

# The Age of Non-Conventional Terrorism

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**T**he September 11, 2001 terror attack in the United States was a formative event in the history of modern international terrorism, with a major effect on the characteristics of terrorist activity in the international arena, on the organization that carried it out, on the states supporting that organization, and, invariably, on the country in which it took place. Moreover, it has had a long term impact on the fighting strategy adopted by the countries combating terror and on international relations in general.<sup>1</sup>

The large number of casualties, the serious economic damage, and the psychological effects of September 11 were unprecedented. Consequently, September 11 constituted a watershed in terms of the terrorism threat facing countries in all parts of the free world and established terrorism's position

as a significant player in international relations today. This has been

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reflected by the high profile given to terrorism in the international media, as well as in decision making centers throughout the world. The attack on the heart of America's military establishment and on one of the primary symbols of the American economy heralded the beginning of the direct confrontation between the West, led by the United States, and the "Afghan alumni," led by Osama Bin Laden in particular and terrorist organizations and terror-supporting nations in general.

The overall significance of the events of September 11 is still evolving, and its full implications will

certainly resound in the years to come. However, it is already clear that among the Bin Laden-led Afghan alumni and through their influence on other terrorist organizations, a fundamental change in consciousness has taken place regarding what is permitted and what is forbidden in the realm of terrorism. In the period since September 11, 2001, the standard of violence in terrorism has increased significantly. The number and frequency of mega-terror attacks planned or executed since then attest to the fact that the taboo surrounding the "lethal limit" of single terrorist attacks or mass-casualty cluster attacks is immensely weakened. This change in consciousness is also reflected in the declarations of terrorist organizations' spokespeople, and may signal a broad escalation in their activity and the terrorist organizations' move into the age of non-conventional terrorism.

This age is characterized by two levels of activity. The first is the level of executing a monumental attack ("mega-terrorism") using conventional warfare materials to achieve an effect that is fundamentally non-conventional in nature. The second level involves preparing terrorist attacks

<sup>1</sup> Yoram Schweitzer and Shaul Shay, *An Expected Surprise: The September 11<sup>th</sup> Attack and its Ramifications*, Herzliya: Mifalot Publishing, The Interdisciplinary Center, 2002, p.15, (Hebrew); English version forthcoming in June 2003: *The Globalization of Terror: The Challenge of Al-Qaida and the Response of the International Community*, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, Rutgers University Press.



that use non-conventional materials in order to harm large numbers of people, cause long-term environmental damage, and deliver a public psychological and morale-crushing blow of a scope hitherto unknown. The war with Iraq is likely to have the negative impact of accelerating the progress of the global age of non-conventional terrorism.

In contrast, and perhaps ironically, the public and the decision makers of the Western world have not experienced a change in consciousness regarding the nature of the threat and its degree of acuteness. Such a change, however, is essential to achieving the public support for an anti-terrorism strategy that can adequately and effectively address the current terrorist threat.

### A Change in Consciousness

Since the end of the 1960s, when modern international terrorism began playing an increasingly influential role in international relations, a large number of terrorist attacks have been carried out around the world. Only a small number yielded high lethal results, killing dozens and in rare cases hundreds of people. Exceptionally severe attacks were carried out infrequently, typically by different organizations and at significant intervals. Airplanes provided a ready venue for such attacks: 329 people were killed by the explosion of an Air India plane by Sikh terrorists in June 1985, and 270 people were killed in December 1988 when a Pan Am plane exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, the work of

Libyan agents. In some instances, car bombs loaded with thousands of kilograms of explosives and driven by suicide bombers were used to carry out attacks with mass casualties. The two terrorist attacks against United States Marines and a multinational French force in Beirut carried out by the Hizbollah in October 1983, which killed a total of 300 people, serve as primary examples of such attacks.

However, mass-casualty attacks

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killing thousands of people have only been planned and attempted by terrorist groups that are Afghan alumni, led by Bin Laden and functioning under the auspices of al-Qaeda. According to the Afghan alumni's increasingly extremist religious messianic worldview, the indiscriminate killing of large numbers of people is permitted, and even desirable, when it is done "in the path of god" (*"fi sabil Allah"*). They interpret such acts as consistent with the commandments of the Koran and Islamic law. In this context, the transition to carrying out mega-terror attacks can be seen as a "natural"

outcome of the cultural-religious confrontation between them and those whom they perceive as infidels, chiefly, in their terms, the "Judeo-Crusader alliance." Still, they do not refrain from the indiscriminate killing of others, such as Hindus in Kashmir and even "infidel" Muslims in Arab countries.

September 11, with its score of more than 3,000 dead, heavy economic damage, and dramatization of American vulnerability, was an important morale-boosting victory for the Afghan alumni. It also represented a new, higher minimum standard in escalating terror attacks, as their architects work towards actualizing their vision of liberating Islamic holy lands and establishing an Islamic caliphate throughout the world.

Today, one and a half years after September 11, one can discern an increase in intensity and frequency in the planning and execution of mass-casualty terror attacks, which reflects the profound change of consciousness that has taken place at the level of violence sanctioned, if not encouraged, in the struggle against infidels. *Accordingly, we have already reached the initial and in this case accelerated phase of the age of non-conventional terrorism.* The Afghan alumni regard mega-terror attacks, whether using materials of conventional or non-conventional warfare, as legitimate. The execution of such attacks is primarily a function of the terrorists' performance capabilities, and timing is usually determined by their degree of operational preparedness and their



overall operational strategy of maximizing the economic and psychological damage to their adversaries.

### Post-September 11 Non-Conventional Attacks

Following the counterattack of the United States-led international coalition against the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, which began on October 7, 2001, al-Qaeda renewed and intensified its global terrorism network. Determined to quash the challenge to its operational capabilities, members of al-Qaeda and the terrorist networks it supports attempted to carry out monumental attacks throughout the world. The rapid succession of major attacks over the past nineteen months under the umbrella of al-Qaeda testifies to an emboldened, defiant group. Specifically, it is the change in consciousness that allowed for the multitude of major attacks since September 11.

The first and most prominent operation was a multi-target attack in Singapore that was meant to kill thousands of people, fatally injure the Singapore economy, and propel an extensive economic domino landslide in Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> The operation was thwarted when a group from the terrorist organization al-Jam'ah al-

Islamiya was arrested in Singapore in December 2001. This Southeast Asian regional, multi-national organization has leaders and members scattered throughout Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Its intention was to detonate simultaneously seven truck bombs filled with tons of explosives at the American, British, and Israeli embassies in Singapore, and strike American economic targets as well. Al-Qaeda was actively involved in

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planning the attack through the supervision and funding of Khaled Sheikh Mohammad, its senior operations agent.<sup>3</sup>

On December 22 of the same year, Richard C. Reid, a British citizen who converted to Islam and was sent on his suicide mission by al-Qaeda, attempted to blow up an American Airlines passenger flight en route from Paris to Miami by igniting the explosives concealed in his shoe. Passengers overpowered Reid during the flight, and the attack was averted.

In addition to dispatching suicide terrorists, detonating car bombs, and perpetrating shooting attacks in

countries throughout the world (including Tunisia, Morocco, Pakistan, Kuwait, and Jordan), al-Qaeda commanders and their cohorts in Southeast Asia chose to focus their operations in Asia, due to the large Islamic population in key countries in the region (a factor that facilitated their residence, movement and operations), the relative weakness of the security forces, and their belief that they could destabilize the regimes with terrorism.

In this framework, al-Jam'ah al-Islamiya advanced from its more routine low-level attacks to the spectacular mass-casualty attack on the island of Bali in Indonesia. Based on the lesson learned by its operatives in Singapore from the operational failure of the maga-attack, al-Jam'ah al-Islamiya decided to strike, with the assistance of al-Qaeda, "soft" targets, in this case Western tourists who visit the island in droves. On October 12, 2002, a cell of the group blew up two of the most popular nightclubs in Bali by means of both a suicide bomber and a remote control detonated car bomb, carried out at close intervals. The attacks were planned so as to take place at peak hours, and accordingly the casualties were extensive: approximately 200 tourists killed, including Australians, British, Germans, and other nationalities. The economic damage to the tourism industry, which constitutes a central component of the Indonesian economy, was immense, and the detrimental impact on the Indonesian economy is expected to be felt long into the future.

<sup>2</sup> *Globalization of Terror*, 192-93.

<sup>3</sup> Yoram Schweitzer, "The Capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad," *Tel Aviv Notes*, No. 68, March 5, 2003.



Al-Qaeda chose to attack in other geographical areas as well. On November 29, 2002, al-Qaeda members, using a local infrastructure, carried out two simultaneous attacks against Israeli targets in Kenya. The first attack was the attempted downing of an Israeli Arkia Air Lines plane carrying 271 passengers and crew; the two SAM 7 missiles narrowly missed their target. The second attack took place twenty minutes later, when a vehicle loaded with explosives and driven by two suicide attackers was detonated at the entrance of the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa. The hotel is Israeli owned, and its guests were Israeli travelers who had arrived at the hotel a short time before the attack, on the same Arkia plane that embarked on the return flight to Israel. Fifteen people were killed and dozens were injured in the attack at the Paradise Hotel.

The attack on the theater in Moscow by a terrorist network of more than 40 Chechnyan militants, including Arab Afghan alumni as well, may be added to the list. The captors, who held 650 hostages for three days, were armed with a large number of weapons and explosive belts. They booby-trapped the building and threatened to detonate it with the hostages inside if their demands were not met. Like the other attacks, this event concluded with a high casualty tally: more than 100 hostages and dozens of captors were killed during the rescue operation of the Russian security forces.

## Preparations for Using Non-Conventional Weapons

Very few terrorist attacks using non-conventional weapons have been carried out in the past. Best known are the attacks carried out in Japan by the Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth) cult in 1994-1995. Of these, the deadliest one was perpetrated in Tokyo in 1995 and involved releasing sarin nerve gas, which killed a dozen Japanese

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and injured thousands. Although the attack in Japan was the focus of considerable media coverage, as well as many academic studies and articles, it remained an exceptional, marginal phenomenon that was not imitated by other terrorist organizations.

Armed with extremist ideology and an agenda of indiscriminately killing their enemies in masses, the Afghan alumni's escalation within the international terrorism arena during the 1990s led them almost naturally to invest efforts in acquiring non-conventional weapons. Bin Laden's unequivocal 1999 statement that he

regards the acquisition of such weapons as mandatory and as a religious commandment only increased fears that the day would soon come that this threat would be transformed from the potential to the actual. The United States attack on the Shifa medicine factory in Sudan, which was suspected of producing chemical substances for al-Qaeda, lent credibility to the threat. Another expression of senior al-Qaeda leaders regarding non-conventional terrorism was the September 2002 television interview granted by Khaled Sheikh Mohammad to the television program *Sirri l'il-Ghaya* ("Top Secret"), broadcast on al-Jazeera. Khaled Sheikh, who supervised the September 11 attack and was arrested in early March 2003 in Pakistan, acknowledged that one of the directions considered by al-Qaeda on the eve of September 2001 was an attack on a nuclear reactor in the United States. At the time the idea was rejected out of concern that a successful attack of this nature would unleash uncontrollable consequences and events would rapidly spiral out of control. Since then, hesitations of this sort appear to have abated.

The attack in Afghanistan uncovered numerous documents and extensive photographic documentation of training camps and hideouts of al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan. This documentation indicated the readiness of al-Qaeda and its affiliates to use non-conventional materials in terrorist attacks aimed at killing thousands of people. The most chilling documentation was broadcast



on CNN in August 2002, showing the experimental use of poisonous substances on dogs in training camps in Afghanistan. This documentation can be added to the testimony of arrested al-Qaeda members such as Ahmed Rassem (arrested while attempting to smuggle weapons from Canada to the northwestern United States, as part of his plan to blow up the Los Angeles airport on the eve of the new millennium), who at his trial acknowledged that he and his colleagues underwent training with poisonous substances.

In addition, a number of events took place since September 11 that are likely to help and accelerate the formation of a "consciousness environment" supportive of the Afghan alumni's desire to use non-conventional warfare substances in their terrorist attacks.

■ The explosion at the chemical factory in Toulouse, France, in September 2001 appears to have been caused by an act of sabotage carried out by a French Islamist of North African descent hired by the factory just a few days before the explosion. The incident caused the death of 29 people, as well as serious environmental damage. The French authorities went to great lengths to keep the incident quiet, among other reasons in order to prevent it from becoming a model for imitation.

■ While the anthrax attack carried out in the United States shortly after the attack of September 11 appears to have been an act of protest most likely by an American scientist with no al-Qaeda involvement, it played a significant role in raising the standard of non-conventional operations, from chemical terrorism to biological terrorism. Despite the relatively small number of casualties caused by only a miniscule quantity

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of anthrax, the attack functioned primarily to highlight the potential of environmental damage and the blow to morale that a terrorist weapon of this sort can wield.

■ The May 2002 arrest of Jose Padilla, an American citizen who converted to Islam, was trained in Afghanistan by al-Qaeda, and was sent by the organization to assess the possibilities of purchasing radiological material to detonate a "dirty bomb" in the United States, is also evidence of the operational directions of al-Qaeda in this realm.

■ The assassination of Hatab, a prominent leader of Chechnyan

terrorist organizations, with a poisonous substance concealed inside an envelope resulted in Chechnyan threats of taking revenge against the Russians in the same manner. Moreover, the Russian security forces' use of fentanyl gas while storming the Moscow theater caused the immediate paralysis and eventual death of many of the captors and the hostages. This was perceived by the Chechnyans as an act of escalation, accelerating the non-conventional phase in their own struggle against the Russians. Indeed, a terrorist cell arrested in France at the end of 2002 had planned a revenge attack against Russian targets in Europe using non-conventional materials.

■ The arrest of al-Qaeda and its affiliated cells in various countries throughout Europe in early 2003<sup>4</sup> involved the January discovery in England of ricin (apparently only a small portion of a much larger quantity that had disappeared). A similar find occurred in March in France. These events reinforce the suspicion that al-Qaeda and the organizations it supports are preparing to wage non-conventional terror campaigns.

■ The death of many al-Qaeda members, including some senior leaders and members of their families (for example, the wife and daughters of Dr. Aymen al-Tawahir, Bin Laden's deputy), enhances the Afghan alumni's already radical worldview with the dimension of personal revenge. This is likely to dispel any moral inhibitions that still remained regarding the use of all warfare

<sup>4</sup> Amit Cohen and Daphna Vardi, "Europe Under Threat," *Maariv* supplement, February 7, 2003, 22-23 (Hebrew).



materials at their disposal and motivate them to execute terrorist attacks that are much more deadly than the one the world witnessed on September 11, 2001.

### **The War in Iraq and Non-Conventional Terrorism**

Iraq's record of using non-conventional warfare materials has at least until now been limited to acts of war against its enemy during the war with Iran and against its Kurdish citizens at Halabja. It is too early to assess the effects that the war in Iraq will have on the era of non-conventional terrorism, yet the war that intended in part to prevent the dissemination of non-conventional weapons and was justified as part of the fight against world terrorism may, at least in the short-run, encourage mega-terror attacks and constitute another phase in the gradual deterioration into the use of non-conventional weapons in the international arena.

To the best of experts' knowledge, Iraq has refrained up to this point from providing terrorist organizations functioning under its auspices with

non-conventional warfare materials, and it is possible that it will continue to act in this manner in the future. At the same time, it can be presumed that the longer belligerent engagements in Iraq last and the more civilian casualties they cause, the more likely Iraq may be used as an inspiration and a pretext for terrorist organizations throughout the world to carry out terrorist operations against those identified as participating in or supporting the war. Some attacks would be specific localized targets, while others would undoubtedly be indiscriminate and involve mass casualties. It can also be presumed that the various Afghan alumni would lead the terrorists: indication of this intention was provided by a video cassette recently distributed by Bin Laden, in which he called on all Muslims to mobilize for the campaign and carry out suicide attacks and the mass killing of infidels by any means at their disposal. He portrayed the war in Iraq as a plot of the Judeo-Crusader alliance, aided by traitors among the leaders of the Arab world and aimed at humiliating Islam and robbing it of its oil riches.

Thus, even if the horrifying

scenario of non-conventional weapons being used in the war in Iraq was averted, the overall threat remains in place. Consequently, countries of the free world, primarily those of the West, have a supreme obligation to adopt firm, practical measures in order to stop the process of deterioration within the age of non-conventional terrorism. In effect, the change in consciousness evident among the Afghan alumni since September 11 must now be internalized by the public and by decision makers and translated into strong anti-terror policy. Such policy demands broad international cooperation that is well coordinated and effective, aimed at neutralizing the threat posed by al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups and networks and changing the behavior patterns of states that support terrorism. This should be done by levying heavy economic, political, diplomatic, and military penalties for actively or passively assisting terrorist organizations. Creating new norms in the area of counterterrorism warfare in the international system is a prerequisite for addressing the terrorist threat facing the world today.