Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century

One of the critical questions in the study of counter-terrorism is the methods by which the enemy operates. In the Modus Operandi panel, panels grappled with the difficult question of whether or not terrorism was an individual or collective challenge.

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Last year, I had the unique opportunity to attend the Anti-Defamation League’s Advanced Training School in Washington, DC, which is a three-day workshop designed for senior law enforcement professionals assigned to intelligence, counter-terrorism and homeland security units across the United States. One of the key speakers of the conference was Marc Sageman, counter-terrorism expert and author of Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century. In his analytical book, Sageman "suggests that radicalization is a collective rather than an individual process in which friendship and kinship are key components." This issue, since its inception, has sparked many heated debates among leading experts in the counter-terrorism field. Eight years after the 9/11 attacks, the main question still remains; what is the state of Al Qaeda today? Sageman suggests that Osama Bin Laden does not exercise the same power he did in 9/11; he is merely an inspiration for young extremists who will, once radicalized, act with their own ambitions to pursue Jihad. On the contrary, counter-terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman has argued that Al Qaeda has re-emerged and is actively directing terrorist organizations.

On September 9, the ICT conference commenced with a popular workshop based on this controversial subject, entitled “Leaderless Jihad or Organized Scheme? - Global Jihad Structure and Modus Operandi.” Taken from Sageman's terminology, the three-hour panel discussed the various components as to how a Jihad network evolves and thrives. In light of these opinions, the panel's goal was to discuss the views and estimations regarding the concepts of Leaderless Jihad. Led by Dr. Col. (Res.) Shaul Shay, Head of Security Policy Division, National Security Council, the panel featured Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Dr. Ariel Merari from the Department of Psychology at Tel Aviv University, Dr. Col. (Ret.) Eitan Azani, Deputy Director of the ICT, Col. Behram A. Sahukar, Research Fellow of the United Service Institution in India and Professor Gabriel Weimann from the Department of Communications at the University of Haifa.

Dr. Rohan Gunaratna gave an in-depth presentation on various issues, which included terrorist operational and support networks, maritime terrorist methods, skills and procedures, suicide terrorism and violence in the Asia-Pacific. Gunaratna specifically focused on Al Qaeda and highlighted his experiences in
interviewing over 200 Al Qaeda members. Gunaratna gave an overview of Al Qaeda ideology and methods of operations, as he combined his academic knowledge with his field experience. Gunaratna gave insight into terrorism’s role in Southeast Asia, with specific attention to groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf.

Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Dr. Col. (Ret.) Eitan Azani spoke about the roots of the phenomenon, the organizational processes and the manner in which Global Jihadi organizations adapt to the strategies used against them. In the past eight years, a global campaign led by the United States has attempted to influence and affect Global Jihad strategy. The true question remains: Has Al Qaeda leadership been hierarchally threatened? Azani stated that Al Qaeda is not one entity, but an overall framework, complete with hierarchal relationships, aimed at building Islamic caliphates. In the past eight years, since a global campaign has been waged, organizations have had to adapt and are in the process of rehabilitation, which include attempts and measures in fundraising, media objectives, connections between Jihad organization, security, command and control, factors that all affect the modus operandi.

Dr. Ariel Merari has studied political terrorism for more than 30 years and established Israel’s Hostage Negotiations and Crisis Management Unit, which he oversaw for over 20 years. Merari discussed the individual components of terrorism and noted that when it comes to suicide bombers, there is a total absence of fear within the individual. As a student of Merari’s, it was interesting to hear his contrasting views, compared to the other speakers, on the individual, rational choice of terrorists. He discussed the psychological factors that compel a terrorist to commit an act, and the influences from the community and group dynamics to the suicide bomber’s desire to be liberated. Merari discussed the intense job the organization upholds, to get the terrorist to the point, the point of no return, from citizen to martyr.

Col. Behram A. Sahukar

As an expert on Islamist terrorism, specifically concerning its impact on the Middle East and Southern Asia, Col. Behram A. Sahukar spoke about the 60-hour long November 2008 attacks by Islamic terrorists who struck against high-profile targets in Mumbai, India. Sahukar lectured about India’s close relationship with Israel, which is seen
by Islamic militants as a Western-alliance against Islam. Sahukar’s presentation keyed in on the attack at the Chabad house, commonly known as the Nariman house. Sahukar examined the attack’s linkage to global jihad and assessed the impact on the India-Israel tactical relationship against Islamic terrorism.

Professor Gabriel Weimann, whose interests cover the study of media effects, political campaigns, persuasion and influence, media and public opinion, modern terrorism and the mass media, gave a detailed presentation on the overall expansion of terrorist organizations using mass communication. Giving detailed examples, he discussed how terrorist organizations are taking mainstream media outlets and conveying their messages to spark interest in individuals all over the world, in an effort to gain support and recruit members for the struggle.

All five panelists gave differing opinions, which displayed the multifaceted and complex area of terrorist organizational structure and modus operandi. In all, there does not exist a sole influence, but many, which compel individuals to become terrorists. These factors can be individual, familiar, community-based, organizational, sociological, and/or environmental. As the debates continue to prevail, the panel showed the various approaches to take in order to view and access how an organization comes into existence and operates. It showed that, although there are many factors that help build these terror networks, it is through the breakdown of ideology of the individuals whom form the organizations and networks that will give light to the security of our future.