

Document created: 24 June 04

## Destroying Terrorist Cells

Capt Jason Belcher, USAF

**\*A special thank you to Dr. Stephen Sloan for his assistance.**

On October 16, 2003 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld posed the following question in a now famous memorandum: "Does the US need to fashion a broad, integrated plan to stop the next generation of terrorists?" Mr. Secretary, the answer is most definitely yes. The logical follow-up question is harder to answer: what, exactly, would or could such a plan look like? From an operational level, one important aspect of the answer would involve formulating a specific plan to disrupt and destroy terrorist cells. Many statistics have been given on the seizure of terrorist financial assets, the global arrest of terrorist members, and the elimination of terrorist regimes such as Afghanistan. (1) Certainly these are true indicators of progress that has been made in the war on terrorism. But when it comes to the specific destruction of terrorist cells, most political discussions have conveniently omitted the subject.

My purpose here is to explain why more attention needs to be focused on destroying terrorist cells and how that can be accomplished. In a broad sense, there are two primary ways to destroy terrorist cells: one is to eliminate existing cells, and the other is to prevent future cells from being created. Each of these objectives requires a specifically tailored strategy. To understand what these strategies should be, it will first be necessary to examine what terrorist cells are and why they are significant.

Terrorist cells are frequently referenced but much less often defined. The concept of the terrorist cell may be mostly western, but it is based on a Middle-Eastern model dating back to the early 1920s. During that time in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood gained prominence as a leader in the fight against European colonialism. As an organization the Muslim Brothers divided itself into *an quads*, which is Arabic for a cluster of grapes. The idea was that if you destroy a single grape, the others will not only survive but will be capable of carrying out the group's mission. Furthermore, only a single unit need survive, because all contain the seeds necessary for propagation; in theory a single unit could in time reconstitute the entire organization. The underlying principle here is that if you destroy 9 out of 10 existing cells, you've failed to eliminate the group. Modern terrorist *an quads*, or cells, are similar to the Muslim Brothers model.

"The Cell" (2) defines a terrorist cell as a group of 4-12 individuals working together for the purpose of either supporting or carrying out acts of violence against a target or populace. Just how many cells there are, or where they are located, no one is sure. But one thing that is certain is that cells are a vital component of terrorist organizations. There are many terrorist groups

worldwide, but our focus here is on al-Qaeda, and therefore the scope of the following analysis will be restricted for the most part to that organization.

Cells are mobile, autonomous, and flexible in the range of targets or objectives in which they may engage. The 19 hijackers from September 11<sup>th</sup> were an example of one al-Qaeda cell, though operationally they divided even further into four groups, each one assigned a specific airliner. There are different types of cells, most notably operational and support. Operational cells are the pointed ends of the spear; they are comprised of the individuals who will actually conduct attacks or suicide missions. Operational cells carried out the attack on the U.S.S. Cole, the bombings of the American embassies in Africa, and in the post-9/11 world the attacks on a housing complex outside of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Support cells are harder to quantify, but in a broad sense they facilitate the supply, training, and movement of operational cells. Operational cells will eventually carry out an attack thus revealing their existence if it wasn't previously known. Support cells will remain clandestine even after an attack, and will therefore be much harder to find. Overall the amount of information known about al-Qaeda cells is much smaller than what is unknown.

The exact number of each cell is unknown, and neither is it known how many cells there are or where they are located. If any information providing a detailed structural overview of al-Qaeda has been obtained by American law enforcement or intelligence agencies, it has not yet been declassified. It is also unclear exactly how cells are formed, and how decisions are made about who will or will not be included in the make up of new cells, or even at what rate new cells are being produced. Movement and training of al-Qaeda cells seems to be the result of a sophisticated agent handling system which has no central location but works from numerous countries around the world. (2. This lack of a definitive understanding about how cells operate makes formulating a strategy to defeat cells all the more difficult, but not impossible.

Nature already has a strategy to defeat destructive unwanted cells. The human body has several large, powerful muscle groups, such as the legs and back, which some power lifters use to pick up as much as 1,000 pounds from the ground. But all that power is useless against an invading organism a million times smaller. The human body primarily fights hostile cells with other cells. America should apply that lesson to the war on terrorism by the formation of counter terrorist cells. These counter terrorist cells would have the benefit of mobility, flexibility, while simultaneously having the capacity to draw on the enormous resources of the United States. What exactly they will be, and how they can be constructed and utilized depends on the mission at hand, but there are several possibilities to be discussed.

The first key is to know who the terrorists in question are. Construction of a centralized database between the FBI, CIA, NSC, ATF, and state and local law enforcement agencies to share information about potential terrorists and their activities has been discussed but not yet implemented. Access to such a database, once constructed, would be crucial for any potential counter-terrorism cell. Effectively this would constitute a global listing of enemy combatants classified as terrorists. The creation of this list would rely heavily on intelligence. But is important to make a distinction between an intelligence requirement and an intelligence need.

The problem with traditional intelligence is that it has to be collected, reported, analyzed, and only then, *maybe*, acted upon. Each one of these functions is not only performed by different people, but even different departments separated by administrative barriers. With traditional organizations like the CIA, this process may take days, weeks, or months. Counter-terrorist cell members could perform all of these functions cumulatively and even simultaneously. This is because they have a *need* for a certain amount of intelligence, but they should not have a *requirement* to send all of that intelligence through a bureaucracy to await instructions. In a small target-specific operation, there is no reason why an individual or a group cannot perform the necessary intelligence analysis functions as well or better than a large bureaucracy. We need to change the rules under which our operatives function. To defeat terrorist cells, counter-terrorist cells need equal or superior mobility, flexibility, and a significant degree of independent time-critical targeting response capability.

This is simply an unconventional extension of the Air Force's own doctrine of centralized control and decentralized execution. Counter-terrorist cells must be able to take action within hours or minutes upon receipt of information. An example of this type of technique has already been demonstrated in Iraq. Upon receipt of intel indicating the potential whereabouts of Saddam Hussein, American air assets put bombs on that target within an hour of notification. It worked because aircraft were assigned to loiter over an area, and when targets of opportunity appeared, they could then attack them quickly. The same theory can be applied towards terrorists.

Small teams of counter-terrorist cells could similarly loiter (on the ground) in an area of suspected terrorist presence and if a target is identified it could then be attacked. The on-site cell leader would approve the attack once he had the intelligence that a target had been identified. This information could come from a member of his cell, a member of a different cell, or from any number of other sources that may or may not lend themselves to easy predictability. This kind of autonomy is also not without risks. Mistakes are inevitable in any complex operation, but on the balance the potential for error is no greater than with traditional intelligence operations or past efforts to destroy terrorist organizations.

The high level of autonomy of counter-terrorist cells certainly makes for deniability. Additionally, the resources available to a small potentially isolated group could be no more than necessary to accomplish their mission simply by virtue of limited logistics. Moreover, the key to counterterrorist cells effectiveness is quality, not quantity. Small groups of highly trained operatives with specific objectives, clandestine movement, high mobility, and concentrated lethality would use terrorist's own strategies against them. Potential damage to non-targets would be much smaller than with conventional forces: A small group can't fire cruise missiles into the wrong building in front of the whole world. Their targets would not be structures, but people.

Vietnam provides the rationale for that decision. Hundreds of tons of bombs were dropped on North Vietnam, but straw huts were much cheaper than blockbuster bombs. The ease with which they could be replaced made them poor targets for conventional weapons. Terrorist's organizations present a similar problem. There is no central headquarters building with "Al-Qaeda" written on the front; and the only real hard targets terrorists offer are training camps, and these are not much more than a collection of tents. Destroying these camps with modern

munitions is bombing straw huts in Vietnam all over again. The brutal truth is that we are not after facilities here we are after people.

The fact is that most of our current military hardware was designed to either destroy other military hardware, industrial infrastructure, or to kill large numbers of enemy combatants clustered together. Terrorists operate in a way that denies all three of these possibilities. The only way conventional weapons can be employed against terrorist groups is in situation like Iraq or Afghanistan, where U.S. forces physically control the entire country. There the results of such use are debatable; massive explosions from tanks and attack aircraft can incite the populace against U.S. forces. Operations of this scale are enormously expensive in terms of blood and treasure. Even if we could for the sake of argument call the U.S. strategy in Iraq successful, al-Qaeda operates in many other countries. The reality is that America does not have enough domestic and international political capitol left to bankroll any more invasions until at least the situation in Iraq is favorably resolved. Al-Qaeda presumably knows this, and if even if they don't they aren't going to wait around find out.

We must therefore have an effective alternative to conventional weapons employment. Currently the United States has no widely applicable method or system specifically designed to destroy terrorist cells. The military isn't designed for it, law enforcement isn't designed for it, and intelligence agencies aren't designed for it either. Instead of creating new large-scale bureaucracies what we need to do is fundamentally change the rules of engagement for the assets we already have. Pulling some elements from the military, some from law enforcement, and others from intelligence gathering, we need to fashion a network of counter-terrorist cells to be deployed throughout the world.

Theses cells would only be as good as their respective members. But for the price of a single million-dollar cruise missile, (which are not always 100% effective yet we buy them by the dozens) we could field 10 cells of five members, and each cell could have a \$100,000 dollar budget. In the areas of the world where they would need to go, such as the Middle East and Asia, that kind of money would go a long way. According to the FBI, the 19 hijackers of 9/11 spent less than \$250,000 (3) in total over the course of several years. Using counter-terrorist cells would certainly be more cost-effective than conventional weapons. But one significant obstacle would be how to control or direct these cells.

The primary purpose of counter-terrorist cells would be to eliminate terrorists. While the idea of independent assassination squads would be certain to shock most Americans, it shouldn't. During the large-scale conventional wars of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of soldiers fought and killed each other on the battlefield. In the west this was regarded as lawful combat, and soldiers who killed the enemy under those conditions were rewarded, not prosecuted. Terrorists don't wear uniforms, but they are combatants and therefore legitimate targets nonetheless. (It is interesting to note that the presidential order banning assassinations still exists although it has been expanded)

In Word War II, an American GI who met a soldier from the Werhmacht on the battlefield took aim and tried to kill him, he didn't call the police to come and make an arrest. It would be equally futile to rely on arrest as the primary means of destroying the terrorist threat. As a lawful

combatant, it is legal to kill them even if they don't wear a uniform and do not reside on a traditional battlefield. The difference between this idea and the very tactics used by terrorists is that the notion that "anything goes" would not be applied. Counter-terrorist cells would only be authorized to kill a specific terrorist target or targets. Such instructions would preclude the use of explosive devices in public places, because that would result in civilian deaths. It would be similarly out of bounds to set fire to a hotel of 1,000 people because three terrorists were staying there.

Aside from the obvious moral opposition to such tactics, (which are quite valid) such methods are by definition imprecise. A bomb could level a building and kill 100 people, but what good is that if you missed the two who were your targets? Such large-scale activities draw too much attention, and moreover, as the United States learned in Iraq with one of the air strikes aimed at Saddam Hussein, the destruction was so complete it was impossible to say for sure whether or not the mission was successful. Only months later with his capture did America come to know for certain he had survived that strike. Smaller weapons of limited lethality would be the stock and trade; guns, knives, poisons, or whatever could be thought of to use that would only kill the target would be authorized. An intense selection process would provide already dedicated, trained, and loyal personnel who would abide by such restrictions. Even with their autonomy, the counter terrorist cell would still be under orders.

The key for a counter terrorist cell would be real time, first hand information. By first hand I mean that the data in question would need to be HUMINT gathered from any location that would be necessary. Determining the locations to be canvassed would be the job of each individual cell, according to their own findings, research, or even experience. They could also capitalize on the expertise of already existing intelligence agencies. For example, a counter-terrorist cell consisting of four members could disperse across the globe but still keep in touch electronically. From morning to a days end one member could be in Singapore, one in Africa, another in Europe, and the fourth in the United States, and all could keep in touch with each other by using the most elaborate espionage device ever conceived, the internet.

The sheer volume of traffic on the internet makes monitoring all of it impossible. That means it is impossible to track all potential terrorists using the net, but it also means that they cannot monitor all potential counter-terrorist activities either. Using Zulu time as a reference, the four members could create their own chat room at that given time no matter where they are, and then the next day create a new chat room, or they could simply email each other with near impunity to eavesdropping. If they varied servers and email addresses enough, the odds against detection would become practically nil. Even though there would still be some risk, it would be substantially lower than the risk of making a phone call. For such a group, there would be no headquarters, no office of record, and no hard facilities.

This makes their detection harder, plus it saves money. How much do the CIA and FBI spend each year on the rental, construction, maintenance, and defense of their huge office buildings? A small group would need no such infrastructure, and thus would be able to stretch a limited budget much farther. Close to 100% of their budget could be spent on operations, a level of efficiency that will never be within the reach of the CIA, the FBI, or the NSC as they are presently constructed.

Traditionally, American law enforcement and intelligence agencies have existed to provide analysis and advice to senior leaders. They take no direct action against threats; they merely pass along information to decision makers who can then make a determination about what needs to be done. This process is glacially slow at responding to terrorist threats. For example, it takes considerably longer for the entire CIA or NSA to go through their OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act) loop than it does for a terrorist cell to go through the same process.

One of the principal tenets of current U.S. military doctrine is that it is desirable to go through your OODA loop before your enemy goes through theirs. With the war on terrorism, the reverse is happening. The reason is simple; a group of eight people can act much faster than a multi-thousand-person bureaucracy. With counter-terrorist cells, the mission would not be restricted merely to analysis. These groups would need to have the flexibility to take action against a threat. Such actions would be formulated and completed in a fraction of the time it would take under the existing system, but again these actions, which could include eliminating targets, requires a substantial basis in intelligence.

Resources accessed through a centralized U.S. database on terrorists could not be continually accessed from remote terminals. While on the move counter-terrorist cell members would be cut off from this source of information. The solution would be for these members to conduct their research before initiating an operation, and to commit to memory the classified portions of data that cannot be transported. It would be less of a problem than it seems because the targets of counter-terrorist cells would be small, maybe even one individual. All of the cell members could be widely dispersed, but they could also all concentrate in one area or location. In effect they would move their entire operation close to the target or targets. These cell members (or single member) could live in a location for months or even years before activation. They could have multiple ops, or only a single operation to perform.

The devastation this could wreak against terrorist organizations should not be underestimated. As al-Qaeda demonstrated on 9/11, it is not necessary to physically destroy the entire United States to deal it a heavy blow. The lesson is you don't necessarily need a large-scale military-industrial complex to cause considerable destruction to your enemy. The same is true for terrorist networks and organizations. Picking off their operatives one or a dozen at a time would erode terrorist capabilities because they would have to direct more time and energy towards defense, thus returning the initiative to the United States. Or, if they chose not to make any extra defensive effort, then counter terrorist cells could continue to eliminate them bit-by-bit until terrorist organizations ceased to be effective. It's a win-win situation for America. But we should not limit ourselves to elimination operations only. Infiltration should not be overlooked as a valuable objective.

That al-Qaeda uses madrassas to recruit has been documented in several works, including "Inside Al-Qaeda" by Rohan Gunaratna in 2002. Madrassas are generally small, privately run religious schools scattered throughout the Middle East, though they are especially prominent in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the remote, mountainous border between those two countries. From these schools the Taliban and al-Qaeda have drawn many of its local recruits.

According to the BBC, most of these madrassas focus on teaching their students a very militant and severe brand of Islam. Students spend most of their time memorizing the Koran, though many of these same students may not even understand the meaning of the words, they simply progress by rote learning. No mention is made of science, history, or any other subject found in traditional schools. The focus is entirely upon Islam, in the hope that it can be learned and taught as it was 800 years ago. Teaching of militant Islam is not restricted to remote mountain madrassas in the Hindu-Kush, but it can also be found in downtown Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

One Saudi Arabian school instructs its students that they must kill Jews and unbelievers. (4) That is taken from a textbook, which is used to teach thirteen and fourteen year olds in Saudi Arabia. The fact that 15 of the 19 Sept 11<sup>th</sup> hijackers were Saudi has been dismissed by most Saudi government officials, and indeed by most Americans. President Bush has repeatedly said that Saudi Arabia is a friend of the United States, and in many ways it is. But the fact is that the Saudi school system is producing young people who are ideally suited for recruitment by al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, and 9/11 is direct proof of that.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has created a voluntary program whereby Madrassas can receive aid if they broaden their curriculum and register with the government, but the program is voluntary. The United States should use its considerable influence to persuade President Musharraf to present his Madrassas reform bill to the Pakistani parliament, with the intent of making it mandatory for all Madrassas to broaden their subjects of study and register with the government. But there is another level of engagement that has of yet been unexplored.

Madrassas presently do not register with anyone, nor does any authority license them. Since these are breeding grounds for al-Qaeda recruits, it would be in America's interest to see them closed down. But using military force is not an option, because of the tremendous backlash that would occur throughout the Muslim world. For that reason a different approach is needed. Instead of seeking their physical destruction, the United States should adopt a more pragmatic approach.

America could recruit Islamic scholars, preferably Arab-Americans, for potential infiltration of the Madrassas system. Ideally, such agents could become the head instructor of one or several Madrassas, making them in effect fake Madrassas. This would have many benefits to the United States. It would give insiders a chance to observe first hand how al-Qaeda recruiters work, and who they are. Ostensibly fake Madrassas students could also be inserted, and indeed this approach may be easier to accomplish. There are no pre-requisites to attending Madrassas. All that is needed is a professed intense faith of Islam, and that can be fabricated. Such students would have to be of Middle-Eastern descent, Arabic speaking, and familiar with the Koran, though it would be unwise to reveal that familiarity at the outset, since most Madrassas students are not yet supposed to have mastered the Koran.

Such an action would be a deep cover and long term infiltration. The objective would be to penetrate al-Qaeda, and eventually for the agent to be assigned to an operational or support cell. Once assigned, that operative would then need to report to his case officer (I say his because women are not allowed in Madrassas). The way to do this would be through the Internet. Even the vast resources of the NSC cannot track all electronic correspondence on the net, and there is

no reason to believe that al-Qaeda can either. What to do from there would depend on the exact situation, and there is no way to know what circumstances those would be. But the bottom line is that penetration of al-Qaeda is something the United States must achieve if it wants to win the war on terrorism.

One American has already achieved this feat. Jonathan Walker's story has been well publicized as a lonely teenager who left the United States, converted to Islam, and then sought to carry out jihad, or religious war, against America. He succeeded in joining terrorist factions, and he is not even of Arabic descent. If a teenager from California can gain the confidence of a terrorist organization, surely trained intelligence operatives can too. Terrorist organizations are not impenetrable, magical fortresses beyond the reach of western intelligence agencies.

Recruitment is certainly the weak point of terrorist defenses, and particularly with al-Qaeda. As Peter Bergen astutely observed in *Holy War Inc.*, al-Qaeda is like a corporation and bin-Laden is like a CEO. Bin Laden even said that his organization was vast and that he "did not know everyone." Bergen then observed that such a sentiment was "spoken like a true CEO." (5) The gates to al-Qaeda are called madrassas, and they don't check ID cards there. Infiltrating terrorist training organizations and eliminating terrorist personnel could bring about the wide-scale destruction of terrorist cells across the globe. It may be a project whose success is measured in terms of years, but if it is not undertaken its failure will be measured in terms of dead American citizens much, much sooner.

### WorksCited

1. State of the Union Address 2004,  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040120-7.html>
2. Miller, John; Stone, Michael; Mitchell, Chris (2002) *The Cell* Hyperion New York, New York p.53
3. "Investigators trace 9-11 funding to accounts in Pakistan" JOHN J. LUMPKIN, (Associated Press) San Francisco Chronicle, July 31, 2003
4. "Analysis Wahabism" *PBS Frontline: Saudi Time Bomb* Nov 5, 2001 [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)
5. Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc. Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* Free Press, November 2001

---

### Disclaimer

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author cultivated in the freedom of expression, academic environment of Air University. They do not reflect the official position of the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force or the Air University.

---