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## Introduction

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Brian A. Jackson

In today's environment, the threat of terrorism<sup>1</sup> and insurgent violence,<sup>2</sup> including high-impact and unconventional attacks, is constant. The evolving nature of this threat has created the need for new ways to examine the terrorism problem and to analyze the behavior of terrorist groups. Novel approaches can provide new insights into the level of threat a group poses, expose unanticipated vulnerabilities, help anticipate how the group might change over time, and suggest potentially effective countermeasures.

One such innovative approach is to examine terrorist organizational learning. Terrorist groups are organizations that operate in volatile environments where the ability to change is the linchpin not only of effectiveness, but also of survival.<sup>3</sup> Change, in turn, usually requires learning. While a terrorist group may have ample motivations for change—technological developments, counterterrorism measures, shifts in people's reactions to attacks—change does not occur automatically. To be able to transform itself when needed and wanted, an organization must be able to learn. Otherwise, change is no more than good luck and far from calculated.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, we adopt the convention that *terrorism* is a tactic—the systematic and premeditated use, or threatened use, of violence by nonstate groups to further political or social objectives to coerce an audience larger than those directly affected. With terrorism defined as a tactic, it follows that individual organizations are not inherently “terrorist.” We use the terms “terrorist group” and “terrorist organization” as shorthand for “group that has chosen to utilize terrorism.”

<sup>2</sup> Though many of the violent substate groups discussed in this study use tactics that are not purely terroristic in nature—for example, mixing traditional military operations against opposing security forces with terrorist bombings or assassinations—we use “terrorism,” “terrorist violence,” and “counterterrorism” as generic descriptors of groups' violent activities and government efforts to counter them.

<sup>3</sup> For a variety of discussions of change and adaptation in terrorism and terrorist group activities, see Cragin and Daly, 2004; Crenshaw, 2001; Gerwehr and Glenn, 2003, pp. 49–53; Hoffman, 2001; Jackson, 2001; Kitfield, 2001; Stern, 2003; Thomas and Casebeer, 2004, pp. 35–38. We particularly acknowledge Lutes (2001), an unpublished paper that did not come to our attention until late in the study. Lutes brings the literature on organizational learning to bear on terrorism, specifically on al Qaeda.

<sup>4</sup> While change in the way a group carries out its activities is frequently indicative of learning, the occurrence of change is not sufficient to indicate that organizational learning has occurred. Changes are not necessarily intentional; they can be made unintentionally or for exogenous reasons incidental to the behavior that is changed (e.g., a change may occur in one area simply as a result of a change made in another). In this study, we define learning

A terrorist group skilled at learning can find solutions to many problems, modify tactics and behaviors, systematically fulfill its needs, and advance its strategic agenda by design. Learning enables groups to adapt in response to a changing environment. This learning can range from efforts to *continuously improve* skills in activities the group already carries out, such as improving marksmanship or bomb-construction skills, or more dramatic, *discontinuous changes*, such as adopting entirely new weapons or tactical approaches. The greater a group's learning capabilities, the more threat it poses to its adversaries and the more resilient it is to the pressures exerted by law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

In the face of this sort of adaptive threat, the law enforcement and intelligence communities must try to stay one step ahead of the enemy. Understanding the process by which terrorist groups learn—i.e., organizational learning—can help provide that advantage.

## The Need to Both Describe and Explain Learning

Organizational learning in a terrorist group is the acquisition of new knowledge or technologies that the group uses to make better strategic decisions, plan and design tactics more skillfully, increase morale and confidence, and conduct more-successful operations. In short, learning is change devoted to improving a group's performance.

While organizational learning requires that individual members of a group build new skills and knowledge, it is more than simply the sum of what each individual member knows or can do. An organization is a system with a "memory" greater than that of any individual member. This memory enables the organization to utilize the capabilities of individual members to achieve group goals, while at the same time reducing its reliance on any one person. When knowledge is fully *organizational*, a group has attained new or expanded capabilities in such a manner that it need not depend on particular individuals to exploit them.

To understand how a group changes to improve its performance, we must be able to describe what the group has learned (or has tried to learn) and why; discern the outcomes of its efforts; and explain how the group actually went about learning. With this knowledge, we may be able to better map out ways for counterterrorist specialists and the law enforcement community to make their strategies and operations more effective.

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as sustained changes that involve intentional action by or within a group at some point—such as one or more of the following: intentional seeking of new knowledge or new ways or doing things; intentional evaluation of behaviors, new or old, that leads to efforts to retain valuable behaviors and discard others; and/or intentional dissemination of knowledge within a group or among groups when such knowledge is deemed useful or beneficial. Furthermore, we categorize as learning only changes that are beneficial to the terrorist group.

This study focuses on learning in terrorist groups at the tactical and operational level, specifically, the efforts terrorist groups make to

- Become more effective at applying their chosen tactics and weapons
- Adopt new, often increasingly damaging, tactics and weapons
- Alter their behavior to fend off attempts to infiltrate, undermine, and destroy them

## About This Study

This research effort addresses two basic questions:

- What is known about how terrorist groups learn?
- Can that knowledge be used by law enforcement and intelligence personnel in their efforts to combat terrorism?

To answer these questions, we designed a methodology to explore why and what terrorist groups learn, to gain insights into their learning processes, and to identify ways in which the law enforcement and intelligence communities might apply those insights. The research process comprised four main tasks:

1. **Review of the literature on organizational learning.** The rich literature on learning in organizations is focused predominantly on learning in legitimate groups, particularly commercial organizations, but it provides a wealth of models and hypotheses on group learning practices that can be applied to terrorist groups. Later phases of our study were informed by ideas and concepts drawn from this literature.
2. **Review of available literature on terrorism and insurgent violence.** We reviewed the published literature and other data sources on groups that have used terrorism to assess what was already known about organizational learning activities in such groups and to assist in selecting individual groups for detailed study.
3. **Terrorist group case studies.** The research process consisted primarily of preparing and reviewing a set of case studies of organizations that have used terrorism as a component of their violent activities. We selected five organizations for these case studies:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Al Qaeda was deliberately *not* selected to be a case study group. The goal of the study was to examine organizational learning across different types of terrorist organizations to find commonalities and differences among their experiences. The rapid change occurring in al Qaeda during the study period and the volume of information available made it such a complex subject that we would not have been able to satisfactorily examine a sufficient number of other terrorist groups.

- Aum Shinrikyo
- Hizballah
- Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)
- Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA)
- The Radical Environmentalist Movement

These groups, having a variety of characteristics, were selected to cover the full spectrum of organizations that have used terrorism: Aum Shinrikyo is a religious cult that pursued chemical and biological weapons; Hizballah is a social and political movement with insurgent and terrorist aims and activities; JI is a smaller, better defined terrorist group linked to and influenced by the global jihadist movement; PIRA is a traditional ethnic terrorist group with a long operational history; and the radical environmentalist movement (focusing on terrorist activities claimed by organizations identified as the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front, among others)<sup>6</sup> is an example of a much less-defined terrorist “front” of a broader ideological movement. These organizations are described in more detail in Part I of this volume.

In addition, to focus the study on learning behavior, we chose terrorist groups that have a reputation for innovative activities.<sup>7</sup> The wide variety of group types

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the radical environmental movement is significantly different from the other groups examined in this study. Examining the actions claimed by organizations identifying themselves as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), and others from the perspective that they are carried out by a defined “group” is problematic as these organizations function as pieces within a broader ideological movement, rather than defined and bounded groups in a traditional sense. However, because of assumed cross-membership of individuals and cross-fertilization among many groups within the radical environmental movement, law enforcement and counterterrorism efforts frequently treat ELF, ALF, and affiliated groups as a single organization for analytical purposes, while recognizing that the organization’s diversity adds a unique dynamic to such analyses. In this study we will refer to these groups as either radical environmentalists or, for shorthand purposes, ELF/ALF. Given the relevance of similar movements in modern terrorism—e.g., extremist right-wing, anti-globalization, violent anti-abortion, and global *jihad* movements—the differences between the learning processes of ELF/ALF and those of more traditional organizations are of significant interest.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this report, terrorist groups that can learn effectively are contrasted with groups that are not effective learners and, as a result, pose less serious levels of threat. Because of the design of the study, specific groups that learn poorly were not examined in detail and are generally cited as a class rather than as individual groups. Terrorism-incident databases and compendia, such as the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism’s *Terrorism Knowledge Base* (<http://www.tkb.org>), provide a range of examples of groups that are poor learners—groups that staged only single types of attacks of limited effectiveness, communicated so poorly that their agenda and intent were difficult to discern, or were rapidly rolled up by security and law enforcement. It should be noted that even terrorist groups that one might consider poor learners overall obviously learned in some areas, but their inability to do so in the areas most critical to their effectiveness limited their impact. Such groups include the following:

- The Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army in Bolivia was active for two years. It had approximately 100 members but did not learn what was needed to maintain its activities after its leadership was captured (<http://www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=4289>).

selected was intentional—addressing the study’s research questions required examining the relevance and utility of organizational learning theories and frameworks across a range of terrorist groups.

To provide a common approach and structure for the individual case studies, the researcher examining each terrorist group began his or her work with a common set of areas to explore, including the group’s motivations for learning, the areas it chose to learn, the outcomes, and—to the extent possible—how it carried out its learning efforts. The case study process included review of available published information on each group’s learning activities, supplemented by examination of other information sources and interviews with experts in the academic, intelligence, and law enforcement communities who had direct experience with the groups being studied.

4. **Project workshop.** We invited practitioners from law enforcement and the intelligence community, along with academic experts, to participate in a workshop held concurrently in RAND’s Washington, DC, and Santa Monica, CA, offices on September 29, 2004. Approximately 25 individuals participated in the workshop, where discussions were held on a not-for-attribution basis. The workshop focused on practical insights into how to improve the design of policies for combating terrorism. Starting with the preliminary results of the case studies, the discussion explored how analytical approaches based on organizational learning might be relevant and applicable to combating terrorism.

## About This Report

This report presents results from our review of the organizational learning and terrorism literatures and the case studies of learning in individual terrorist organizations. A companion report, *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1: Organizational Learning in Terrorist Groups and Its Implications for Combating Terrorism*, MG-331-NIJ, focuses on the application of these concepts to policy for combating terrorism. That report

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- Terra Lliure in Spain disbanded after approximately 20 years, during which it never developed effective strategies to build significant support among the Catalan population it sought to champion (<http://www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=4281>).
  - The Free Papua Movement, partially due to its goals and ideology, did not pursue technologies that would pose a significant threat (<http://www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=4023>).
  - Black Star in Greece, which carried out attacks via two tactics—using gas canister bombs and setting cars on fire—demonstrated neither the interest nor the ability to carry out operational learning in its attack modes (<http://www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=32>).

A number of other terrorist groups carried out only one or a handful of attacks before disbanding, disappearing, or being arrested without any of their stated goals accomplished. Assessing such groups is difficult, however, as the “new” terrorist groups could be established organizations adopting a cover name for a few operations.

presents an abbreviated overview of the research presented here and describes the results of the project workshop.

The present volume has two main parts. Part I contains the five case studies; Part II presents insights drawn from the organizational learning literature and applies those insights to the case study groups.

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