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SNAPSHOT

The Business Habits of Highly Effective Terrorists

Why Terror Masterminds Rely on Micro-Management

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A still of Ayman al-Zawahiri from a video distributed in 2011 (Courtesy Reuters)

In addition to being a ruthless jihadist, Ayman al-Zawahiri long ago earned a reputation for being a terrible boss. When he took over al Qaeda in 2011, senior U.S. intelligence officials were already pointing out his penchant for micro-management. (In one instance in the 1990s, he reached out to operatives in Yemen to castigate them for buying a new fax machine when their old one was working just fine.) Reports that last week's terror alert was triggered when Zawahiri reached out to Nasir al-Wuhayshi, his second-in-command and the leader of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- a communication that Washington predictably managed to intercept -- only hardened the impression that he lacks the savvy to run a global terror organization.

But few of Zawahiri's many critics have paused to consider what the task of leading a terror organization actually

entails. It is true that Zawahiri's management style has made his organization vulnerable to foreign intelligence agencies and provoked disgruntlement among the terrorist rank and file, not to mention drawing last week's drone strikes. But it is equally true that Zawahiri had few other options.

Given that terrorists are, by definition, engaged in criminal activity, you would think that they would place a premium on secrecy. But historically, many terrorist groups have been meticulous record keepers. Members of the Red Brigades, an Italian terrorist group active in the 1970s and early 1980s, report having spent more time accounting for their activities than actually training or preparing attacks. From 2005 through at least 2010, senior leaders of al Qaeda in Iraq kept spreadsheets detailing salary payments to hundreds of fighters, among many other forms of written records. And when the former military al Qaeda military commander Mohammed Atef had a dispute with Midhat Mursi al-Sayid Umar, an explosives expert for the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, in the 1990s, one of his complaints was that Umar failed to turn in his receipts for a trip he took with his family.

Such bureaucracy makes terrorists vulnerable to their enemies. But terrorists do it anyway. In part, that is because large-scale terror plots and extended terror campaigns require so much coordination that they cannot be carried out without detailed communication among the relevant actors and written records to help leaders track what is going on. Gerry Bradley, a former terrorist with the Provisional Irish Republican Army, for example, describes in his memoir how he required his subordinates in Belfast in 1973 to provide daily reports on their proposed operations so that he could ensure that the activities of subunits did not conflict. Several leaders of the Kenyan Mau Mau insurgency report that, as their movement grew in the early 1950s, they needed to start maintaining written accounting records and fighter registries to monitor their finances and personnel.

But the deeper part of the answer is that the managers of terrorist organizations face the same basic challenges as the managers of any large organization. What is true for Walmart is true for al Qaeda: Managers need to keep tabs on what their people are doing and devote resources to motivate their underlings to pursue the organization's aims. In fact, terrorist managers face a much tougher challenge. Whereas most businesses have the blunt goal of maximizing profits, terrorists' aims are more precisely calibrated: An attack that is too violent can be just as damaging to the cause as an attack that is not violent enough. Al Qaeda in Iraq learned this lesson in Anbar Province in 2006, when the local population turned against them, partly in response to the group's violence against civilians who disagreed with it.

Terrorist leaders also face a stubborn human resources problem: Their talent pool is inherently unstable. Terrorists are obliged to seek out recruits who are predisposed to violence -- that is to say, young men with a chip on their shoulder. Unsurprisingly, these recruits are not usually disposed to following orders or recognizing authority figures. Terrorist managers can craft meticulous long-term strategies, but those are of little use if the people tasked with carrying them out want to make a name for themselves right now.

Terrorist managers are also obliged to place a premium on bureaucratic control, because they lack other channels to discipline the ranks. When Walmart managers want to deal with an unruly employee or a supplier who is defaulting on a contract, they can turn to formal legal procedures. Terrorists have no such option. David Ervine, a deceased Irish Unionist politician and onetime bomb maker for the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), neatly described this dilemma to me in 2006. "We had some very heinous and counterproductive activities being carried out that the

leadership didn't punish because they had to maintain the hearts and minds within the organization," he said, referring to a period in the late 1980s when he and the other leaders had made a strategic calculation that the Unionist cause was best served by focusing on nonviolent political competition. In Ervine's (admittedly self-interested) telling, the UVF's senior leaders would have ceased violence much earlier than the eventual 1994 cease-fire, but they could not do so because the rank and file would have turned on them. For terrorist managers, the only way to combat those "counterproductive activities" is to keep a tight rein on the organization. Recruiting only the most zealous will not do the trick, because, as the alleged chief of the Palestinian group Black September wrote in his memoir, "diehard extremists are either imbeciles or traitors."

So someone in Zawahiri's position has his hands full: To pull off a major attack, he needs to coordinate among multiple terrorists, track what his operatives are doing regardless of their intentions, and motivate them to follow orders against their own maverick instincts. Fortunately for the rest of us, the things terrorists do to achieve these tasks sow the seeds of their undoing. Placing calls, sending e-mails, keeping spreadsheets, and having members request reimbursements all create opportunities for intelligence agencies to learn what terrorists are up to and then disrupt them. In that way, Zawahiri's failures are not just a reflection of his personal weaknesses but a case study in the inherent limits that all terror groups face.

That is good news, of course, for potential terror targets: As long as our intelligence and law enforcement agencies remain vigilant, there is no way terrorist organizations will ever rise above the level of the tolerable nuisance, which is what they have been for the last decade. But for aspiring terror managers, it is a dispiriting reminder that there is no escape from the red tape that ultimately dooms their cause.

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