analysis is extended back to the early 1970s, the number of groups jumps to 1,400. Much of their coding is based upon claims of responsibility or blame of the authorities, neither of which is necessarily reliable.

²⁷ Quoted by Moghadam, "Suicide Terrorism, Occupation and the Globalization of Martyrdom," 717.

²⁸ Kydd and Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," and Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," are two recent examples.

Some groups perpetrated a single act, or have claimed to, and disappeared soon after. Others have evolved through a number of stages, and later forms may have no relation to earlier permutations.

This paper will make no effort to fit all terrorist groups into the typology, because to do so would distract from its message in two ways: First, critics would inevitably quibble about the groups included, and those not; and second, intellectual honesty demands admission that no such list can possibly be accurate. Any such canonical list would create the illusion, but not the reality, of an empirical foundation. Instead, the analysis that follows will admit the methodological limitations that face the terrorism scholar, draw its evidence primarily from the larger, well-known terrorist groups, and invite response.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Two important initial observations deserve emphasis. First, *there is no important practical difference between terrorism on behalf of political ideology and that on behalf of religion*. So-called sacred terror is not a new phenomenon, nor is it analytically distinct from the ideological terrorism that came before.²⁹ Those seeking to transform society have chosen (or been given) a variety of labels throughout history, but they share a great deal of strategic and organizational characteristics.

Such groups are always an extreme minority of society, for one thing, and they share a desire to spark utopian revolution. Even though sizeable portions of some Muslim societies have at times reported some sympathy for Osama bin Laden, only a miniscule percentage favor the imposition of an Islamist government. Only 6 percent of Shibley Telhami's respondents reported being sympathetic to al Qaeda's Islamist goals, and 7 percent approved of its methods, which is a finding echoed from poll to poll.³⁰ Furthermore, only tiny fractions of those small sympathetic minorities would consider taking up arms in support of such a cause.³¹ In other words, al Qaeda and its associated groups are not representative of Islamic fundamentalism, much less of Islam itself. Like left-wing groups of the 1970s, they are fringe radicals rejected by their societies. In earlier eras, such malcontented radicals might have described their grievances

²⁹ Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America* (New York: Random House, 2003); Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, 2003); and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

³⁰ Shibley Telhami, "What Arab Public Opinion Thinks of U.S. Policy," Brookings Institution Forum, December 2005, accessed at <http://www.brook.edu/fp/saban/events/20051212.pdf>, 6 April 2009.

³¹ For a review of public opinion polling on this issue, see Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), "Large and Growing Numbers of Muslims Reject Terrorism, Bin Laden," (College Park, MD: Center for International and Security Studies, University of Maryland), 30 June 2006, accessed at http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/international_security_bt/221.php?nid=&id=&pnt=221&lb=btis, 28 March 2008.

“through other ideological lenses, perhaps anarchism, Marxism, or Nazism,” argued Jessica Stern. “Today they choose Islamic extremism.”³²

Today’s religious terrorists represent perversions of established faiths, cultish off-shoots of established traditions, not vanguards of clashing civilizations. Al Qaeda and its associated groups should be thought of as parts of a broader anti-establishment ideological terrorist movement, one that had its origins in the twentieth century but seems to be at its most dangerous in the twenty-first. The ink that has been spilled in the attempt to decipher the mystical, occasionally violent theology of Wahhabism or “radical Salafism” has provided little substantive aid to decision makers. Society may well be reaching the limits of what theology can teach about terrorism; mapping the precise pathological detour that the terrorist takes from organized religion is not nearly as important as the recognition that such a detour has in fact occurred, and that a violent, ideological splinter group has formed. Although they would probably all be loathe to admit it, the anarchists, the Red Army Faction (RAF), and Aum Shinrikyo share many important characteristics. Islamist terrorism is merely the latest incarnation of a rather familiar, ancient phenomenon.

Some scholars have argued that terror in the name of God differs in its transnational appeal, the fanaticism of its followers, their willingness to kill in great numbers and die in the expectation of a divine reward, and perhaps in the level of violence that groups are likely to employ.³³ None of these characteristics qualify the movement as particularly new. The passion and devotion to secular causes that terrorists have exhibited over the years have been no weaker than those for religious. Ideological movements have always been transnational, and theoretically universal in appeal. The anarchists held their first international meeting in London in 1881, for example, and cross-national ties among Cold War left-wing groups were widely known. Suicidal impulses are also nothing new; anarchists rarely fled after their crimes, preferring martyrdom to life in hiding. And as will be argued below, ideological terrorist violence has always had fewer strategic restrictions than nationalist. Religious terrorism certainly does not require “nothing less than a sea change” in thinking about terrorism, as one prominent scholar has argued on behalf of the conventional wisdom.³⁴ There is every reason to believe that counterterrorism strategies that worked against ideological groups in the past will be successful again.

The second revelation immediately offered by this typology is that there is an important difference in rationality between the two categories of terrorism. *The thinking and planning of ideological groups usually display a far more tenuous grasp of what might be considered conventional “reality.”* Political scientists tend to minimize psychosis as an explanation of motivation for terrorism, perhaps

³² Jessica Stern, “The Protean Enemy,” *Foreign Affairs* 82 (July–August 2003): 37.

³³ Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, xxii.

³⁴ Bruce Hoffman, “Old Methods, New Madness: Revival of Religious Terrorism Begs for Broader U.S. Policy,” *RAND Review* 22 (Winter 1998/99): 16.

because it is somewhat outside of their intellectual purview.³⁵ Instead, they prefer to focus on potential socioeconomic conditions, religions, and/or political ideologies as breeding grounds for terrorism, rather than explore the psychological linkages between frustration and aggression.

Nonetheless, most scholars seem to recognize that a hazy connection to reality is one of the central, defining characteristics of ideological groups. Laqueur observed that the left-wing terrorists of the 1970s “proceeded on a level of higher lunacy, divorced from all reality.”³⁶ Similarly, Conor Cruise O’Brien argued that “the unreality of stated aims is more obvious in the case of the millenarian-universalist type of movement, than in the territorial secessionist/irredentist type.”³⁷ It matters little that there are no rational grounds for their assumptions, because ideological groups are “interested in faith, not reason.” As a consequence, ideological groups are “especially baffling” to the outside world, according to Paul Wilkinson, “because they do not share the same canons of rationality.”³⁸ To understand ideological terrorists, one should sooner consult Freud and Jung rather than Machiavelli and Thomas Schelling; irrationality is the rule, not the exception.³⁹ They live in a world of their own creation, where a need to strike back at perceived enemies outweighs both social convention and strategic logic. In Wilkinson’s mind, ideological groups are bizarre contradictions of “Lilliputian membership and negligible popular support coupled with the most pretentious language” of global, existential struggle.⁴⁰

The delusions of the ideological terrorist help explain some of the more important distinctions between the two kinds of terrorist groups, and often eventually serve as an impediment to their success and longevity. As will be explained below, this variation in rationality helps illuminate differences in strategy, tactics, and life expectancy, and provides the foundation for the creation of practical counterterrorism recommendations.

TERRORIST STRATEGY AND TACTICS

The first major area of practical divergence between nationalist and ideological groups is in their typical choice of strategy and tactics. Since their target audiences, enemies, and goals are distinctly different, the two kinds of groups

³⁵ Laqueur makes this observation in *The New Terrorism*, 101. Of the psychologists that study terrorism, one of the best is Post, “Terrorist Psycho-Logic.”

³⁶ Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, 122.

³⁷ O’Brien, “Liberty and Terrorism,” 60.

³⁸ Wilkinson, “Terrorist Movements,” 107.

³⁹ A number of studies have argued that levels of clinical psychopathology are no higher in terrorists than in the public at large. For an exemplary review, see Jeff Victoroff, “The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49 (February 2005): 3–42. However, diagnosable mental illness is hardly a necessary condition for irrationality and strategic delusion, which is the essence of this critique of rational-choice approaches to terrorism.

⁴⁰ Wilkinson, “Terrorist Movements,” 107.

usually choose widely divergent ways and means to achieve their ends. Nationalists often behave as rational actors facing extreme power asymmetry, and are the implicit subject of the vast majority of writing on the strategies of terrorism. For example, when Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter identified five common strategies employed by the rational terrorist (attrition, spoiling, intimidation, provocation, and “outbidding”), they were speaking primarily of nationalist groups.⁴¹ The strategic choices vary based upon the challenges faced by each group, but all tend to proceed in a more-or-less rational manner.

Whichever strategy they choose, nationalist terrorists face a dilemma: Although popular sentiment may sympathize with the nationalist cause, those supporting violence are almost always in the minority. After all, most people everywhere tend toward the apolitical, and in the absence of massive deprivation are usually reluctant to take up arms in the pursuit of independence. A central goal of the typical nationalist strategy must therefore be to overcome the collective action problem that keeps the masses from joining, or at least supporting, the movement. Such groups must radicalize, militarize, and motivate their compatriots without demonstrating counterproductive bloodlust.

Nationalist terrorists therefore must act within a set of strategic limitations. Their tactics and choice of victims must appear to be specific and restrained, not maximized and random, if they are to avoid alienating wider society. The IRA, for example, would often warn Londoners when and where bombings could be expected, in order to minimize civilian casualties. Even the massacre at Omagh was preceded by three warnings, all of which were apparently tragically ignored.⁴² Even those actions that are extremely violent—such as the destruction of airliners by Sikh groups, or mass-casualty attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka—cannot appear to be indiscriminate. Violence on behalf of nationalist causes, if not properly restrained, can prove fatal for such groups, as the Real IRA discovered after Omagh. Less well known is the fate of the Breton Liberation Army (ARB), which was the armed wing of the various groups that worked for the freedom of Brittany in France in the 1970s. The group had perpetrated more than 200 attacks over the course of 30 years but avoided human casualties until a McDonald’s employee was killed by one of their explosions in Quèvert in 2000. Outrage followed; in the public’s eye, the ARB went “from quaint to bloodthirsty,” as described by a *Time* magazine headline.⁴³ Its support dropped, and the group has perpetrated no violent acts since.

⁴¹ Kydd and Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism.”

⁴² At their trial, the Omagh bombers claimed that their intent was not to kill civilians. See “Omagh Trial Told of Bomb Warnings,” BBC News, 12 October 2006. See also “Bomb Warning Calls Played to Inquest,” *The Independent*, 7 September 2000; and Rosie Cowan and Nick Hopkins, “Devastating Report on Omagh Bombing Puts RUC on the Spot,” *The Guardian*, 7 December 2001.

⁴³ Brian Crumley, “From Quaint to Bloodthirsty: Brittany’s Independence Movement Has Forfeited its Claim to Innocence,” *Time Europe*, 1 May 2000, accessed at <http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/2000/0501/burgerbomb.html>.

Ideological terrorists, on the other hand, do not seem to be constrained by such rational strategic limitations. Throughout history, such groups have chosen the most-destructive weapons available to inflict the maximum amount of damage on people and property. Peter Kropotkin, the philosopher of anarchism, argued that terrorists can “in a few days, make more propaganda than thousands of pamphlets.”⁴⁴ Anarchist terrorists practiced what they called “propaganda of the deed,” the logic of which followed the illustration shown in Figure 1.

If this model appears rather simplistic, vague, and perhaps somewhat illogical, then it accurately captures the strategic thinking of ideological terrorists. These groups seem to feel that their violent propaganda will somehow bring about a better world, but are rarely clear about the precise path that this metamorphosis will take. The middle steps almost always include an “awakening” of the masses through violent example, and the implicit belief that their actions will inspire a broad movement against their ideological enemy. At the very least, therefore, the route to utopia usually requires significant leaps of faith. The strategic thinking of ideological terrorists, therefore, is typically somewhere between unclear and profoundly delusional.

All of the post-Cold War terrorist attacks in the United States, from Oklahoma City to September 11, were less calm, calculated tactics than cataclysmic outbursts of rage, designed to spark chain reactions that would somehow bring about a better world. Timothy McVeigh felt that his attack would somehow prove to be one of the first shots fired in a nationwide race war;⁴⁵ the Aum thought that their attack on the Tokyo subway system would bring about World War III, after which they would somehow ascend to positions of world leadership; al Qaeda seems to have vaguely hoped that their attacks would somehow inspire the return of the Caliphate and save Islam from the corrupting influence of the West. The LRA seeks to impose its bizarre version of Christianity on northern Uganda via rape, massacre, and torture. The RAF in Germany in the 1970s apparently thought that their terrorism would lead to a resurgence of Nazism, which would, in turn, spark a workers’ revolt.⁴⁶

It is particularly hard to argue, as Martha Crenshaw did in an influential piece on terrorism, that ideological groups engage in “a form of political behavior resulting from the deliberate choice of a basically rational actor.”⁴⁷ When Crenshaw held that “significant campaigns of terrorism depend on

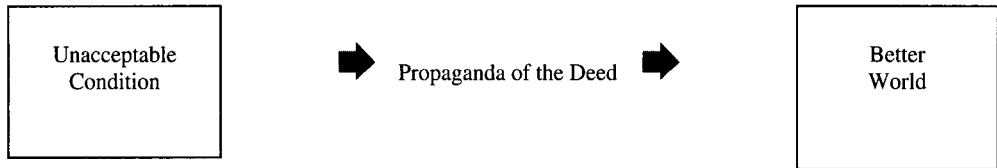
⁴⁴ Quoted by Richard Bach Jensen, “Daggers, Rifles and Dynamite: Anarchist Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Europe,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16 (Spring 2004): 124.

⁴⁵ Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Many groups have shared such goals, such as the Manson Gang, which hoped to ignite a race war that would eventually bring about Armageddon. See Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying the World in Order to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1999), 274.

⁴⁶ Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” 392.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 380. See also Martha Crenshaw, “The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice” in Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism*, 7–24.

FIGURE 1
The Basic "Strategic" Framework of Ideological Terrorists



rational political choice," she clearly had nationalist groups in mind.⁴⁸ When her discussion drifted toward ideological groups, she admitted that often the exact relationship between their means and ends might not be clear to the outside observer. "The leaders of Narodnaya Volya," she conceded, "lacked a detailed conception of how the assassination of the tsar would force his successor to permit the liberalization they sought" and bring about their peoples' utopia. Likewise, the French anarchists of the 1890s "acted in light of a well-developed political doctrine but were much less certain of how violence against the bourgeoisie would bring about freedom."⁴⁹ Anarchists in general, argued a recent work, displayed a "baffling gap between rhetoric and reality."⁵⁰ Their actions hardly fit into a rational-choice framework.

A veritable subfield has emerged over the past five years attempting to analyze al Qaeda's strategic goals. Virtually all of these studies begin with the central premise that such goals do indeed exist, which may prove to be a flawed assumption.⁵¹ It is just as likely that the September 11 attacks were motivated by a desire for revenge against perceived offenses, rather than as part of a grand strategy to bring about anything resembling a realistic end. There may well have been no road map, nor a master plan behind the attacks. To the extent that they can be considered strategists at all, al Qaeda's leadership is extremely myopic. Von Moltke they are not.

"The murkier the political purpose of terrorism," Laqueur observed sagaciously, "the greater its appeal to mentally unbalanced persons."⁵² It is inaccurate to speak of ideological terrorists in rational, strategic terms; their strategy is based (often literally) on faith alone. The actions of ideological groups are more cathartic than strategic, based more on emotion than intellect. For such groups, violence is often an end in itself, their *raison d'être*.⁵³

⁴⁸ Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," 385.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 386. See also Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, 16.

⁵⁰ Jensen, "Daggers, Rifles and Dynamite," 128.

⁵¹ Among the better examples of this literature are Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Yossef Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (Rocklin, CA: Forum, 2001); Benjamin and Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror*; and Cronin and Ludes, eds., *Attacking Terrorism*.

⁵² Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, 40.

⁵³ Wilkinson, "Terrorist Movements," 107.

This lack of rationality makes ideological groups more frightening to the public at large, turning them into inexplicable bogeymen that terrorize out of proportion to their actual capabilities. A century ago, Teddy Roosevelt argued that “when compared to the suppression of anarchy, every other question sinks into insignificance.”⁵⁴ Nationalist groups, on the other hand, can at least be understood, perhaps even reasoned with, and eventually placated. The irrationality of ideological groups seems to imply that there can be no grounds for negotiating, and no solution save total victory. To paraphrase President George W. Bush, society conducts “existential” struggles with ideological groups. The empirical evidence we have suggests that targeted countries are more likely to make territorial concessions to nationalist groups than existential concessions to ideological.⁵⁵ The latter’s chance of success is therefore quite low.

Ideological terrorists seem to perceive a direct relationship between the size of the deed and the effect of the propaganda. The bigger the act, therefore, the better the chance to effect the desired outcome. The anarchists of the nineteenth century reached the destructive limits of their tools, employing dynamite to destroy packed Parisian opera houses and cafés. Likewise, al Qaeda chose the most visible, destructive, and deadly attacks imaginable. The logic (or illogic) of such groups rarely provides an incentive to restrain their violence. They do not fear losing the support of society, in part because they never enjoyed such support, and in part because they feel that their violent propaganda will win them converts.

Ideological groups throughout history have displayed a fascination with weaponry and technology far beyond that of nationalists. The anarchist movement as a whole was captivated by dynamite, and thought its explosive power could literally and figuratively destroy the oppression of modern society.⁵⁶ Older groups also seemed to have their sacred weapons: Assassins killed with the dagger, and Thugs used the noose.⁵⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) hold a particular attraction for today’s ideological terrorist. When FBI agents raided the compound of the Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord, a right-wing Christian identity group in the United States, they found stockpiles of cyanide, which allegedly were part of a plot to poison the water supply of an unnamed American city.⁵⁸ The cult, led by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, poisoned 10 salad bars in Oregon in 1984 as part of their quest to ride to victory in the county elections.⁵⁹ Most famously and destructively, the

⁵⁴ Quoted by Jensen, “Daggers, Rifles and Dynamite,” 117.

⁵⁵ Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” 44.

⁵⁶ Jensen, “Daggers, Rifles and Dynamite.”

⁵⁷ Although they are often discussed in the literature, it is not clear at all that Thugs were terrorists as we understand the term today, since they appear to have had no political aims. See Rapoport, “Fear and Trembling.”

⁵⁸ Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2002), 341.

⁵⁹ Judith Miller, Steven Engelberg, and William J. Broad, *Germs: Biological Weapons and America’s Secret War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

Aum Shinrikyo not only released sarin in the Tokyo subway system, but also attempted (unsuccessfully, thankfully) mass slaughter using a variety of biological agents, including Anthrax and Ebola. The group was obsessed with science-fiction-esque superweapons throughout its existence, and was actively pursuing a nuclear capability at the time of its demise.⁶⁰

Nationalists cannot afford to be unlimited in their choice of weaponry. To paraphrase Brian Jenkins, they tend to want a lot of people watching, rather than a lot of people dead.⁶¹ Laqueur has argued that WMD in general, and biological weapons in particular, are likely to be employed by “only the most extreme and least rational terrorist groups,” or those “motivated not by distinct political aims but by apocalyptic visions or by some pan-destructionist belief.”⁶² Indeed, few nationalist groups have expressed real interest in exceptionally destructive weapons.⁶³ For them, the ends are more important than the means. With many ideological groups, the two are often virtually indistinct.

Finally, there appears to be no significant distinction between the two categories in the willingness of members to sacrifice their own lives for the greater good. Suicide attacks, while profoundly irrational to the individual, are often quite rational for the organization. In his widely read *Dying to Win*, Robert Pape sagaciously observed that suicide terrorism has an impact beyond the material significance of the act, and can increase the odds of success for the organization.⁶⁴ There are few more powerful statements of dedication to cause than the willingness to lay down one’s life in its pursuit. More controversially, Pape then went on to argue that suicide terrorism is typically a response to occupation, and therefore the purview of the nationalist terrorist. As Assaf Moghadam pointed out in a rather devastating critique of Pape’s work, this holds true only if one stretches the definition of “foreign occupation” to include virtually every country in the world in which the United States has influence.⁶⁵ Al Qaeda, according to Moghadam and the preponderance of scholarly opinion, is a religious (and therefore ideological) terrorist organization. Suicidal attacks are therefore not merely a response to occupation, nor are they the exclusive strategic property of either category of terrorism.

The willingness to resort to suicide is certainly related to group size. Perhaps it should be unsurprising that suicide bombing is more often employed by

⁶⁰ Lifton, *Destroying the World in Order to Save It*, 12.

⁶¹ Brian Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1975).

⁶² Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, 70.

⁶³ There have been a number of cases in which nationalist groups have employed poisons. The PKK poisoned drinking water at a Turkish Air Force base in 1992, and the LTTE dropped cyanide in water tanks of the Sri Lankan army two years earlier. However, these attacks were hardly random, mass-casualty attacks, which are much more common to ideological groups. See Gavin Cameron, “Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism Research: Past and Future” in Andrew Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 81.

⁶⁴ Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁶⁵ Moghadam, “Suicide Terrorism, Occupation and the Globalization of Martyrdom,” esp. 716–179.

nationalist groups, since they are usually larger than their ideological cousins. If November 17, a leftist ideological group that over the course of a generation murdered about 20 people in Greece, had decided to employ suicide bombers as a tactic, the group would not have been able to persist for nearly three decades. Since its core membership may have only numbered around a half dozen committed terrorists, suicide would have greatly limited the number of attacks it was capable of perpetrating.

To review, nationalist groups operate inside a set of strategic limitations unknown to the ideological terrorist, which makes their tactics and choice of weaponry far more restrained. Ideological terrorists operate in a world outside of strategic logic and tactical restraint. Suicide attacks, however, have been employed by both types. The main restraint on this perfectly rational tactic (to the group, if not to the individual) is the number of people involved in the organization, not its motivation.

LIFE EXPECTANCY

Fortunately for society, most terrorist groups do not live long. Ninety percent of all groups disappear within one year; more than half of those that survive that critical first year do not last a decade.⁶⁶ A small minority does manage to linger on, sometimes for generations; with few exceptions, the older groups are nationalist. Unlike ideological groups, nationalists can persist for long periods of time, and have no identifiable life cycle.⁶⁷ Longevity for such groups is not uncommon—of history's most violent nationalist groups, only three have failed to live long enough to celebrate their tenth birthday.⁶⁸ The few ideological groups that have persisted beyond a decade, by contrast, were either miniscule in terms of membership and activity, like November 17, or had mutated away from their original purpose and drifted toward criminality and away from terrorism altogether, such as the LRA in Uganda.⁶⁹ Nationalist groups tend to live far longer than ideological, often persisting until their ethnonationalist cause loses its salience, as appears to have happened to the Quebecois and Breton terrorist groups; until they are placated by the regime in power or even co-opted into the political system, as happened with the IRA and, to a lesser extent, the Palestine Liberation Organization; or until they achieve their objectives, like the Irgun, the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, and the Greek

⁶⁶ Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How Al Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* 31 (Summer 2006): 13.

⁶⁷ Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism*, 206; Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, 48. See also Wilkinson, "Terrorist Movements," 104; and Cronin, "How Al Qaida Ends," 13.

⁶⁸ Martha Crenshaw first made this observation in 1991, and it still applies today. See her "How Terrorism Declines," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3 (Spring 1991): 73; discussed by Cronin, "How Al Qaida Ends," 13.

⁶⁹ Anthony Vinci, "Existential Motivations in the Lord's Resistance Army's Continuing Conflict," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30 (April 2007): 337–352.

National Organization of Cypriot Fighters.⁷⁰ The various Kashmiri separatists, the LTTE, and Palestinian nationalist groups have displayed a consistent proclivity for resurrection, despite concentrated, prolonged counterterrorist efforts. No one should be surprised by Basque Homeland and Freedom's (ETA's) recent renunciation of its cease-fire, which occurred as the group prepares to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. Likewise, the resurrection of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) should not be greeted with profound amazement.

The lifespan of ideological groups, on the other hand, is rarely long, for at least three important reasons. First and foremost, as mentioned above, ideological groups generally do not have the broad support in the population at large that nationalists often enjoy. Terrorists, like guerrillas, need the support of at least a segment of the population to survive. When that support is absent, law enforcement is likely to be more successful in rooting out the guilty. Even where the public shows a degree of sympathy for ideological groups, tolerance for their tactics—much less desire for their success—is very low. The National Intelligence Estimate of April 2006, for example, cites a variety of polling data in the Arab world regarding al Qaeda and found that the jihadists' brutal tactics and ultraconservative ideology remain unpopular with “the vast majority of Muslims.”⁷¹ Similar unpopularity followed the actions of the Anarchists, left-wing terrorists in the 1970s, and Aum Shinrikyo. Unrestrained slaughter on behalf of vague ideas usually wins few followers among the public at large. It is very difficult for terrorist groups to survive amid a uniformly hostile population that is cooperating with law enforcement at every turn.

Second, in a related point, due in part to their marginal place in society, ideological groups tend to have trouble replacing their members. Propaganda of the deed, especially when perpetrated for murky or unclear purposes, often proves self-defeating. Public repulsion at what appears to be senseless violence not only undercuts whatever sympathy might have existed for the group prior to the terrorist act, but it rarely inspires others to gravitate to the cause. Anarchist terrorism in Germany and Austria in the 1880s, for example, ended when their propaganda of the deed not only failed to energize the masses, but turned them decisively against the cause.⁷² Mass casualty attacks have thus far always proven to be the high-water mark, or the beginning of the demise, of terrorist groups. The slaughter in Oklahoma City not only failed to spark the race war of McVeigh's warped imagination, but it proved to be the peak of right-wing terror in the United States; likewise, the Aum Shinrikyo never recovered from the Tokyo Sarin gas attack. Al Qaeda has not been as effective since September 11, and we now know that those attacks were not uniformly popular even within the organization itself. The seemingly indiscriminate slaughter of those attacks and

⁷⁰ For more, see Cronin, “How Al Qaida Ends.”

⁷¹ Karen DeYoung and Walter Pincus, “Sobering Conclusions on Why Jihad Has Spread,” *The Washington Post*, 26 September 2006.

⁷² Jensen, “Daggers, Rifles and Dynamite,” 133.

the series of reversals that followed caused a good deal of grumbling and second-guessing within al Qaeda and broader fundamentalist circles.⁷³ The organization has predictably found it quite difficult to recover its pre-September 11 operational capacity, and its recruiting has suffered.⁷⁴

By contrast, Palestinian terrorist groups replace their members as fast as the Israelis can take them off the street; Catholic schools in Northern Ireland were for decades filled with potential future IRA members. As a general rule, ideological fervor generally proves to be much more difficult to pass on to future generations than nationalist pride. As David Rapoport sagaciously observed, “Dreams inspiring parents lose their attractiveness for children.”⁷⁵ The dream of a homeland, however, is evidently passed down from generation to generation.

Nationalist groups replace their members with relative ease, in large part because their grievances resonate with a public that shares a sense of injustice or deprivation. The French may have been able to smash the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front) in the late fifties, for instance, but before long the group had refilled its rolls and resumed the struggle for independence. As long as grievances exist, nationalist groups are likely to persist. They can span generations, recover from reversals, and frustrate counterterrorist efforts much more effectively than can movements based upon non-nationalist ideas. For states and nonstate actors alike, nationalism remains the strongest motivating force in international politics.

The final reason that ideological terrorist groups tend to die more quickly than nationalist is related to their unlimited goals: For them, victory is not possible in any real sense. Utopian outcomes are generally unattainable, which is an unfortunate reality that often (eventually) becomes painfully apparent to those group members that manage to evade capture. Acceptance of that reality, sometimes accompanied by the mellowing effects of aging, causes many militants to abandon the struggle. In one of the more remarkable examples, William Ayers, one of the founding members of the Weathermen, abandoned his pursuit of a workers’ paradise and stopped punishing capitalist society long ago, and is currently a Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Once the irrational foundation of their strategic logic becomes undeniable even to the most fanatically committed, these groups tend to give up the struggle. Catharsis simply cannot be long sustained.

⁷³ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 216–217; Lawrence Wright, “The Rebellion Within: An Al Qaeda Mastermind Questions Terrorism,” *New Yorker*, 2 June 2008, 37–53.

⁷⁴ For a discussion of al Qaeda’s perceptions of how their struggle is progressing, see Mark W. Stout, Jessica M. Huckabey, John R. Schindler, and Jim Lacey, *The Terrorist Perspectives Project: Strategic and Operational Views of Al Qaida and Associated Movements* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008).

⁷⁵ Rapoport, “The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism,” 48.

THE FOUR-STAGE LIFE CYCLE OF IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS

Ideological groups live their short lives across four identifiable stages, which are similar across eras and movements. In the first stage of this life cycle, groups form and grow in power underneath society's radar screen. Charismatic leaders recruit small bands of impressionable, angry young people with semi-plausible narratives of injustice, repression, and the need for vengeance. Plotting occurs relatively unhindered by law enforcement, which is often not even aware of the group's existence. The second stage begins when ideological groups announce their existence through acts of violence. They bring law enforcement attention upon themselves, and are forced underground, as their anticipated revolutions inevitably fail to materialize. Their actions usually have the opposite of their intended effect, repulsing rather than inspiring vast majorities in targeted populations. The leaders of individual groups are usually caught in relatively short order by a society galvanized to bring them to justice. In the penultimate stage, remnants of ideological groups fight on, in a weakened, decentralized form, robbed of their inspirational and tactical leadership. At the point when the banner of the group is being carried on by disconnected individuals ("lone wolves") rather than from a coherent center, the final stage—group death—is not far off.

Even the largest and strongest ideological groups follow these stages. The Shining Path, which was by far the biggest group of the Cold War left-wing terrorist movement, was founded in Peru by a charismatic young university professor, Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, in the 1970s. The group coalesced and grew under his leadership over the course of the decade, under the radar screen of law enforcement, and began perpetrating acts of violence in 1980. It remained in this second stage far longer than most other ideological groups, since Guzmán was not captured until 1992. After his arrest, however, group decline shortly followed. No successor rose to take his place, since the majority of Peruvians were predictably alienated, not inspired, by Shining Path violence.⁷⁶ Its rate of killing, which had been thousands annually prior to Guzmán's capture, dropped to 516 people in 1993, 150 in 1994, and declined further in 1995 and 1996. Today the memory of the group is kept alive in a few isolated pockets, but it poses no great threat to society.⁷⁷ The European left-wing groups followed a similar path.

Religious terrorists groups go through similar stages. Under Shoko Asahara's charismatic leadership, the Aum Shinrikyo was able to amass a complex infrastructure and weapons program under the nose of the Japanese government. Its sarin gas attack on 20 March 1995 announced its existence to the world, and advanced the Aum into a brief second stage. Much to their utter

⁷⁶ David Scott Palmer, "The Revolutionary Terrorism of Peru's Shining Path" in Martha Crenshaw, ed., *Terrorism in Context*, 249–305.

⁷⁷ Laqueur, *The New Terrorism*, 187.

surprise, no doubt, their desired outcome—a third world war that would leave them in charge of civilization somehow—did not come to pass. Instead, the Japanese people were horrified, the leaders of the Aum were arrested, and its infrastructure devastated. The group exists today in disconnected bands, largely in Russia, where it is monitored closely and presumably poses no further danger. Their rise and fall was rapid and dramatic, but not necessarily atypical.

Broader ideological terrorist movements live somewhat longer than any individual group, but they too are mortal. Movements wax and wane, usually within a fairly short time frame, as their constituent groups travel through their short life cycles. The inspirational power of propaganda of the deed eventually deteriorates to the point that no new groups follow. The various organizations that constituted the Anarchist movement followed a life cycle, and the movement peaked twice before finally ending with the outbreak of the First World War. The left-wing terrorist movement had all but petered out prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since the far-right-wing groups in the United States have been virtually silent since Oklahoma City, it is probably safe to say that the movement, too, has passed its peak.

Will the Islamist movement follow a similar path toward oblivion? Could religion provide a more permanent inspiration in the way that nationalism inspires the grievances of multiple generations of terrorists? If Islam itself could be blamed for the Islamist terrorists, then indeed there would be reason for concern. However, al Qaeda and its sister groups are no more Islamic than Timothy McVeigh was Christian. Their violence is not inspired by a permanent, established religion, but by a perversion of faith, one defined by fanatical group leaders. None of the world's major religions command their followers to kill in large numbers; without leadership, religious people (even fundamentalists) do not take steps in direct opposition to doctrine.

The final stage before the death of ideological groups is decentralization, where disconnected individuals attempt to carry the banner for a dying group. This stage is sometimes misportrayed as an especially dangerous one, rather than as the final functional period in their life cycles. Neither Anarchism nor the various right-wing Christian Identity militias in the United States had a bin Laden-esque leader unifying the groups for the last few years of their existence, for instance, but they remained dangerous. Both movements tried to spin their downturns by arguing that decentralization was in fact a strength, since “lone-wolf-style” actors can be quite hard to detect. Indeed, individual anarchists succeeded in assassinating many heads of state, and McVeigh was able to act virtually alone. The Christian Identity literature encourages its followers to practice “leaderless resistance” to their hated enemies, a strategy that they claim will make the movement far more effective.⁷⁸ More than one analyst worries that al Qaeda is similarly far more dangerous now, since it

⁷⁸ Lifton, *Destroying the World in Order to Save It*, 339.

seems to be moving toward a similar amorphous, uncontrollable leaderlessness that will long outlive bin Laden.⁷⁹

Fortunately, there is ample reason to believe that decentralization makes movements less dangerous, not more.⁸⁰ “Leaderless resistance” is a strategy of weakness, not strength; it is turned to out of desperation and wishful thinking, not as part of a coherent strategic plan. As Jeffrey Kaplan has noted, the concept emerged in the late 1980s “as a last gasp of defiance by the American radical right which was then at the nadir of its already bleak fortunes.”⁸¹ Bravado aside, no commander hopes that his forces will be scattered and disconnected. Individuals cannot possibly be as effective as groups, even if they are occasionally able to amass large amounts of fertilizer. And since not many people will become lone wolves on their own—people must be led to terrorize—their number invariably diminishes over time. Bin Laden’s assurance that “1,000 martyrs” will follow his death is more hope than strategy, a sign of weakness rather than strength.

The Islamist terrorist movement will likely move into a decentralized, lone-wolf phase once the leaders of al Qaeda are removed. It will be capable of committing sporadic acts of violence but not of sustaining campaigns such as were possible in its heyday prior to September 11. The splinter groups and disconnected individuals will not have access to the resources or coordination that al Qaeda provided, making successful mass casualty attacks less likely. Decentralization, as always, represents a victory for law enforcement, the beginning of the end rather than of a new and more-dangerous phase.⁸² As Audrey Kurth Cronin wrote in an otherwise skeptical paper, “There is a difference between sporadic and local acts of terrorism by religious extremists and the coordinated growth of Al Qaida, with its signature of meticulous planning, mass casualties, and global reach.”⁸³ Terrorism will always be part of the background noise of contemporary life, but it need not become the focus, or perhaps the obsession, of industrialized nations.

Political Islam will long outlive the Islamist terrorist movement. Tiny minorities of fundamentalists exist in every religion, almost all of whom manage to worship and live at peace within societies that they consider decadent and

⁷⁹ Stern, “The Protean Enemy,” 34; Cronin, “How Al Qaida Ends.”

⁸⁰ See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

⁸¹ Jeffrey Kaplan, “Leaderless Resistance,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (Autumn 1997): 80.

⁸² Bruce Hoffman worries that bin Laden has likely planned for his own death and formulated a succession plan, in “Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism, and Future Potentialities: An Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26 (November 2003): 436–437. However, Hoffman’s claim that bin Laden openly welcomes martyrdom flies in the face of post-September 11 experience. Bin Laden went deep into hiding immediately after the terrorist attacks and has not emerged since. People who never sleep in the same area twice are not eager to become martyrs. Osama’s repeated longings for martyrdom are likely more recruiting slogans than reflections of his true intentions.

⁸³ Cronin, “How Al Qaida Ends,” 7.

corrupt. Fundamentalist Islam has existed for centuries and always will, but it need not spin off violence, just as fundamentalist Christianity can surely survive just fine without terrorism.

There are precious few examples of ideological terrorist groups or movements, irrespective of the origin of their inspiration, persisting as long as nationalist groups. If today's Islamist groups do indeed prove to be exceptions, they will be virtually without precedent. This historical pattern ought to provide some comfort to those who currently seem to feel al Qaeda's warm breath on their neck virtually everywhere they go. It is only a matter of time before the group—and the broader movement to which it belongs—loses steam and dies. Its passing will be silent, unmarked by tickertape or tolling bells. For the global north, victory will be marked not by parades, but by sustained silence.

COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

Clearly targeted societies cannot afford to wait passively for the inevitable demise of terrorist groups—the primary goal of the state must always be to hasten that demise. Good counterterrorism strategists would be wise to take this typology into account, since not all tactics at their disposal have proven to be effective against both types of groups. Tailoring strategy to match group type maximizes the chance of success.

Generally speaking, societies challenged by nationalist terrorists have more options from which to choose. Since nationalist groups are essentially rational actors, negotiation can often prove to be more effective and less costly than prolonged counterterrorism. Political solutions, though they may constitute a de facto reward for terrorist acts and a defeat for the government, sometimes constitute the only route to lasting stability. Co-optation into the political process can transform the means by which nationalist groups pursue their goals. The British made great advances against the IRA over the years, but it was the incorporation of Sinn Fein into Irish politics that finally brought the Troubles to an end. Optimists might therefore hold hope that Hamas's recent electoral success may mark the beginning of their adoption of political, rather than merely military, tactics.⁸⁴

Political accommodation with ideological groups, on the other hand, is a non-starter, since existential struggles do not lend themselves easily to negotiated solutions. Other methods must be employed.

Targeting Terrorist Leaders: The "Kingpin Strategy"

The expected utility of a "kingpin strategy," one which places primary (and secondary, and tertiary) counterterrorism focus on group leadership, is completely

⁸⁴ Michael Herzog, "Can Hamas Be Tamed?" *Foreign Affairs* 85 (March–April 2006): 83–94.

dependent upon group category.⁸⁵ Nationalist terrorists suffer when their leaders are captured, of course, but it rarely proves fatal. The ANC, for example, was able to persevere throughout Nelson Mandela's long imprisonment. Although a lull in PKK violence followed the arrest of its leader and founder, Abdullah Öcalan, by 2004, the group had taken up arms again, and has been implicated in hundreds of attacks across Turkey since the establishment of a quasi-independent Kurdistan in Iraq. No doubt the Israelis were disappointed to find that their assassination of the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, and his successor in early 2004 had no lasting effect on the strength of the organization.⁸⁶ Likewise, Indian authorities killed the founder of modern Sikh terrorism, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, in 1984, but the nationalist violence did not begin to wane until a variety of political accommodations were made with the Sikhs in 1991.⁸⁷ The kingpin strategy had virtually no effect.

By contrast, although decapitated ideological groups can sputter on for a while in the third stage of their life cycle following the loss of their leaders, their level of violence invariably drops and soon reaches nearly zero, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the leader usually plays a far more important role in the formation and development of such groups. Ideas, no matter how infectious, must start somewhere. Nationalist group motivation can derive from relative deprivation, whether real or merely perceived; for ideological groups, the motivation to kill must come first from the mind of an individual. Sometimes these groups are little more than an extension of the leader or leaders, such as the Manson and Baader-Meinhof Gangs, the Aum, the Shining Path, and al Qaeda. The loss of confidence and direction upon the arrest or death of the leader can prove quite shattering to followers, since such groups often develop an almost cultish belief in the leader's inherent wisdom and near invulnerability. When that leadership is removed, the entire terrorist venture can be thrown into existential crisis.

The second reason that ideological groups rarely survive the removal of their leadership is more practical. Successor generations of ideological terrorist leaders are invariably less adept at motivating and organizing members, and often prove unable to hold groups together. Shadowy ideological groups can survive a long time as long as their mystical, often guru-like leadership maintains cohesion and inspires action.⁸⁸ The charisma, intelligence, and motivational skills of the original group leader are never replicated in the successors, who, after all, usually joined the group as followers of the guru. They rarely share his (and leaders are invariable male) motivational, tactical, and operational genius.

⁸⁵ The term is used by Michael Kenney, "From Pablo to Osama: Counter-terrorism Lessons from the War on Drugs," *Survival* 45 (Autumn 2003): 187–206.

⁸⁶ Daniel Byman, "Do Targeted Killings Work?" *Foreign Affairs* 85 (March–April 2006): 95–111.

⁸⁷ Paul Wallace, "Political Violence and Terrorism in India: The Crisis of Identity" in Crenshaw, ed., *Terrorism in Context*, 352–409.

⁸⁸ Lifton refers to the devotion to the leader "guruism." Lifton, *Destroying the World in Order to Save It*, 8.

Finally, leaders are also the best recruiters that ideological groups have. They often come to personify the cause, which is not always obvious to the public at large. For nationalist groups, the cause is always bigger than any individual leader; for ideological groups, the two are almost synonymous. Ideological leaders always prove to be better recruiters as breathers rather than as martyrs. When robbed of the face on their recruiting poster, membership in ideological groups rapidly dwindles.

The examples are legion. While the Aum Shinrikyo religion may persist in some minor forms today, the arrest of Asahara effectively spelled the end of its terrorist arm. Similar fates befell leftist groups like the Shining Path and the Baader-Meinhof Gang, the latter of which soon splintered and collapsed when its eponymous leaders were arrested and committed suicide in jail.⁸⁹ November 17 was able to operate for decades until its leadership was arrested in 2002. Constituent groups of the far-right terrorist movement in the United States, such as "The Order" and the Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord, also collapsed upon the arrest of their leaders.⁹⁰ Anarchist groups proved similarly incapable of surviving the removal of their leadership, from the earliest of the movement (which included the People's Revenge, which disintegrated when Sergei Nechaev was sent to Siberia) to the later (The People's Will virtually disappeared after a series of arrests and show trials, one of which led to the execution of Vladimir Lenin's older brother).⁹¹

Ideological groups survive long periods of time only if their leaders remain free to inspire, plan, and direct activity. The persistence of the LRA is due primarily to fact that the charismatic Josef Kony remains at large. Likewise, al Qaeda is not likely to go away as long as bin Laden and al Zawahiri are alive, directing (or at least inspiring) their flock. All other groups in the broader Islamist terrorist movement have thus far demonstrated a broad similarity across all stages of the life cycle to their ideological predecessors, and the reliance on individual leaders is no exception. The Egyptian Islamic Jihad fell on hard times after its leader, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, was imprisoned in the United States and the group's other senior leaders were killed or forced into exile.⁹² The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has never recovered from the death of its leader, who fought under the *nom de guerre* Juma Namangani, in Afghanistan in late 2001.⁹³ Official U.S. government sources have with good

⁸⁹ Although fragments of the Baader-Meinhof Gang fought on under a new name (the Red Army Faction) until the 1990s, its violent activities never approached the peak of the mid-1970s.

⁹⁰ Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*.

⁹¹ Avraham Yarmolinsky, *Road to Revolution: A Century of Russian Radicalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), esp. chap. 12.

⁹² Stern, "The Protean Enemy," 28.

⁹³ Russian and Uzbek sources claim that elements of the IMU formed the Islamic Movement of Turkestan sometime in 2002. Tashkent also maintains that the IMU was behind the incidents at Andijan in May 2005, when militants stormed a jail where political prisoners were being held, leading to a bloody

reason predicted the same outcome for al Qaeda once its leaders are brought to justice.⁹⁴

While the point at which al Qaeda loses its founding fathers will likely mark the beginning of the end of the organization, Islamism as a movement will continue to possess the ability to carry out attacks in many countries. However, since movements are nothing more than a collection of individual groups, as those groups go, so goes the movement. Al Qaeda's demise will be a severe blow to the ideological terrorists that survive, and an indication that their days are numbered as well. The death or capture of bin Laden would not lead to an immediate halt to Islamist violence, but it would signal the beginning of the end of its most dangerous group.

Democratic Transformation

If there is a guiding principle behind the so-called War on Terror, it is that democracy is the long-term solution to the problem, since it can provide a peaceful, alternate outlet for political grievances. The 2006 *National Security Strategy* makes this point boldly, and repeatedly: "Democracy is the long-term solution to the transnational terrorism of today."⁹⁵ However, history offers few examples of instances where democracy brought an end to either nationalist or ideological terrorism. ETA violence did not abate when Spain moved from Franco's dictatorship to democracy in the late 1970s. Israel's democratic status has obviously not shielded it from terrorist attack, nor have Palestinian groups been reined in by their democratically elected government. And although the Shining Path was formed in the late 1960s, it did not engage in violence until Peru had made the transition to democracy in the early 1980s.

Overall, scholars have been unable to detect any relationship between regime type and presence of terrorism.⁹⁶ If anything, the evidence suggests that certain structural features common to democracies may make them more attractive incubators and targets for terrorists.⁹⁷ The very freedom of speech, religion, and assembly that are at the heart of the optimism of the Bush administration can allow terrorist groups to form, organize, and expand. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the most progressive, tolerant societies are often the home of some

stand-off in a cinema in the Fergana Valley city. Since no group has claimed responsibility for the action, it is not clear at this point if indeed the IMU was involved. For perhaps the best discussion of the incident, see Shirin Akiner, "Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment," *Silk Road Paper* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute), July 2005.

⁹⁴ The April 2006 National Intelligence Estimate in particular makes this prediction; see DeYoung and Pincus, "Sobering Conclusions on Why Jihad Has Spread."

⁹⁵ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, March 2006), 11.

⁹⁶ F. Gregory Gause, "Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?" *Foreign Affairs* 84 (September–October 2005): 62–76; and Pape, *Dying to Win*, 38–60.

⁹⁷ Kydd and Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," 80.

of the worst terrorists: Counterterrorist law enforcement is usually more successful when unrestrained by concerns for basic human rights. The Muslim Brotherhood had far more problems operating in Hosni Mubarak's Egypt than it did in Brooklyn, for example. London and Madrid have recently experienced more terrorist attacks than Damascus or Beijing. Political refugees of all stripes, including the occasional terrorist, have traditionally found homes in liberal European capitals. The tolerance in which democrats take pride can prove to be an Achilles heel in the fight against terrorists.

None of this is to say that freedom has to be sacrificed for security, of course, just that liberalism carries risks with which its proponents must deal. Presumably, few would argue that those risks outweigh the benefits.

Theoretically, democracies might prove to be more open to compromise with nationalist groups. Surely the fact that both Ireland and Great Britain are democratic helped ease the transition of the IRA to quasi-respectability. While the connection is tenuous at best, there is at least reason to hope that a transition to democracy will undercut some of the support for nationalist terrorism. There is absolutely no reason to believe, however, that ideological groups are affected by the regime type of their target. Since the demands of such groups are often zero-sum non-starters, political mollification, even in a democracy, is usually impossible. The unrestrained tactics of ideological terrorists ensures that they will have a difficult time winning support among the general public, even in dictatorial states where the government is deeply unpopular. The Soviet Union, after all, was not the target of a great deal of ideological terrorism.

Overall, there is simply no reason to believe that democracy would help alleviate the grievances that give rise to Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. After all, al Qaeda has proven to be able to repulse a large majority of Muslims on its own. From a counterterrorism perspective, therefore, the promotion of democracy in the hope of minimizing the appeal of extremism is a waste of time and resources on a job that has already been largely accomplished.

CONCLUSION

Not all terrorism is created equal; neither is all terrorism unique. This "long war" is destined to be an expensive failure if the West approaches terrorism as if it springs from a common source, with identifiable motivations, unified tactics, and unpredictable actors. In response to the attacks on September 11, the United States should have poured all its energy into tracking down and eliminating the al Qaeda leadership. The movement, which never had legitimacy anywhere, would have soon petered out. Instead, Washington has chosen to embark on a war against a host of enemies, expanding the circle of terrorists to include any group, individual, or nation that disagrees with its view of the future.

Two opinions dominate the public debate about terrorism in the United States: Some analysts believe that the country is underreacting to the threat

posed by groups like al Qaeda, and therefore the people must be continually reminded of the mortal peril they are all in; others feel that the country is over-reacting, and that the real danger is posed by our own responses to the threat.⁹⁸ History suggests that the latter group is correct. At the very least, recognition of the transitory nature of ideological terrorist groups ought to provide some comfort to our terrorized society. All of al Qaeda's predecessors isolated themselves through their actions, and quickly wilted once their leadership was killed or captured. Although nobody thought to declare war on terrorism in the 1890s or 1970s, the ideological movements that were the scourges of their eras died out in due course.

Not only are bin Laden and al Zawahiri the Clausewitzian "center of gravity" for al Qaeda, but their death or capture would present Washington with an opportunity, one that will probably not be repeated. After the removal of al Qaeda's senior leadership, the United States would be able to announce that the most dangerous phase of its war on terror had been brought to a conclusion. Such a proclamation would of course carry significant political risks, and if done sloppily, could become a point of mockery akin to President Bush's premature declaration of "mission accomplished" in Iraq. But the potential benefits for society would far outweigh those costs, since without such a declaration, the war on terror might never end. Bin Laden's death will present the West with its greatest (and perhaps only) opportunity to call an end to this mislabeled and misguided war, and begin to bring a sense of proportion to the relatively low level of threat to the national security posed by today's propagandists of the deed.*

⁹⁸ For a review of this debate, see John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

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