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Information strategy of the Al Qaeda terror organisation

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In this article a detailed account is given of the information strategies of terrorist organizations with a special emphasis on Al Qaeda, by using a the end–ways–means approach and the model called mystic diamond. Based on his experience, as Chief of Intelligence Analysis of the MNDCS in Iraq in 2003–04 and an academic background, acquired at the NPS, the author concludes that very few the terrorist organizations commit actions randomly or senselessly. Assuming that the rational actor model applies to most advance terrorist organizations, he asserts that the pernicious information strategy of Al Qaeda is an integral part of the overall strategy of the terror organization.

Introduction

Information operations are actions taken to affect an adversary and influence others' decision making process, information, and information systems, while protecting one's own information and information systems.¹ Understanding how the Al Qaeda (AQ) information strategy differs in asymmetric conflicts and why rational people continue to support terrorists instead of the counterinsurgent forces is important. Al Qaeda surely has one of the most remarkable information strategies with a grand scheme of total war and the remaking of the society along ideological guidelines, which are extremist and militant in nature. Therefore analyzing Al Qaeda's information strategy is an exceptionally interesting subject. In today's technologically developed world AQ makes advantage of his information advantage over the adversaries and uses a mix of modern equipment and ancient methods to address the various target audiences and achieve his information strategy goals.

My purpose is to lay out the information strategy of Usama Bin Laden (UBL) and introduce how he most likely uses modern information technology to address the various target audiences. In order to achieve my goal I will apply the ends–ways–means approach² to AQ, analyse the strategic objectives of the organization, the information strategy of UBL and the resources and various methods that AQ can utilise in order to achieve its goals.

¹ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, Joint Doctrine for Information Operations (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 9 October 1998).

² Originally introduced by Lykke at the Army War College strategy development model.

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Ends –The strategic objectives of AQ

To have a clear picture on what are the overall strategic goals of Al Qaeda we can analyze the audiotape released in January 2005, where Ayman Al Zawahiri (Al Qaeda's chief ideologue) identified the "three foundations" of Al Qaeda's political ideology and applied them to recent events.³ The specific objectives as outlined by Al Zawahiri are based on "three foundations":

- *"The Quran-Based Authority to Govern."* Al Qaeda supports the creation of an Islamic state governed solely by sharia law. Secular government or "man-made" law is considered unacceptable and deemed contrary to Islamic faith.
- *"The Liberation of the Homelands."* Reforms and free elections will not be possible for Muslims without first establishing "the freedom of the Muslim lands and their liberation from every aggressor. For AQ it is important to establish control over the Middle East's energy resources.
- *"The Liberation of the Human Being."* It is an articulated vision of a contractual social relationship between Muslims and their rulers that would permit people to choose and criticize their leaders but also demand that Muslims resist and overthrow rulers who violate Islamic laws and principles.

In summary Al Qaeda supports, resources, controls, and coordinates three general types of missions. First, they support any faction in opposition to Muslim regimes that Al Qaeda believes undermine Islamic values and interests; second, they support any faction in opposition to governments who oppress Muslim populations; and third, they support any faction fighting to create its own regime or government whose rule is founded in Islam. Additionally, Usama bin Laden also supports any effort to attack the U.S. or other western regimes that he considers a threat to Islam (far-enemy concept). Moreover UBL envisions a world in which his organization can reinstate the Caliphate. In other words, bin Laden seeks to reunite the Muslim world into one body. Under his command Al Qaeda redirects those assets toward a continuing war throughout the world on behalf of bin Laden's interpretation of Islam.

Ways – AQ information strategy

Al Qaeda can be best described as a networked organization, which applies the rules of terrorism and insurgency and the information strategy is one of the ways to attain the

³ Al-Zawahiri Denounces US, Argues for Reign of Islamic Law and Caliphate, Jihad Against Crusaders and Jews, FBIS Report – GMP20050131000021, January 31, 2005.

ends described above.⁴ The assumption I make in this paper is that AQ is a global terrorist organization and I apply a model called the *mystic diamond*⁵ to determine the information strategy objectives of AQ. As it can be seen on Figure 1, UBL has many objectives to adhere to. Therefore, the information strategy has to be diversified as well. There are also many target audiences that can be identified.

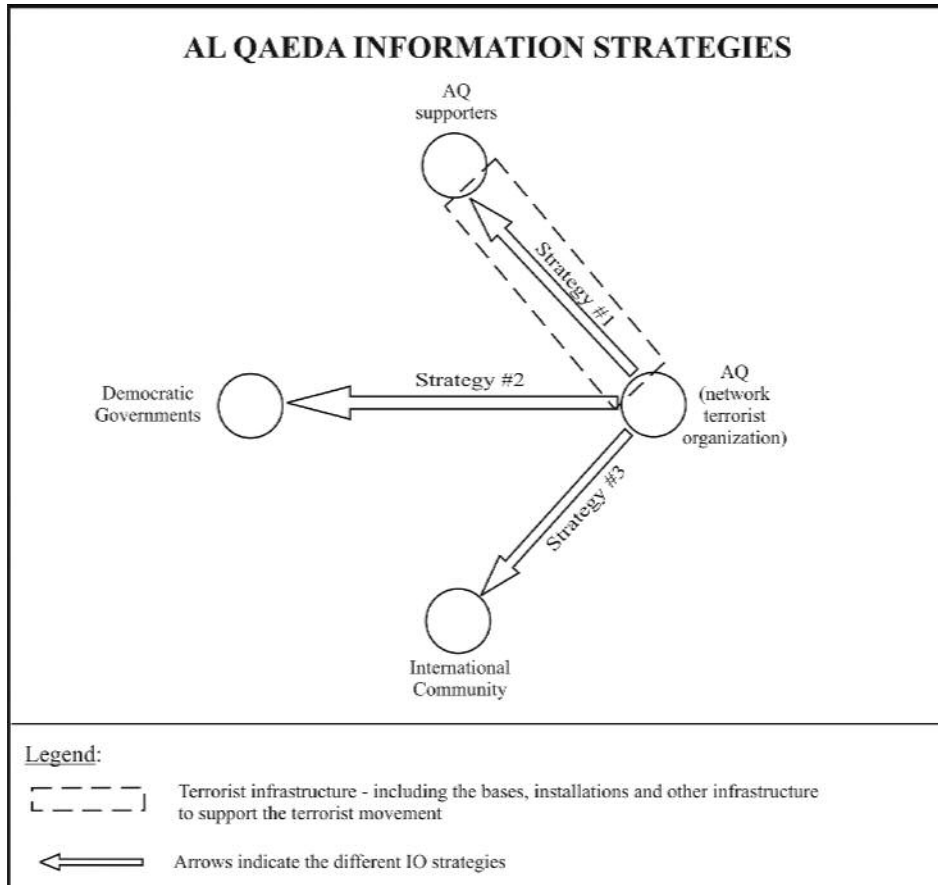


Figure 1. Al Qaeda information strategies

⁴ The “ends–ways–means” approach I have applied here to AQ was developed by Lykke at the Army War College strategy development model.

⁵ “Mystic diamond” is a general model of describing insurgencies. The model was originally created by Professor Gordon McCormick, Chair of Defense Analysis Department at the NPS.

In the model I have used some terms that require further explanation. Democratic governments are the ones actively participating in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and fighting AQ. The international community is the population of those countries who are considered to be ‘neutrals’ or fence sitters. It is important to realize that for AQ it is enough if a country’s leadership is not actively against them, because if they are not directly pursued, they can find safe heavens to hide within ungoverned areas and foster their case. Supporters in my understanding are the states and organizations who are sponsoring AQ. These are mainly found amongst the Muslim countries and organizations. Using the model as a guideline I have identified three major information strategy objectives for AQ:

1. *Information operations to win the hearts and minds of the “supporters”* in order to be able to collect resources and further support AQ operations; provide safe heavens for terrorists for training and preparation; and for recruitment purposes. This strategy has two main purposes. The first one is resource collection and maintenance of support with an additional touch of creating even more supporters within the already AQ-pro areas amongst the population. The second one is increasing the number of recruits into the organization.
2. *Information support of direct attacks against democratic governments threatening Islam.* The purpose of these spectacular attacks is to collect information before the attacks and communicate the attacks after they have been carried out in order to intimidate the population, gain recognition for AQ as a legitimate organization and “advertise” the effectiveness of the fighters. Another important aspect of this objective is to carry out direct information attacks (e.g. hacking, jamming) against government infrastructure, government security forces and civilian targets in order to generate fear.
3. *Information operations to ensure the support of the international community.* This is best described as an information challenge, a race that AQ has to win over the “fence sitters”. The purpose of this strategy is to convince the “undecided” people not to interfere with AQ.

Means – How to support and achieve AQ information strategy objectives

As with all information strategies, it is important to emphasize that there are two sides of the coin. Information operations can be defensive and offensive ones as well. AQ is a highly secretive organization and INFOSEC is necessary to ensure the survival of the active fighters. This is why OPSEC is maintained and enforced within the whole

organization at all times. The networked nature of AQ is best fitted to achieve this objective as it serves the purposes of information security.

On the offensive side AQ has to adapt different styles and methods in addressing each case and issue. As the organization is diversified and the target audiences are different in nature as well, each objective has to be achieved with different methods and even within the same objective, different techniques and tactics has to be used in order to address the variety of target audiences. This is why in introducing the various methods that should be used by AQ, I will mainly focus on the main target audience groups.

Target audiences

Al Qaeda members

The members of AQ (the core or the fighters of the organization) are critical target audiences. Al Qaeda's active fighters are critical in the success of the organization's information strategy simply because any organizational failure jeopardizes the mere existence of AQ. Perceptions count a lot, but an image of a successful terrorist organization can only be built by successful spectacular attacks carried out by the members.

Although the organization is scattered and the main safe heavens have been demolished, Al Qaeda maintains camps and training centres to this day. Decades of fighting as terrorists have given them experience in using information against a variety of enemies in a number of scenarios. Thus, Al Qaeda has an information advantage over his enemies (which is quite common in guerrilla and terrorist operations) and it also has well-developed training regiments to instruct how to use this information advantage. As part of their information strategy, they "specifically address the day to day functions, resource requirements, site selection, training objectives, physical security, and public relations."⁶ In addressing this target audience Al Qaeda's information technology is used to create "self-contained cells that operate independently of a central command."⁷

It is important to notice how UBL addresses this type of target audience. AQ members are from the Muslim community. To these people the message can best be broadcasted through television (Al Jazeera). The networked nature of AQ again plays an important part, as Muslim mosques (with their Imams supporting AQ) can be used as nodes of communication, furthermore as places to recruit, hide and train fighters as well.

⁶ GUNARATNA, R. (2002). p. 83.

⁷ GUNARATNA, R. (2002). p. 82.

Al Qaeda's supporters

The next critical target audience are the supporters or sponsors of AQ. These include, but are not limited to, individual sponsors, corporate sponsors, and state sponsors. Individual sponsors like Peter Bergen found access to UBL through London-based Khaled al-Fawwaz, the spokesman for the Advice and Reformation Committee, a group opposed to the royal family in Saudi Arabia.⁸

Al Qaeda has also created legitimate businesses like banks and charities designed both to create profits for the organization and to act as fronts for illicit activity.⁹ These corporate sponsors have a stake in Al Qaeda's existence. There are illegitimate corporations that sponsor Al Qaeda as well; however, "where possible Al Qaeda [prefers] to raise funds via legitimate businesses."¹⁰

State sponsors are also profound stakeholders in Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda represents a financially viable option to be sponsored by governments.¹¹ Most countries sponsor terrorist organizations because more overt and conventional military action is not an option. Using terrorist organizations as surrogate military forces with goals that parallel those of state sponsors gives some governments offensive options that normally do not exist.

Resourcing is probably the greatest challenge to AQ and information operations to support effective resourcing directly impact the goals and policies of the organization. To forward his message towards the supporters UBL typically prompts clerics to reiterate his fatwas in their own decrees, thereby binding devout Muslims to his cause and silencing critics of his inadequacy.¹² Development in information technology have made it possible for AQ to maintain existing relationships and transfer encrypted messages through the internet, but the resourcing of the organization is still better solved by "secure" means (using the old fashioned hawala remittance system).

Al Qaeda's enemies – democratic states

The enemies of Al Qaeda are also critical target audiences in the information strategy. The regimes and societies that Al Qaeda threatens have a clear interest in the failure of this organization. In an attempt to defend themselves, Al Qaeda's enemies must divert large sums of resources from other priorities to the Global War on Terrorism. On the contrary AQ has to employ defensive information measures to counter these attacks and apply OPSEC all the time. The offensive side of the information strategy regarding democratic

⁸ BERGEN, P. (2001). p. 2.

⁹ GUNARATNA, R. (2002). p. 61.

¹⁰ GUNARATNA, R. (2002). p. 67.

¹¹ BERGEN, P. (2001). p. 38.

¹² GUNARATNA, R. (2002). p. 47.

states is pretty clear. AQ has to collect information to carry out attacks and “advertise” the attacks after they have been carried out. UBL’s aim is to intimidate the population of democratic states, gain recognition for AQ as a legitimate organization. The internet again is an extremely useful tool to achieve these objectives. The western mass media is also broadcasting images of superterrorists and terrorist events which is in some ways an involuntary support of UBL’s agenda. In fact UBL does not even have to invest into this strategy, as the international media is kind enough to help him out in this matter. The news are out there, and most of the world’s population is listening to them.

The international community – fence sitters

Al Qaeda’s successes have brought them greater advancement of their goals and ideology. Every bin Laden message released to the media now gets global attention. Al Qaeda has adopted different strategies in the past, but its ideals and intentions have changed little. Therefore, continued success by Al Qaeda guarantees that UBL’s message will be heard by the largest audience possible. This information strategy (if correctly employed) in turn can support AQ’s overall goal and help to convince those states and organizations who are undecided towards AQ to “stay away” from the fight. The message in this case has to be aimed at the largest possible target group. All media sources (TV, internet, etc.) can be used to forward the message.

Moreover, Al Qaeda’s message to the world, however simple and profound, is established in centuries of politicized religion and theological study. For example, “bin Laden’s constant referral to American forces in Saudi Arabia as ‘crusaders’ draws a parallel to Christian soldiers who fought Islamic warriors for the religious territories.”¹³ Bin Laden himself constantly refers to Allah and Islam in his fatwas in an attempt to cast himself in the light of Allah’s representative on earth. Thus, “he can manipulate perceptions and misrepresent religion as the license of his authority.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, according to the very law of Islam that bin Laden preaches, he is not authorized to decree fatwas – only clerics can.¹⁵

¹³ BERGEN, P. (2001). *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*. New York: The Free Press, p. 28.

¹⁴ GUNARATNA, R. (2002). *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 51.

¹⁵ GUNARATNA, R. (2002). *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 7.

The use of technology in cyberwar and netwar

Al Qaeda is an organization with a very high degree of technology that uses the standard technical systems found in most multinational organizations. Al Qaeda's roots during the fight against the Soviets built a cadre of insurgent fighters and resource networks that are clandestine, and AQ has generated enough resources since then to be advanced and use high tech equipment if needed for achieving information strategy objectives.

UBL makes sure that although Al Qaeda's message is rooted in ancient religion, and even though the cadre of Al Qaeda who delivers it are experienced with decades of politicized religion, the terrorist organization uses contemporary technical systems to disseminate its intent. Fax, email, phone, encryption, and satellites are common equipment used for communications these days. AQ training camps also teach progressive tactics that include excellent counterfeiting and forgery to counter the many population control measures implemented by western democracies.

Moreover computer hacking is also a convenient mean to obtain information about possible targets, raise funds and to carry out direct attacks against information systems. It also has to be emphasized though, that writers enamoured of the flashy, high-tech aspects of the information revolution have often depicted *netwar*¹⁶ and *cyberwar* as a term for computerized aggression waged via stand-off attacks in cyberspace – that is as a trendy synonym for infowar, information operations, hactivism, cyberterrorism, cybotage, etc.¹⁷ In the case of Al Qaeda while it is important to analyze the aspects of cyberwar, as a looming form of military conflict, it is more important to concentrate on the social and cultural aspects of the threat, and realize that netwar should be the primary focus. Netwar is a parallel concept about information-age conflict at the less military, low-intensity, more social end of the spectrum. Information revolution surely favours the rise of network forms of organisations, doctrine and strategy. Through netwar, numerous dispersed small groups, using the latest communications technologies could act conjointly across great distances and the netwar form of warfare enables them to enjoy both low-visibility and a high survivability (both of which are the main

¹⁶ JOHN ARQUILLA and DAVID RONFELDT fielded the netwar concept in the first journal article “*Cyberwar is coming*” (1993), then provided a full exposition in a RAND study “*The advent of Netwar*” (1966). Additional insights were advanced in the concluding paper “*In Athena's Camp*” (1997). Elaborations appeared in multi-authored RAND volumes e.g. “*Countering the new terrorism*” (LESSER et al., 1999). Their new study “*Swarming and the future of conflict*” (2000) generally advances their view that swarming is likely to become the dominant approach to conflict across the spectrum, including among netwar actors.

¹⁷ For an interesting paper by a leading proponent of hactivism, see STEPHAN WRAY, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and the World Wide Web of Hactivism: A Mapping of Extraparliamentarian Direct Action Net Politics*, paper for a conference on The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory, Drake University, November 1998, www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/wwwhack.html.

problems in fighting against a networked non-state actor). Technology should therefore not only be seen as the means to carry out attacks, but primarily as an enabler to launch networked attacks against the targets and reach the different target audiences.

Analyzing the threat in the spectrum of cyberwar is also highly important. According to an August 2005 computer security report by IBM, more than 237 million overall security attacks were reported globally during the first half of the year. Government agencies were targeted the most, reporting more than 54 million attacks, while manufacturing ranked second with 36 million attacks, financial services ranked third with approximately 34 million, and healthcare received more than 17 million attacks. The most frequent targets for these attacks, all occurring in the first half of 2005, were government agencies and industries in the United States (12 million), followed by New Zealand (1.2 million), and China (1 million).¹⁸ Hacking is also an important aspect in funding organised crime and terrorist organisations. A 2004 survey by an internet security company, covering 450 networks in 35 countries, found that hacking had become a profitable criminal pursuit.¹⁹ Figures from the National Hi-Tech Crime Unit in England show that, in 2003, at least 83 per cent of U.K. companies were targeted by hackers in attempts to seize control of their systems.²⁰

This suggests that linkages between criminal and terror groups may allow terror networks to expand and undertake large attacks internationally by leveraging criminal sources, money, and transit routes and AQ is surely one of the main beneficiaries of this newly emerging trend.

Methods

In order to determine which methods to use in order to achieve the of information strategy objectives I have applied some of the most recent IO types²¹ in order to better describe the various methods used by AQ. As it can be seen on the figure (Figure 2) UBL is able to utilize many of the existing forms of Information Operations in order to achieve the information objectives. These methods are as follows: physical destruction, military deception, operations security, electronic warfare, psychological operations, computer network operations and public information. The list of methods applied here is not exhaustive, rather just a sample of what means can UBL use in order to achieve his goals.

¹⁸ Data based on the CRS report for Congress (RL 33123), *Terrorist Capabilities for Cyberattack*, (Library of Congress, 2005 October 10), [www.crs.org].

¹⁹ Counterpane Internet Security, *Attack Trends 2005*, June 2005, [http://www.schneier.com/essay-085.pdf]

²⁰ *Hi-Tech Crime: The Impact on U.K. Business 2005*, 2004 Survey, [http://www.nhtcu.org/media/documents/publications/8817_Survey.pdf]

²¹ HAIG ZS., VÁRHEGYI L., (2005), p. 187.

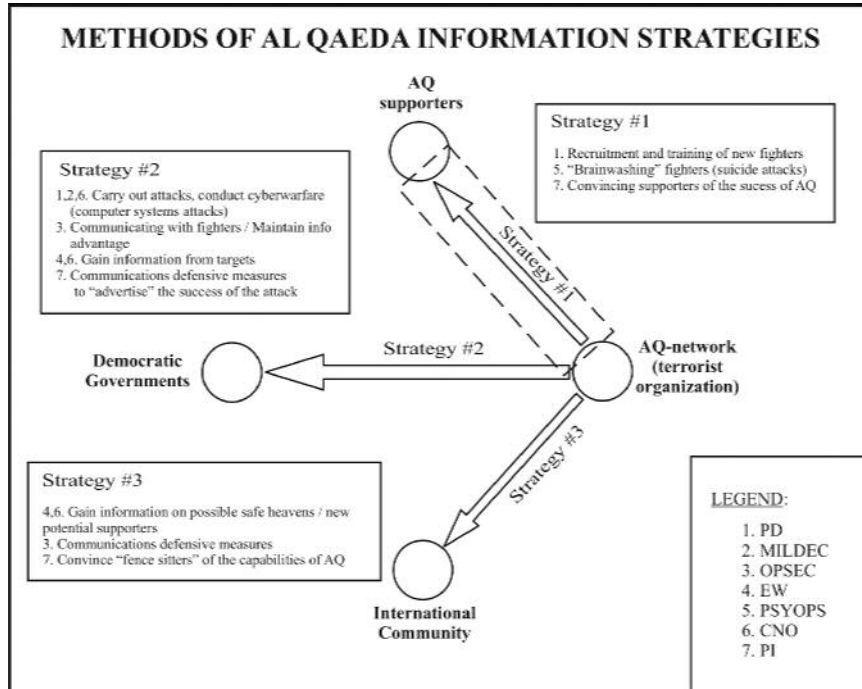


Figure 2. Methods of AQ information strategies

Summary

It can be concluded that none of the terrorist organizations commit actions randomly or senselessly. Al Qaeda is no exception. I am convinced that the information strategy of the organization forms an integral part and has a high emphasis within the overall strategy. Al Qaeda wants maximum publicity to be generated by actions, which result in continued support and growing recruitment capacity of the organization; moreover, aims at the intimidation of western population to generate fear and attain the overall objectives.

With the application of the "ends-ways-means" method my intent was to draw a picture of AQ's information strategy. I conclude that advanced technical systems are easily available to AQ. With the resources available, the terrorist organization can be on par with what one might expect of any well developed networked organization operating in today's world. The technology can fully support the wide variety of methods UBL uses to address the various target audiences and achieve his goals in information strategy.

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