
Partners in Crime: Support Structures and Exchanges Between Terrorist Groups

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Introduction

Transformation witnessed internally in a terrorist organisation can be the result of a need to keep pace with growing changes in the external environment. These changes could predominantly arise as a result of focussed anti-terrorist measures undertaken by governments. Like a virus which mutates and escapes the body's immune system, terrorists have evolved in the face of measures which are aimed at suppressing terrorism. Evolutions have taken place in a terror organisation at both strategic and tactical levels. The nature of attacks, structure and networks, and tactics has all changed from their traditional and original style to more innovative patterns. Guerrilla warfare has replaced a more conventional form of fighting. Improvised techniques have been used in place of normal conventional methods. Apart from the need to evolve to withstand government measures, technological improvements have brought in new thinking processes among terrorist groups.

This metamorphosis in terrorism has been on account of mutually beneficial platforms between terror groups, which have been established to share the expertise derived among like-minded groups to withstand a united global community.

The precise nature of relations can be a combination of financing, logistics, training, ideology and even mounting joint operations. Some groups borrow

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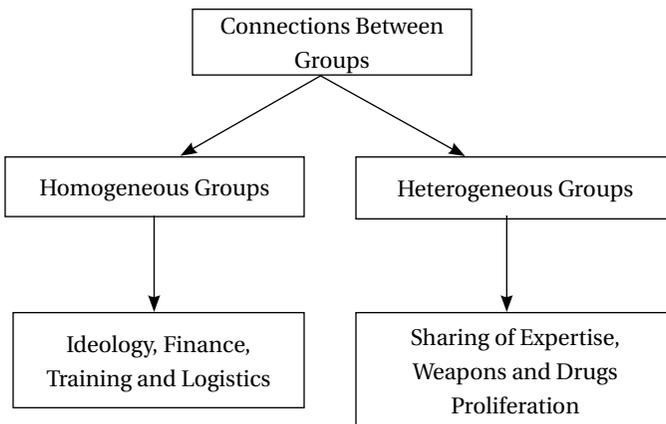
ideological shades alone. The nature of exchanges varies from group to group. The most important factor which influences the nature of exchange between groups is the ideology of the groups involved.

Nature of Support and Exchanges

The nature of exchanges can range from diverse to narrow and varies from case to case. Of the 49 groups designated as “foreign terrorist organisations” by the US State Department, more than half have ties with other groups designated in that list. The majority of the groups which have ties with other groups are driven by Islamic ideology. The nature of cooperation between ideologically homogeneous terrorist groups varies from that of groups with a different ideology. Again, further segmentation can be done based on the size and stature of the groups. The relationship based on ideology is an important factor in determining the kind of exchanges that take place between terrorist groups (see Fig 1).

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Fig 1: The Nature of Links Between Terrorists Groups



Source: US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2010*, <http://www.state.gov/> (July 22, 2012)

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Exchanges Between Homogeneous Groups

Links between these terrorist groups can be attributed to various factors like,

- Ideological uniformity.
- Anti-terror measures.
- Binding on account of a common threat.

Terror groups stand to benefit from relations with other terrorist groups. These relations increase their operational reach, effectiveness and efficiency by harnessing the expertise or strength of other groups. The Al Qaeda network is an ideal example to explain this issue.

Firstly, groups with a similar ideological background tend to draw towards each other for a similar cause. Connections between ideologically similar terrorist groups have been documented from the mid-1970s when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) joined hands with the German Red Army faction. The Red Army followed the Communist ideology and the PFLP followed a much more rigid form of Marxist ideology in their respective countries. In this case, since both the groups shared similar but different versions of the ideology, it paved the way for the Red Army faction to train in the facilities of the PFLP in Jordan. Hence, a relationship was established on common ideological grounds. Later, in 1976, PFLP members hijacked a Frankfurt bound plane to Mogadishu to secure the release of jailed Red Army leaders as well as two Palestinians, along with a ransom of \$15 million. The PFLP's demand for the release of leaders of both the groups, clearly suggests that the 'project' was conceived jointly by both groups. Similarly, Al Qaeda's relationships are with groups which are associated with the ideology of global *Salafi jihad*.

Secondly, after the September 11, 2001 World Trade Centre attacks, countries have followed and implemented anti-terror measures in letter and spirit, mostly against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Hence, Al Qaeda's original structure and its network stand dismantled, compromising its operational reach and efficiency. The very fact that it has not mounted any major attack directly is ample testimony to the fact that it is functioning at a diminished operational reach. To overcome this hurdle, Al Qaeda has inspired several ideologically similar groups and some loosely connected individuals to launch attacks against the US and its allies globally. In a way, the war on terror has been a factor to bring these groups together to establish support structures. According to Rohan Gunaratna, these groups hold declared or undeclared membership of the World

Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and the crusaders, formed in February 1998.

Thirdly, Al Qaeda plays a prominent role by providing funds, training and operational support to its smaller regional affiliates who are faced with common threats. A bigger group within the same ideological basket always acts as a provider of expertise to the smaller ones while deriving facilitation services from them in return. There always exists a *quid pro quo* between these groups tilted in favour of the smaller ones. It is imperative at this point to state that bigger groups within the same ideological platform invariably motivate, and in some cases, directly support, smaller players, financially, and operationally. This enables groups like Al Qaeda to extend their network and reach. Thus, Al Qaeda has transformed itself from a “trans-border group” into a truly “trans-global group”. It has a network sans borders.

At the same time, by deriving support from Al Qaeda, the smaller groups can make quite an impact domestically within their own countries. Notwithstanding the above factors, when faced with a common threat, smaller regional or sub-regional groups always look up to the bigger players for support at times of crisis. A group named Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) which is part of the Al Qaeda umbrella, shot into prominence after mounting two major attacks in Bali in 2002 and the JW Marriott bombing financed by Al Qaeda in 2003.

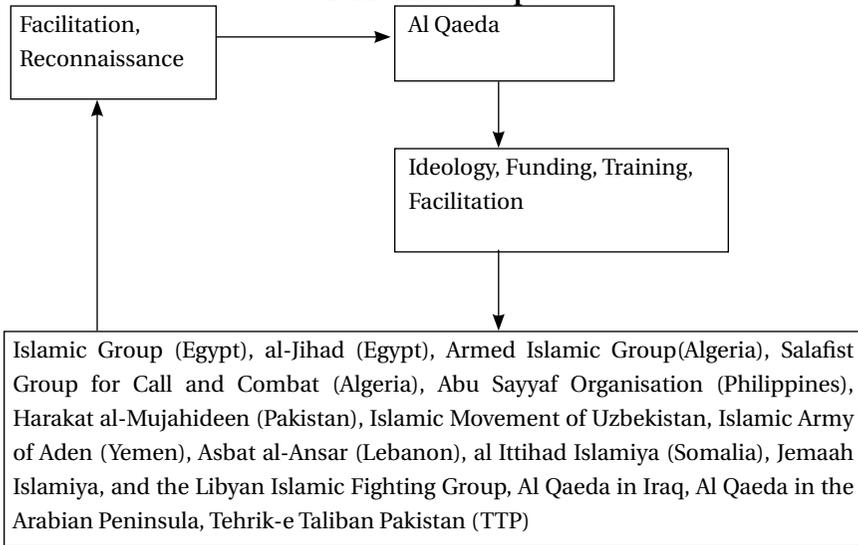
JI, in turn, supported regional groups in Southeast Asia. Hence, some groups acted as extended networks of Al Qaeda which propagated violence across the world.

Al Qaeda has a robust financial network which not only feeds its operations but also fund its affiliates. The network which manages these operations is known as Global Jihad Support Network (GJSN) which is composed of individuals from North Africa, the Levant, or Saudi Arabia, and who reside in those countries, in Europe, or South Asia. The network provides various services, including logistics and fund raising, and helps move operatives from country to country as needed. Post 9/11, though Al Qaeda’s core has weakened, its affiliates and sympathisers outside South Asia have taken the initiative.

By deriving support from Al Qaeda, the smaller groups can make quite an impact domestically within their own countries; when faced with a common threat, smaller regional or sub-regional groups always look up to the bigger players for support at times of crisis.

Groups like Al Qaeda support smaller groups with ideology, finance, training and logistics. They extract facilitation services and logistical facilities like safe houses in return (see Fig 2).

Fig 2: Nature of Links Between Al Qaeda and Other Islamic Terrorist Groups



Source: US Library of Congress, *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*, 2004, Congressional Research Service.

Ideology

Groups like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) draw inspiration from Al Qaeda. Its leader is Nasir Abdal Karim al-Wahayshi, a 33-year-old Yemeni, who seeks to model AQAP on Al Qaeda⁸. This organisation regularly publishes wise counsel given by Osama Bin Laden to Al Wahayshi to attract new recruitments.⁹

This group was formed by merging Al Qaeda’s Saudi and Yemeni outfits. Similarly, most of the groups under Al Qaeda’s umbrella are ideologically inclined and draw inspiration from Al Qaeda. Another group named Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), draws inspiration from Al Qaeda, recruiting mainly among the Moroccan youths. This group was responsible for the 2003 Casablanca bombing and the 2004 Madrid train bombings. The Madrid train bombing was an operation which was entirely planned and funded by GICM which shows that there are groups that

draw inspiration alone.¹⁰ This type of exchange is always one-way which moves from the parent body to its affiliates or like-minded loosely connected groups.

Training

Training is one aspect of cooperation which is common among terrorist groups. Al Qaeda's camps in Afghanistan and Sudan acted as training grounds for cadres from different groups. Training again is a one-way affair which proceeds from the parent body to its affiliate which, in turn, cascades to the same to smaller groups in that particular region. In the 1990s, Abdullah Sungkur, a key Jemaah Islamiya (JI) leader sent recruits to Afghanistan to train in Al Qaeda camps.¹¹ Further, JI and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had a training relationship. JI operated its own training facility within MILF's camp called "Abu Baker". Fathur Rahman Al Ghazi, the key JI figure, was the demolitions and explosives trainer with the MILF.¹² The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), of the Philippines had training connections with Al Qaeda even prior to the 9/11 attacks.¹³ The training aspect, as stated earlier, is a major area of cooperation between ideologically similar groups where the smaller groups like JI and ASG stand to benefit from the expertise and experience of the bigger groups like Al Qaeda. Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), a group active in Indonesia's Aceh province, sent its cadres to the MILF camp "Abu Baker" for guerrilla training.¹⁴ Training partnerships can be of two variants: one, where the cadres are trained by members of bigger groups and the other, groups that offer training facilities such as ASG offered to JI, and get trained by their trainers in turn.

Funding

Another major area of cooperation is funding. Funding constitutes a major part of a relationship between ideologically similar terrorist groups. Groups like Al Qaeda fund other group's organisational as well as operational requirements.¹⁵ The 2003 JW Marriott bombing in Indonesia was fully financed by Al Qaeda and executed by JI.¹⁶ Hambali, the leader of JI used to manage Al Qaeda's investment established in the Southeast Asian region predominantly through the Islamic banking system¹⁷. He has confessed that Al Qaeda was so pleased with the Bali operations in 2002 that he was rewarded US\$ 100,000.¹⁸ Al Qaeda funds ASG in the Philippines through front organisations and legitimate Islamic institutions.¹⁹ There are also cases of funding facilitation done by one group to others like the Indonesian MILE, which helped raise funds by facilitation of illegal logging and smuggling.²⁰ Funding arrangements mostly are again a one-way affair, wherein the bigger parent body directly funds the smaller regional bodies.

Facilitation

Facilitation is the only partnership which opens up two-way traffic between ideologically similar terror organisations. It can involve logistics, provision of safe house, conduit for travel and material support. The above partnerships are provided by bigger groups which extract facilitation services in return from smaller groups. Al Qaeda, by providing motivation funding and training, enjoyed easy and secure access to Southeast Asia²¹ and other areas. Two of the 9/11 hijackers stayed with Malaysian Yazid Sufaat in 2000, as did Zacarias Moussaoui, the 20th hijacker in 2000, who was provided a safe house facility by Faiz Bafana in September 2000.²² Apart from providing safe houses, the regional affiliates also provide the vital reconnaissance of potential targets. JI provided the video reconnaissance of the Yushun Mass Rapid Transit station which was recovered at the house of Mohammed Atef, the military head of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.²³ In one instance, JI helped Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM) to procure a boat for their logistical use in their campaign in Indonesia. As a result, KMM helped JI to procure four tonnes of ammonium nitrate to be used for attacks in Singapore.²⁴

Exchanges Between Heterogeneous Groups

Groups with different ideological backgrounds can cooperate in terms of exchanging expertise and training, acting as a conduit for weapons and drugs proliferation. This kind of cooperation does not involve funding or providing direct operational support but instances of joint operations have been documented in the past. Exchanges between these groups are always a two-way affair. It can either be barter of goods and services or an exchange done for a business considerations.

Indian intelligence agencies suggest that the Maoists have established links with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) for supply of arms²⁵. While there are no ideological connections between these groups, they have established a connection based on a relationship of convenience where one group gets the arms and another gets money in return.

Recently, links between the People's Liberation Army (PLA), a terrorist movement in India's northeast and the Maoists have surfaced. The nature of links ranges from PLA cadres training the Maoists, to supply of arms and ammunition in return for money and explosive substances like ammonium nitrate²⁶. Though these groups are not ideologically connected, they have signed a declaration for waging war against India.²⁷ It is also understood that India's Maoists were trained by LTTE cadres in mine production and mine laying in the mid-1980s, which the Maoists used with deadly precision in later years.²⁸ Similarly, the Irish Republican Army

(IRA) was understood to have trained members of FARC, Colombia, in 2001²⁹. Connections between heterogeneous groups mostly pertain to supply of arms and providing training and logistics. This is mostly based on monetary transactions for the benefit of one or the other of the groups.

Conclusion

In order to survive, a partnership between terrorist groups has to be the order of the day. These connections vary from diverse to narrow, and differ from case to case. Regardless of the nature of connections and strategic alliances, they act as force multipliers for the terror groups.

Connections between terrorist groups, both heterogeneous and homogeneous, act as an extended reach for these groups. Facing much stronger state machinery, such partnerships and cooperation extend the reach and sustainability of the terror groups, thereby extending their longevity. States which are fighting terrorism need to address this issue immediately in order to prevail over these groups. It is evident that the manifestation of terrorism in all nations, to the extent of developing links between terrorist groups, questions the security, independence and sovereignty of the respective states. The grand strategy of the states needs to be more radical to tackle the menace of terrorism. The war potential of states is to be directed to annihilate terrorism so that security in its fullest sense is achieved, else, the concept of the state would become an absurdity, with its large repertoire of defence mechanisms paralysed by terrorist groups worldwide. Terrorism, in whatever form it may be, is the sinister side of human civilisation which should be destroyed at all costs to achieve PEACE.

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Notes

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