Decision Making of Leaders of Terrorist Organizations:

Bin Laden, Nasrallah, Mashal

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Decision Making

- How do leaders of terrorist organizations make decisions?
- What factors influence their decisions?
- Which decision rule do they use?
- What is their “decision code”? 
The Decision Making Project at the IDC

The “decision making of the adversary” project at the IDC-Herzliya attempts to uncover the “decision code” of leaders of terrorist organizations: Bin Laden, Nasrallah, and the Hamas leadership (Haniya and Mashal)

The project is in cooperation with Yale University, Claudio Yair Samban of Tel Aviv University and J. Tyson Chatagnier of Texas A&M University
Uncovering the “Decision Code” of Leaders

- Analyze a large number of decisions of leaders of terrorist organizations
- “Reverse engineer” each decision
- Identify the pattern of decision making
- If one applies this on a large number of decisions, s/he may uncover the “Decision DNA” of leaders – in this case leaders of terrorist organizations
Applied Decision Analysis

- Identify the set of alternatives
- Identify the set of dimensions that may influence the decision
- Assign weights to each dimension
- Assign ratings to implications of each alternative
- Input the above into the Decision Mind software which automatically generates the decision matrix
Case Studies

The study analyzed 20 decisions of Nasrallah, the Hamas leadership and Bin Laden
Nasrallah’s Decision Code

Nasrallah’s decision code consists of two stages:
- Nasrallah eliminates any alternative which threatens Hezbollah's political survival/standing in Lebanese public opinion and domestic Lebanese politics.
- At the second stage of the decision process, Nasrallah maximizes utility on a subset of alternatives that “survived” the first stage of the decision process.
Nasrallah’s Decision Code (cont’d)

- From the point of view of Nasrallah, threatening Hezbollah’s standing in the domestic political arena is crossing a “red line”
- Any alternative that is unacceptable on this dimension, does not make “the short list” of acceptable alternatives
- From the point of view of Nasrallah, Hezbollah is first and foremost a political entity with political agenda, interests and goals
- Hezbollah uses terrorism to promote its political goals in the internal political area in Lebanon and not a terrorist organization which also has a political party
Nasrallah (cont’d)

If we apply this two-stage decision rule to Nasrallah’s decisions, we can explain, and even predict his decisions better than using other theories and methods.

The model can help forecast periods with higher likelihood that Hezbollah will attack Israel, versus times where it engages in the domestic political arena in Lebanon.
Mashal’s Decision Code

- A veto player who rejects virtually all agreements
- Influenced mainly by the political-dimension
- Should Mashal would have approved every agreement, he would not have been “counted”
- To gain power, he vetoes a series of decisions
- Beyond a certain point, however, once his policies and decisions were to be perceived as damaging Palestinians (especially Hamas’ constituency), he approved a few decisions, but then denies saying them
Haniya’s decision code

- Influenced primarily by the political-organizational dimension (his relations with Mashal and with the military wing of Hamas)
- Haniya’s decisions are constrained by the fact that he can not afford to accept alternatives which will damage his position in the Hamas organization
- The dilemma between the political-organizational dimension and the relationship with the military wing of Hamas leads him to reject compromise offers
- Mashal is the only decision maker in Hamas who can decide on a deal with Israel or Fatah
Factors influencing Bin Laden’s Decisions (in rank order)

- Political-organizational
- Political-public
- Religious
- Strategic
- Military
Bin Laden’s “Decision Code”

- Bin Laden is more of a self-interested player than an organizational player (despite his rhetoric to the contrary)
- Bin Laden’s decision rule is not always linear.
- Al-Qaeda is trying to launch attacks to demonstrate its relevance and existence
- Bin Laden’s decision code is vulnerable when a competing leader emerges. He then sacrifices somewhat the benefit to the organization in favor of his political survival.
Comparing Decisions of Leaders of Terrorist Organizations

- Leaders are risk-averse politically
- Consistent with Poliheuristic theory, they typically reject alternatives which are unacceptable on key political dimensions
- The organizational politics and public opinion dimensions serve as a cognitive “short cuts” in the decision making process of leaders of terrorist organizations
The Effect of Organizational Structure on Pattern of Decision Making

- The structure of the organization affects the degree of influence of the political-organizational dimension.
- Terrorist organizations in their early years, compete for market share – they seek public support for their acts.
- Leaders of organizations which are more institutionalized, with a more solid standing in the public, are affected by the political-organizational dimension (the internal political competition in the organization).
Conclusions

In the roughly 20 decisions that our team has studied, the military dimension was not the critical dimension in the decision calculus of leaders.
Conclusions (cont’d)

- A terror organization is first and foremost a political entity, with political goals, agendas and interests.
- Its leader is a *political* player.
- Leaders of terrorist organizations typically make decisions in a systematic way—their pattern of decision making and Decision DNA can be detected and uncovered.
A detailed evaluation of alternatives takes place only on the sub-set of alternatives that do not threaten the political interests of the leader. For example, Nasrallah does not consider disarming Hezbollah from its power or a total war against Israel (unless being attacked by Israel). He is in the domain of gains and would not risk diminishing his accomplishments.
The method presented in this lecture, Applied Decision Analysis is a unified and systematic methodology for assessing decisions of leaders of adversaries. It allows the unpacking of the cognitive and not only rational aspects of decision making. It allows for uncovering non-trivial motives of leaders.