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# Exploring Terrorist Targeting Preferences

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Martin C. Libicki, Peter Chalk, Melanie Sisson

Prepared for the  
Department of Homeland Security



Homeland Security

A RAND INFRASTRUCTURE, SAFETY, AND ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM

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## Preface

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Each year, federal, state, and local governments spend billions of dollars protecting the United States against acts of terrorism, with human, military, and capital resources allocated in ways that reflect each potential target's value and vulnerability. Yet those buildings, institutions, and icons that the United States perceives as being of utmost value may not be those that its potential attackers perceives that way. That one potential attack may hurt the United States more than another does not mean that terrorists believe that the first would advance their goals any more than would the second.

The goal of this investigation is to assess on what basis al Qaeda would select targets within the United States. Four hypotheses have been considered. The coercion hypothesis posits that acts of terrorism would be designed to cause pain and thereby influence U.S. foreign policy. The damage hypothesis posits that they are designed to hurt the U.S. economy and thereby reduce the means available to support U.S. foreign policy. The rally hypothesis posits that such acts are meant to rally support in the Muslim world. The franchise hypothesis assumes that al Qaeda has limits on its ability to direct terrorist acts and, instead, supports such acts carried out by like-minded terrorists. This study tested these hypotheses by examining major terrorist events (associated with al Qaeda) over the last dozen years, looking at al Qaeda writings, and soliciting the informed judgment of experts.

This study was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate, Office of Comparative Studies.

The information presented here should be of interest to homeland security policymakers and members of the intelligence community who focus on terrorism.

This monograph is one of two under the study “Understanding Terrorist Motives, Targets, and Responses,” with Martin Libicki as principal investigator.

## **The RAND Homeland Security Program**

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## Summary

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Each year, federal, state, and local governments spend billions of dollars protecting the United States against acts of terrorism, with human, military, and capital resources allocated in ways that reflect the value and vulnerability of each potential target. Yet those buildings, institutions, and icons perceived as being of utmost value to the United States may not be perceived as such to its potential attackers. That one potential attack may hurt the United States more than another does not mean terrorists believe the first would advance their goals any more than would the second.

It may thus be helpful to understand what the targeting priorities of terrorists are. This monograph focuses on al Qaeda as an entity, which is presumed to have an overarching goal, a predominant method (i.e., terrorism), and one or more objectives that further the goal and that, in turn, can be advanced through terrorism. We define al Qaeda as the residual network imbued with the ideological outlook of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri and acting according to their strategic direction. All others associated with al Qaeda can be said to have degrees of membership with certain operatives relatively close to the leadership, and other operatives pledging their affiliation but having only tangential links to al Qaeda's leadership. Al Qaeda's stated overarching goal appears to be the re-establishment of an Islamic caliphate, which would eventually govern the *umma* (the entire Muslim community). Its rhetoric, though, also points to a companion goal: driving Western militaries and influences out of the *umma*. Although the monograph presumes that al Qaeda's targeting decisions are taken



solely to further its overarching goals, its rhetoric often justifies attacks in juridical terms (i.e., pain is imposed on the West to balance out the pain that the West has imposed on the Muslim world) and the possibility that terrorism has become an end in itself cannot be entirely ruled out.

Four hypotheses have been developed to explain how terrorism may advance al Qaeda's goals. The *coercion hypothesis* posits that al Qaeda believes the optimal means of fostering the creation of an Islamic caliphate is by coercing the United States and its Western allies to leave the Muslim world in general and the Arab heartland in particular. It does so by raising the human cost of remaining in the region. The *damage hypothesis* contends that al Qaeda seeks to reduce the ability of the United States to intervene in the Islamic world. Its targets and attack modalities would be designed to inflict a large amount of damage on the economic foundations of U.S. military, political, and commercial power. The *rally hypothesis* presumes that al Qaeda believes the optimal means of creating an Islamic caliphate is through the international radicalization of Islam, creating a coterie of those dedicated to overthrowing existing governments and eliminating U.S. presence from their countries. Its targets and modes of attack would be designed to inspire Muslims to engage in jihad against the West. The *franchise hypothesis* posits that although al Qaeda retains its influence and reputation, it lacks the resources necessary to carry out attacks itself or directly control the acts of others. Believing in the need to maintain fear and embolden supporters, al Qaeda serves as an inspiration, well-wisher, supporter, and perhaps clearinghouse for the plans and operations of affiliated jihadist groups. The franchise hypothesis applies to affiliates, which we use to refer to any militant jihadist entity, ranging from a small cell of a few individuals to a major organization that supports al Qaeda's goals but is not directly controlled by al Qaeda. The monograph attempts to determine the relative explanatory weight of each hypothesis by using three methods: (1) an analysis of major terrorist attacks associated with al Qaeda over the last dozen years, (2) an assessment of al Qaeda's statements, and (3) consultation with experts on al Qaeda.

Fourteen terrorist incidents ranging from the 1993 World Trade Center attack to the 2004 bombing of the Hilton Taba Resort in South Sinai, Egypt, were examined.<sup>1</sup> Before this analysis, a correlation was developed between the various hypotheses and the characteristics of the attack that might best fit each hypothesis. For instance, an attack consistent with the coercion hypothesis would tend to evidence large numbers of casualties; those consistent with the damage hypothesis would more likely be associated with direct and indirect economic damage. In the case of the franchise hypothesis, evidence about the actual perpetrators was brought into the analysis. Most attacks, upon analysis, were found to be associated with two or more hypotheses (e.g., the September 11 attack was consistent with the coercion, damage, and rally hypotheses). Our result is portrayed in Figure S.1. It must be cautioned that all attacks since September 11, 2001 have taken place overseas, a (fortunate) circumstance that may limit the ability to extrapolate from subsequent attacks to predict the nature of the next attack on the U.S. homeland.

An analysis of al Qaeda statements, correlated with what experts observed, supports the relative importance of coercion and damage among the various hypotheses. Prior to 2004, many of the attacks were justified on the basis of pain for pain, with the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia, its blockade and then war against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian struggle referred to specifically. There was a coercive element implied by such statements. In 2004, however, bin Laden issued more direct statements, addressed to Europe and, then later, to the United States, that explicitly linked the cessation of violence to desired national actions.

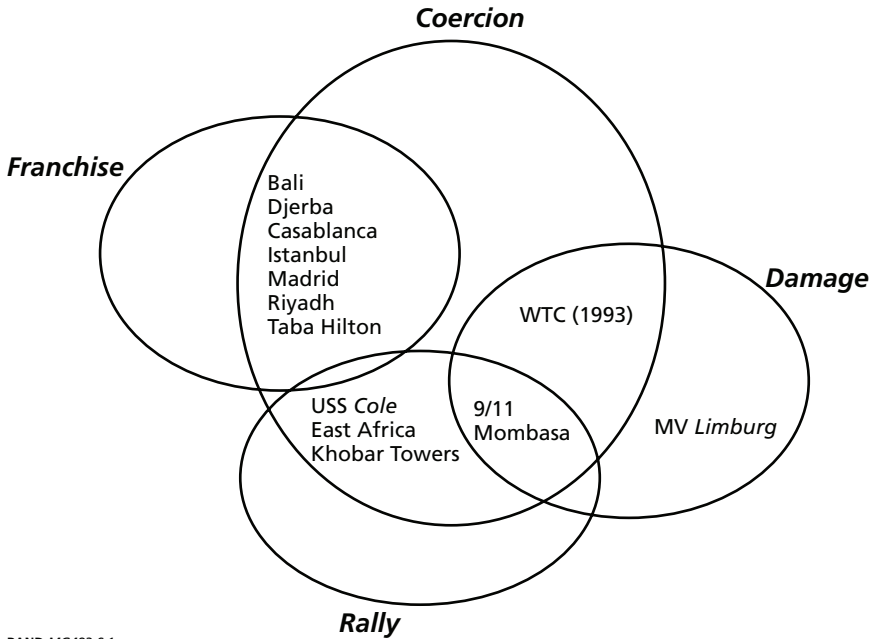
Al Qaeda's desire to damage the U.S. economy has also been a long-standing theme (e.g., bin Laden called for a boycott of U.S. goods in 1996). This theme, however, became especially prominent after September 11, 2001, when the resulting damage to the U.S. economy surprised even bin Laden. Although it may seem absurd that terrorists would be capable of bringing the U.S. economy to its knees, many

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<sup>1</sup> As of this writing, not enough was known of the July 2005 attacks in London and on the Sinai Peninsula to include them for analysis.

jihadists believe that the equally formidable Soviet Union was brought to collapse by their efforts in Afghanistan.

**Figure S.1**  
**Attack Distribution by Hypothesis**



RAND MG483-S.1

Support for the rally hypothesis is relatively weak, at least as evidenced in al Qaeda rhetoric. Al Qaeda statements tend to credit either Allah or the faith of the perpetrators to explain the power of terrorism. Statements highlight the willingness of terrorists to sacrifice their lives in support of militant jihadist goals; this is meant to inspire others. It is more likely that the facts rather than the particulars of an operation are used for inspiration; thus, selecting targets to maximize inspiration does not appear to be a strong motive.

Support for the franchise hypothesis must be inferred from the pattern of attacks. Despite the rhetorical link between what the West has done to the Muslim community, the duty of all Muslims to support jihad, and the attacks themselves, there is little rhetoric that sup-

ports or disproves the notion that al Qaeda prefers that franchisees (rather than directly commanded jihadists) carry out attacks.

What are the implications of this analysis for targeting the United States? A good deal depends on who the next attackers are. If the next attacks are carried out by local jihadists with little or no direct al Qaeda input, the priorities will reflect those of the group itself.

If al Qaeda directs the next attack, however, then coercion and damage, and, quite possibly both, are likely to influence the nature of the target. Given al Qaeda's current resource limitations, there are reasons to believe it would favor the use of suicide bombers in the United States, not least because such attacks are believed by al Qaeda to rally supporters in the Muslim world. There may also be a focus on soft (poorly defended) targets, indicating that al Qaeda is willing to use the modality of attack (i.e., suicide bombers) rather than spectacular effect to rally supporters. Two types of attacks also merit attention. One would be an attack on the food industry, notably the agricultural sector, as being within al Qaeda's limited means and having the potential to cause severe social dislocation and economic damage. The other would be the use of radiological dispersion devices (RDDs), which also meets these two criteria.

We caution that our results are suggestive rather than conclusive. Al Qaeda has not taken great pains to lay out its targeting methodology or rationale in great detail, and the assumption that the organization has a well-thought approach to targeting is exactly that. The link between al Qaeda's ends and means may also have shifted over the last dozen years. Nevertheless, the pattern of attacks combined with al Qaeda's rhetoric suggests that the coercion and damage hypotheses have primary resonance, while the rally hypothesis is secondary. Whether or not the franchise hypothesis applies to targets inside the United States depends, in large part, on whether there are potential affiliates in this country, an aspect distinct from that of motivation.



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## Glossary

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ABB	Asea Brown Boveri
ANFO	ammonium nitrate and fuel oil
CBRN	chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear
CI	critical infrastructure
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
<i>fatwa</i>	Islamic legal pronouncement
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FMD	foot-and-mouth disease
GDP	gross domestic product
GWOT	global war on terrorism
HSBC	Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation
IED	improvised explosive device
IMF	International Monetary Fund
Ji	Jemaah Islamiyah
kg	kilogram
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MANPADS	man-portable air defense system
NA	Northern Alliance



OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
RDD	radiological dispersal device
<i>sharia</i>	Islamic (Koranic) law
UK	United Kingdom
<i>umma</i>	the entire community of Muslims
WTC	World Trade Center

## Introduction

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A farmer owns \$2 million worth of buffalo and \$1 million worth of goats. They are housed in two equally large sheds, one for each herd. He faces two threats: hurricanes and a band of thieves. Reinforced roofs will protect the animals against high winds. Tall fences will protect them against thieves. Unfortunately, the farmer only has enough time to reinforce one roof, and only enough money to construct one tall fence.

In deciding which to protect from hurricanes, the choice to protect \$2 million worth of buffalo rather than \$1 million worth of goats is easy. After all, Mother Nature does not discriminate between the two and so each is equally at risk.

The choice to protect the buffalo rather than the goats from the band of thieves appears equally easy, assuming these thieves value the animals as much as does the farmer.

But he has learned the thieves, despite their intent to maximize profits, find buffalo disgusting to handle. The farmer therefore chooses to forego placing taller fences around his buffalo—as doing so would serve only to protect a commodity that is not at risk—and elects instead to fortify the shed housing the goats.

This parable illustrates how one might apply a rational allocation process to manage risk efficiently. The farmer, faced with a threat to his herds, chooses that course of action he believes will best leverage his limited resources against loss. When mitigating the risk posed by a hurricane—a random event dictated by uncontrollable atmospheric

and environmental factors—the only variable that should affect the farmer’s decision is the value of each asset. When considering the risk posed by a band of thieves, however, comparing the relative value of each asset alone may not ensure the most efficient use of the farmer’s funds. To the contrary, a farmer who knows something about the preferences of the thieves will be better equipped to assess the threat he faces and thus protect himself against the least desirable outcome.

The United States faces a similar dilemma in face of terrorism. Here, if the U.S. government is the “farmer,” the “thieves” are terrorist groups—in particular, al Qaeda. Each year, the federal, state, local, and tribal governments spend billions of dollars protecting the United States and U.S. property against acts of terrorism, with human, military, and capital resources allocated in ways that reflect the value and vulnerability of each venue to be protected. Yet those buildings, institutions, and icons perceived as being of utmost value to the United States may not be perceived as such to its potential attackers; the country, in other words, may be protecting its buffalo when really it is the goats that are at risk.

On the basis of such considerations, this monograph seeks to assist the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in its efforts to manage the risk posed to the United States by terrorists who are directed by or at least associated with al Qaeda and its network. We define al Qaeda as the residual network imbued with ideological outlook of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri and acting according to their strategic direction. All others associated with al Qaeda can be said to have degrees of membership<sup>1</sup> with certain operatives relatively close to the leadership, and other operatives pledging their affiliation but having only tangential links to al Qaeda’s leadership.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as a “fuzzy set” after Zadeh (1965).

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman (2002, pp. 309–310) identifies four levels of al Qaeda operational styles: the professional cadre, the trained amateurs, local walk-ins, and like-minded insurgents, guerrillas, and terrorists. A similar but not identical fourfold division was offered by terrorist expert Gustavo de Aristegui

First, there is the original network, the one that committed 9/11. . . . [Second] is the ad-hoc terrorist network, consisting of franchise organizations that Al Qaeda created—often to replace ones that weren’t bloody enough—in countries such as the Philippines,

The probability that al Qaeda or its affiliates will select any given target and attack modality can be described as a function of two variables: capability and motive. Capability describes the interaction between al Qaeda's resources, its assessment of that target's vulnerability, and the attendant calculation of the costs associated with carrying out an attack. Capability, alone, says nothing about what a group wants to do. Motive encompasses the relationship between the group's goals and its perception of the value of attacking a given target *as a way of fostering these goals*. Intent alone is insufficient to predict what will be attacked because feasibility must be taken into account. Al Qaeda, for instance, attacked the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad during 1995 after the U.S. embassy proved too hard to penetrate.<sup>3</sup>

This study sets out to understand the motives (rather than the capabilities) of al Qaeda-linked jihadists<sup>4</sup> and to use that knowledge to identify principles that may drive their targeting and selection practices among various U.S. targets.<sup>5</sup> It focuses on what might motivate attacks in the United States (even though all but two of the attacks it examines occurred outside the United States). It seeks to address how

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Jordan, and Algeria. . . . [Third is] a strategic union of like-minded companies. . . . Hamas is in, or almost in. . . . [Osama bin Laden] is trying to tempt Hezbollah to join, but they are Shia, and many Sunnis are opposed to them. . . . [Fourth consists of] imitators, emulators. (Wright, 2004, p. 44)

<sup>3</sup> From al-Zawahiri (2001)

Prior to the attack, the team entrusted with the bombing sent us word saying that it could hit both the U.S. and Egyptian embassies if we could come up with an additional sum of money. We had provided what we could, however, and could not provide any more. Hence the team focused on blowing up the Egyptian Embassy. It left the embassy's ruined building as an eloquent and clear message.

Elsewhere he writes, "After extensive surveillance, it was decided that hitting the U.S. Embassy was beyond the team's capability."

<sup>4</sup> This monograph uses the term *jihadists* to refer to militant jihadists so as to differentiate the great majority of Muslims from the few who interpret *holy war* and *jihad* in a narrow, violent fashion.

<sup>5</sup> Although there are targets overseas that are identified with the United States (e.g., embassies), our focus is on the homeland, largely because this research is being undertaken for the Department of Homeland Security.

al Qaeda believes such assaults will further its strategic and tactical agenda. Answering this question should shed light on what targets or attack modalities the group might focus on in the U.S. homeland.

Chapter Two provides support for the contention that al Qaeda is a strategic actor and presents four hypotheses about al Qaeda's motive in organizing, supporting, or carrying out terrorist attacks. Chapter Three tests the explanatory power of these hypotheses by developing quantitative and qualitative measures that suggest the effects a terrorist attack is intended to produce. Chapter Four then subjects each hypothesis to a "common sense" check against al Qaeda statements and the assessments of a community of al Qaeda and other terrorism experts. Chapter Five discusses the ramifications of the findings of Chapters Three and Four in terms of possible attack modalities.

## What Drives al Qaeda's Choice of Targets?

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To establish a meaningful link between al Qaeda's strategic goals and how it uses terrorism as a means to achieve them, it is first necessary to establish that al Qaeda is, in fact, a goal-driven organization. In our definition, a group is goal-driven if its actions are undertaken in an effort to affect the future state of the world. *World* can be locally or globally defined—a man can rob in order to improve his own circumstances; Chechen terrorists took schoolchildren hostage to put pressure on Russia to leave Chechnya. In both instances, the actor has identified a goal and selected a means of pursuing it.

Oftentimes, to achieve one ultimate overarching goal, a group must first achieve a number of other objectives—typically less ambitious, more immediate, and focused—as necessary precursors. The ability ultimately to achieve the overarching goal will then depend on whether the group can achieve the subordinate objectives cumulatively over time.

We proceed on the basis of the contention that al Qaeda maintains such a hierarchy of goals with one or more subordinate objectives for each goal. It is frequently asserted that al Qaeda's ultimate goal lies in establishing an Islamic caliphate, initially based out of one country but eventually extending across the whole *umma* (the global Islamic community). Achieving this goal would dramatically alter the way the world looks in the future.

Al Qaeda may also have a more immediate objective that it believes must be achieved in order to arrive at that ultimate goal: driving the United States and its interests out of the Islamic world. In al

Qaeda's eyes, the United States is the chief obstacle to fulfilling the group's Islamic vision. Shortly after Iraq invaded Kuwait, Osama bin Laden, already quite well known for his role in Afghanistan, made an offer to the Saudi royal family to liberate the small Middle Eastern state (and defend Riyadh's oil fields) with his own mujahideen. The Saudis turned him down in favor of hosting U.S. forces for their protection; nevertheless, they reportedly promised him that the foreigners would leave once the war was over. However, the promised departure did not take place.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the United States has been at the forefront of bin Laden's attention (and hostility)—the country has been consistently demonized for having occupied the holy sites in particular and the Islamic world in general.<sup>2</sup>

Among al Qaeda's charges against the U.S. government is that it "artificially" supports apostate regimes that have forsaken the Muslim ideal by adopting Western concepts of secularism and materialism.<sup>3</sup> In theory, these apostate regimes present another obstacle to achieving the caliphate, so that to realize its ultimate goal, al Qaeda would need to take simultaneous action against both the far enemy—the United States—and the near enemies—morally corrupt Arab governments—that the U.S. government supports. In other words, al Qaeda may believe that it cannot change the apostate governments until the influence of the United States and other Western countries has been effectively eliminated.

Logically, the near enemy should be central; the far enemy, secondary. Rhetorically, however, the opposite seems to be the case for al Qaeda.<sup>4</sup> In other words, driving the United States from the *umma* may

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<sup>1</sup> This account comes from Wright (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Bin Laden's first *fatwa* (issued in 1996), "Declaration of War Against Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," is undeniably self-descriptive in this regard. The *fatwa* is found in Alexander and Swetnam (2001, Appendix 1A, pp. 1–22).

<sup>3</sup> Chipman (2003). During the 1990s, bin Laden sent trained terrorists into Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and any other country he believed violated Islamic ideals.

<sup>4</sup> Although according to Sedgwick (2004, p. 813), "most opinion tend[s] toward the second view—that the United States is incidental to the real struggle, which is against the established regimes in the Middle East." Jason Burke (2004, pp. 85, 162–166) makes a strong

be an end in itself, rather than just a means to the goal of a caliphate. Many statements made by bin Laden, either formally or in interviews, dwell at length on the pain and humiliation inflicted on Muslims by the United States to the point where overthrowing apostate governments and empowering truly Islamic governments (that is, those that enforce Allah's rather than humans' law) appears to be overshadowed.<sup>5</sup> For example, while al Qaeda has labeled many countries as targets for overthrow, conspicuously absent have been references to Syria, Libya, and, for the most part, Saddam Hussein's Iraq<sup>6</sup>—all three clearly secular, but also stridently anti-American governments. Indeed, it seems that if apostate governments are to be overthrown, it is not so much because they are apostate, but because they have encouraged, welcomed, or at least acquiesced<sup>7</sup> to the presence of U.S. power in their country.<sup>8</sup> According to Ayman al-Zawahiri's assistant, Ahmed al-Majjar, "I myself heard bin Laden say that our main objective is now

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case that, when al Qaeda began to coalesce in 1989, its clear target was apostate regimes, but between 1995 and 1996, it switched emphasis to opposing the United States.

<sup>5</sup> In bin Laden's November 24, 2002, letter to the United States, he calls on the United States to do seven things *in the following order*: (1) adopt Islam, (2) stop its oppression, lies, immorality, and debauchery, (3) discover that it is without principles or manners, (4) stop supporting Israel, (5) leave Islamic lands, (6) end support of corrupt leaders in Islamic lands, and (7) deal with "us" on the basis of mutual interests (bin Laden, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> An exception to this can be found in what is often called "the al Qaeda manual," discovered in England (in the possession of a militant jihadist who later joined al Qaeda):

Unbelief is still the same. . . . It is the same unbelief that drove Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, Gadhafi, Hafez Assad, Saleh, Fahed—Allah's curse be upon the non-believing leaders. . . . The confrontation that Islam calls for with these godless and apostate regimes, does not know Socratic debates, Platonic ideals nor Aristotelian diplomacy. But it knows the dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing, and destruction, and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine-gun. (*The al Qaeda Manual*, undated)

<sup>7</sup> Bin Laden's 1996 fatwa affirmed some of the things it thought had stripped the Saudi regime of its legitimacy:

the inability of the regime to protect the country, and allowing the enemy of the *Ummah*—the American crusader forces—to occupy the land for the longest of years. The crusader forces became the main cause of our disastrous condition. (bin Laden, 1996)

<sup>8</sup> In a mid-2003 speech, however, bin Laden suggests that these countries may not have had much choice in the matter.



limited to one state only, the United States, and involved waging a guerrilla war against all U.S. interests, not only in the Arab region but also throughout the world” (Wright, 2002). More recently, Al-Hijazi (a senior operational commander close to bin Laden) instructed al Qaeda members not to confront the governments of Islamic countries, clarifying that U.S. citizens are the main target of the organization, wherever they may be (“Al-Qa’ida Commander in Iraq,” 2003).

To the extent that this rhetoric is an accurate reflection of al Qaeda’s motivations, it appears that success is measured not so much by terrorism’s direct contribution to restoring the caliphate, but by its role in driving Washington out of the Islamic world.<sup>9</sup>

## The al Qaeda Targeting Process: Four Hypotheses

Driving the United States out of the Islamic world is an ambitious endeavor. How does al Qaeda purport to achieve this goal? Multiple strategies are possible, each of which drives even more subordinate objectives. We present four plausible alternatives here: coerce, cause damage, rally supporters, and support franchisee operations.<sup>10</sup> To achieve any one of these objectives, al Qaeda will need to choose and

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In an interview with some world press agencies, [Saudi] Prince Talal bin Abd Al-Aziz said: “Were we to tell the American forces to leave, they wouldn’t.” That is candor. Also, the Qatari foreign minister said: “If we tell the American government and the American forces to leave Qatar, we’ll be wiped off the map.” (“A New bin Laden Speech,” 2003)

<sup>9</sup> To some extent, the United States stands for the West in general. Bin Laden’s reference, for instance, to 80 years of oppression against the Palestinians has to be a reference to Great Britain, which governed the relevant territory from the World War I settlement through 1948. His animus seems directed against military rather than economic intervention (although the West is criticized for suppressing oil export prices). At one point, bin Laden went out of his way to indicate that he had nothing against Sweden, even though the country is home to many multinational corporations such as Asea Brown Boveri (ABB), Ericsson, and Scania. Nevertheless, some European security officials believe that al Qaeda has a presence in Sweden and could be planning attacks there.

<sup>10</sup> In a sense, some mix of these four hypotheses can be ascribed to other terrorists. It is likely, however, that the relative mix associated with any one terrorist group will be influenced by its unique operational setting and, where relevant, position vis-à-vis other competing terrorist entities.

successfully carry out appropriate actions. In general, the group has shown that it believes in committing acts of terrorism to achieve its ends. But what kind of attacks specifically? And on what targets? This will depend on which objective the group is pursuing. Certain targets will be particularly effective if coercion is the objective, for example. Others might be better chosen if the objective is to cause damage. In this way, the group's strategic motives can help explain the organization's calculations about the relative value of alternative targets and attack modalities.<sup>11</sup> Al Qaeda will see certain targets as more or less valuable and attractive in relation to its immediate goals.

Three of our hypotheses—coercion, damage, and rally—assume that al Qaeda *does* retain some capability to select targets for attack. The franchise hypothesis assumes that even if al Qaeda can rank targets globally, it cannot act on its preferences very precisely.

### **The Coercion Hypothesis**

As a general rule, terrorism causes coercion through attacks that create casualties, and, by implication, promises more of the same. Although coercion can also work by putting economic values at risk, the degree of terror (i.e., fear) associated with damage alone is far less than when lives are at risk. In this hypothesis, al Qaeda believes the optimal means of fostering the creation of an Islamic caliphate is by coercing the United States and its Western allies to leave the Arab heartland. Consequently, the group's target selection and attack modalities will be designed to raise the human cost of remaining in the region.

The implications of this hypothesis for al Qaeda's process of selecting targets and modes of attack are succinct: strikes will usually be designed to maximize human casualties. A long series of small attacks on soft targets—explosions in night clubs or car bombs—will be acceptable, though perhaps not as desirable as an event on the order of September 11. Attacks on the U.S. homeland will be particularly attractive, both because civilian targets are “softer” than are the heavily

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<sup>11</sup> An attack modality is how a target is attacked, which may, in turn, affect the resulting level of casualties and damage. The consequences of attacking a building with a truck bomb are different than if someone put poison gas in its ventilation system.

fortified U.S. outposts in the Muslim world, and because pain inflicted upon the U.S. population itself is likely to have a larger political effect.<sup>12</sup> According to this hypothesis, al Qaeda hopes that the U.S. government will be unable to withstand the public pressure generated by strikes perpetrated within its borders, causing it to recalculate the wisdom of remaining in the Muslim world and, ultimately, hastening its departure. The coercion hypothesis was most clearly demonstrated (albeit not with the United States as the primary target) with the bombings of commuter trains in Madrid just prior to the Spanish election.

To the extent that al Qaeda assumes, and is confident about, the risk-averse nature of the U.S. psyche, in aiming to coerce, it may also consider assaults that create a level of fear disproportionate to the actual cost in human life. Repeated low-level attacks on the U.S. food supply, for example, or a series of suicide strikes could be appealing in this regard. With the goal of coercion in mind, the group might also carry out assaults that target particularly politically influential personalities, industries, or organizations. In addition, this hypothesis calls attention to attacks designed to influence specific decisionmakers. If al Qaeda believes that the President of the United States is particularly sensitive to the health care sector, for instance, it might conclude that the most convincing course of action is to target hospitals consistently.

A variant of the coercion hypothesis suggests that attacks, far from being designed to drive the United States out of the Muslim world, are, in fact, calculated to goad the country progressively deeper into the region. The objective, in this case, would be to move the faithful into the al Qaeda camp by highlighting Washington as a repressive, imperialist power that is unjustifiably intervening in the affairs of the Islamic world. While the goading variant of coercion shares the same general purpose as the rally hypothesis—both seek polarization—the mechanisms for each are different. In the latter, reactions are intended to occur *directly* in the Islamic world, meaning that attacks must impress and have resonance within Muslim communities. In the former, by contrast, because effects depend upon a particular U.S.

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<sup>12</sup> Military forces, by contrast, are harder to hit. Equally, the deaths of soldiers—given the nature of their jobs—are less likely to elicit shocking reactions.

response, assaults need to impress U.S. audiences. The sought-for U.S. response, in turn, would be of the sort that alienates the Islamic world and thereby increases al Qaeda's support and following.

### **The Damage Hypothesis**

This hypothesis contends that al Qaeda considers the optimal means of creating an Islamic caliphate to be reducing the United States' ability to intervene in the Islamic world.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the group's selection of targets and attack modalities will be designed to inflict a large amount of damage on the economic foundations of U.S. military, political, and commercial power. This hypothesis posits that al Qaeda believes its attacks can unleash a "tidal wave" of effects that, by reverberating throughout the entire U.S. financial system, can bring the economy to a complete halt.

The damage hypothesis suggests that al Qaeda will select targets and modes of attack based upon their ability to undercut the U.S. economy. This may mean maximization of the direct dollar value of an attack's destructiveness, or the degradation of infrastructure vital to commercial activity—for example, power lines, transportation systems, or financial hubs. For these purposes, attacks in cyberspace might appear particularly attractive if the potential result is substantial economic dislocation. Another feasible methodology would be to strike targets that will disrupt consumer patterns and produce ripple effects. Assaults against the food chain or shopping malls could be instrumental in this regard, as each of these attack modalities can be expected to have consequences that radiate well beyond narrow commercial and agricultural enterprises.

It should be noted that, in many cases, the indirect ramifications of an attack are both broader and larger than their direct conse-

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<sup>13</sup> One cannot rule out the possibility that al Qaeda wishes to cause economic damage as a second form of coercion. For purposes of analysis, however, we have chosen to focus on al Qaeda's potential objective of causing damage rather than attempt to make a separate distinction between damage caused to coerce and damage caused for instrumental purposes. Al Qaeda's statements tend to associate the deaths they cause with coercion (and justice) and tend to associate the damage they cause with bankruptcy (and leverage, e.g., our dollar of effort cost them a million dollars).

quences. Psychological effects are often fundamental to the depression of economic activity (see, for example, de Boef and Kellstedt, 2004; and Santos and Haimes, 2002). Although far more people died in the World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11 than on the airplanes that struck the towers, much of the economic damage in the weeks and months that followed was caused by the public's fear of flying, not by its unwillingness to work in tall buildings.

As argued in the aforementioned discussion of rationality, the actual causes of the economy's downturn are irrelevant; it is al Qaeda's perception of the attack's consequences that matters.<sup>14</sup> There is clear evidence that bin Laden was impressed with the extent of *indirect* economic damage wrought by September 11, and attributed the subsequent deepening of the country's recession to the attack.

### The Rally Hypothesis

According to this hypothesis, al Qaeda believes the optimal means of creating an Islamic caliphate is through the international radicalization of Islam, creating a coterie of those whose beliefs lead them to advocate the violent overthrow of existing regimes in favor of those who enforce *sharia* (Islamic law) and eliminate U.S. presence from their countries. Consequently, its selection of targets and modes of attack will be designed to inspire Muslims outside its organizational framework to engage in jihad against the West.<sup>15</sup> In general, attacks spectacular in size, nature, or consequence serve this purpose best, emphasizing the group's power, underscoring its operational credibility, and "proving" that Allah is on its side. In these ways, attacks of this scale provide a

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<sup>14</sup> If it makes decisions at all in terms of numbers, al Qaeda may be counting on a multiplier effect, in that a one-percent reduction in national income may lead to a larger percentage reduction in the ability of the United States to project power into the Islamic world.

<sup>15</sup> Examined more closely, the rally effect may influence different constituencies in different ways. Both may focus attention, but the spectacular aspect of the attack may yield financial and other softer forms of support, while the martyrdom aspect may inspire individuals to seek out al Qaeda in order to perform their own acts of martyrdom.

powerful mechanism to embolden current radicals, attract new adherents, and positively sway “fence-sitters.”<sup>16</sup>

Spectacular attacks additionally elevate al Qaeda's status in relation to competitor jihadist groups and may align those groups more closely with al Qaeda's orientation, much as a strong magnetic field aligns magnetized particles along a dominant axis. Although bin Laden's movement is now clearly the primary challenger of perceived U.S. military and cultural imperialism, the conflict between Islam and the West is not the only contest taking place in the Muslim world. Factional fights—between Sunni Arabs and Kurds, for example—international frictions, and various forms of localism may also matter. To the extent that spectacular attacks distract populations from these comparatively circumscribed battles and rally Muslims around al Qaeda's larger ideological agenda, a rally-based strategy serves the goal of building an Islamic caliphate and kicking the United States (and the West in general) out of the *umma*.

The rally hypothesis has two implications for targeting. First, it imparts a significant bias in the choice of venues toward those familiar to the Islamic world. The Washington Monument, for example, would be considered a more useful target in attracting participants to jihad than would the Perry's Victory and International Peace Memorial in Put-in-Bay, Ohio, simply because the Washington Monument is identifiable to Muslim populations—they know what it is and what it represents. The same cannot be said about Perry's Victory and International Peace Memorial, rendering its destruction less meaningful and inspirational to current and would-be radicals. Second, and more speculatively, al Qaeda may not be interested in an attack on U.S. soil that is not of the scope of September 11. The group may reason that anything less would suggest a diminution of its power and capability, and lead to the perception among Muslims that the organization is on the wane. According to this line of thought, al Qaeda would rather forgo

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps needless to add, al Qaeda is past needing to carry out terror attacks to prove that it exists or that it merits the attention of the world's governments. The September 11 attacks did this quite adequately. Thus, any attack today would come with such attacks as its context and point of comparison.

small operations within the U.S. homeland in favor of waiting—however long it might take—to generate an attack of dramatic size, scale, and impact. Indeed, al Qaeda may well conclude that any attack capable of awing its own members will also inspire radicals (or near-radicals) existing outside its organizational framework and, as such, both promote its own standing and further the broader culture of jihad.

It is less clear whether the rally hypothesis would indicate al Qaeda is more likely to select scenarios involving multiple, simultaneous, coordinated attacks—which constitute a highly impressive logistical feat—as it is difficult to envision an optimization scheme in which a high degree of coordination emerges as an especially desirable feature in general. Nevertheless, if the attacks of September 11 had involved only one plane, it would have been a less effective attack in psychological terms (the decision to ground all subsequent airline flights would have been far less likely). Coordinated attack can be considered a signature trait of al Qaeda operations: in Kenya; Tanzania; New York; Washington, D.C.; Istanbul; Madrid; and London. Furthermore, a reversion from coordinated assaults could be interpreted as a reduction of strike tempo and, thus, could have a tempering effect on any potential motivational or inspirational outcome.

### **The Franchise Hypothesis**

The franchise hypothesis posits that, as a result of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, al Qaeda retains its influence and reputation but lacks the resources necessary to effect attacks itself or directly control the acts of others. Here, al Qaeda believes that the creation and maintenance of a general climate in which enemies are made fearful and supporters emboldened is the optimal means through which to create an Islamic caliphate. Thus, it serves as an inspiration, well-wisher, supporter, and perhaps clearinghouse for the plans and operations of affiliated jihadist groups. The franchise hypothesis applies to affiliates, which we use to refer to any militant jihadist entity, ranging from a small cell of a few individuals to a major organization that supports al Qaeda's goals but is not directly controlled by al Qaeda.

These groups may or may not submit attack scenarios to al Qaeda for approval or support,<sup>17</sup> with each evaluated against a set of predetermined criteria. Targets and attack modalities that meet the established criteria proceed to the next phase of operational planning, surveillance and assessment. Alternatively, al Qaeda operatives, with a sense of what serves the overall goal, work with franchisees to shape attacks.

Perhaps, in a world in which al Qaeda were not the sole, or even most relevant, unit of action, one might still conclude that smaller militant Islamist groups, inspired and supported by the organization's message, share much of its value structure and therefore select targets based upon similar criteria. More specifically, one could calculate that the odds that a target may be hit remain a function of al Qaeda's strategy as if every group closely resonates with its priorities.

But in fact, there may be differences between al Qaeda's target list and one composed by summing the target list of every affiliated group.

- **Apples and oranges:** There is no guarantee the value matrix of al Qaeda would comport to those of other Islamic terrorists, even approximately. Hizballah, for example, is Shia; al Qaeda is Sunni. This dichotomy is likely to engender both different tactical alliances and associated target selections. If al Qaeda were planning the next attack in the United States, for example, one might postulate a 50-percent likelihood that its next target is the U.S. Capitol. It is difficult to imagine such a high probability would prevail among 10 separate jihadist organizations, however, simply because each group is different, and therefore thinks, prioritizes, and plans in a somewhat dissimilar manner. Furthermore, the

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<sup>17</sup> One good example is Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an Indonesian-based group seeking the establishment of a pan-regional Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia. Some time between 1999 and 2000, the organization is believed to have submitted a scheme to bomb a bus station in Singapore frequented by U.S. naval personnel. The plan was eventually dropped in preference for a more elaborate series of attacks that was scheduled for early 2002 and that involved the deep-sea port at Changi, the Singaporean Ministry of Defense, the U.S. and Israeli embassies, the British and Australian high commissions and commercial complexes housing some 250 Western business interests. For further details of the latter plot, see Chalk (2005).



substitution of one actor by 10 or 100 will necessarily broaden the probability distribution.

- **Global versus local:** Al Qaeda has tended to pursue the long-term goals of expelling U.S. and Western forces from the Muslim world, and of fostering global conditions conducive to the creation of a transnational Islamic caliphate. Local militant jihadists, by contrast, typically pursue objectives that reflect the turbulent politics of their respective regions and immediate environments. Moreover, these groups are more likely to be tactically opportunistic and not disposed to regard any one country as the sole source of opposition against their goals. Indeed, in most cases, regional affiliates contribute to al Qaeda's mission as willing accomplices, only doing so with the expectation of receiving material support to advance their own *local* agendas.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, targets attacked by franchisees may have been ones that al Qaeda may have avoided for strategic reasons.<sup>19</sup> In such cases, the franchisee may be more like a self-selected imitator, believing that it is carrying out al Qaeda's strategy but without any direct input as to what that strategy is.
- **Scope:** Al Qaeda has experience with and interest in thinking about a worldwide menu of targets. Groups that are local and regional in scope, by comparison, generally lack the resources required to stage operations outside their primary theater, the information needed to rank overseas targets in terms of their overall value and vulnerability, and incentive to do so.
- **Competition and rivalry:** To the extent that target selection relates to intergroup competition amongst terrorists, it may make a great deal of difference whether there is one main organization or a multitude of smaller ones. More specifically, the attacks

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<sup>18</sup> Many local groups would also eschew attacking "apostate" governments of the sort that al Qaeda has singled out for aggression. These states are often benefactors of their cause; Saudi Arabia is a highly salient case in point.

<sup>19</sup> Saad Fagih, a Saudi-born Islamic activist in London who is under U.N. sanctions for alleged links to al Qaeda—links he denies—said he believed bin Laden knew that an attack on Britain would turn Muslims in Britain against al Qaeda. That is something he says bin Laden would have wanted to avoid (Faramarzi, 2005).

of smaller jihadist rivals may simply be indicative of an action-reaction dynamic aimed at establishing “street credibility,” rather than reflective of a series of carefully calibrated strikes designed to foment a global Islamic revolution. Under such circumstances, target selection may acquire a “can you top this?” flavor.

Targeting priorities resulting from the franchise hypothesis will reflect the rigor of the vetting process, and how al Qaeda rates the importance and value of each target. If it is very important to al Qaeda that the target be a specific venue—and approval from the group’s leadership is meaningful and required—then how targets are valued will dominate other considerations. Alternatively, if the next attack is a mass shooting at one of the roughly 1,000 shopping malls in the United States, considerations such as the level of risk accepted or proximity of a preexisting cell will dominate planning. As such, capability and logistics limitations may dominate strategic objectives when it comes to target selection. This type of target selection presents unique difficulties to defenders given the open-ended number of potential attack venues that it entails and the limited utility of concentrating safeguards at any one site.

The franchise hypothesis is consistent with the possibility that al Qaeda looks for a satisfactory attack<sup>20</sup> rather than considering a large menu of potential attacks and picking the best one. Instead, potential attacks present themselves to al Qaeda for support and rationalization, and al Qaeda, in turn, approves or disapproves of each on its own merits (that is, without comparing them to other alternatives at the time).<sup>21</sup> A purely opportunistic strategy may be entirely consistent

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<sup>20</sup> To use the words of Herbert Simon (1997, pp. 367–368), who developed the theory, it satisfies, rather than optimizes. Settling on the satisfactory can be an optimal strategy where only one opportunity in the universe meets the threshold of acceptability, or where the time requirements or other costs of looking for the most optimal action are significant.

<sup>21</sup> In other words, even if al Qaeda had a completely ordered list of potential targets, the ordering itself would not matter much except insofar as it permits some control of which terrorist attacks do *not* get support. As a hypothetical example, even if al Qaeda, given its choice, would rather attack the Statue of Liberty than the Eiffel Tower, plans to attack the Eiffel Tower appear but plans to attack the Statue of Liberty do not. Indeed, al Qaeda may

with al Qaeda's long-term goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate. Theorists of guerrilla warfare have speculated that even random violence can generate countervailing repression, which, in turn, creates sympathizers out of the population, and thereby builds a political or quasipolitical movement.<sup>22</sup> There may be little further to be gained in being systematic about exactly which targets are chosen.

### Some Observations on Rationality

Each of these four hypotheses assumes a decision logic that is rational and goal-oriented. But objective measures of what constitutes correct logic are vulnerable to distortion by such factors as incomplete or imperfect information, miscommunication, Western worldviews, and personal preference. Perceived plausibility, in other words, can endow rationality to an act that, to outside observers, defies reason (see McCormick, 2003, pp. 490–495); Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, and Zorick, 1997; Gartzke, 1999; and Walt, 1999). Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait in 1990 provides an illustrative example.

In February 1990, Saddam Hussein denounced members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) for engaging in what he termed a “low oil price conspiracy” causing financial damage to Iraq. In July, he threatened to use force against Arab oil-exporting nations that were producing oil in excess of established OPEC quota. An oblique reference to Kuwait, this threat was followed by an explicit accusation of illegal Kuwaiti drilling practices at the states' shared border. U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie met with Hussein on July 25, 1991, during which conversation she told Hussein the United States had “no opinion” on Arab-Arab conflicts. Hussein understood this statement to mean the United States would not get involved should he pursue military action against Kuwait, and eight days later the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait began.

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deem many targets acceptable, undertake no cost-benefit analysis to compare them, and simply exercise an occasional veto over plans it sees.

<sup>22</sup> See Chipman (2003). For a broader discussion, see the first chapter of Hoffman (1998).

Hussein wanted to invade Kuwait, a preference that doubtless colored his interpretation of the signals and information he was receiving from the international community. Nonetheless, the (then) Iraqi leader was sufficiently convinced of his prospects for success that he proceeded with the attack. The U.S. government did not recognize that Hussein's perception of what was true about the world—and, by extension, the plausibility of a successful invasion of Kuwait—differed from its own. Labeling Hussein's actions as irrational overlooks that they were entirely consistent with his own strategic objectives and beliefs about his environment.

The same analysis may be usefully applied to scrutiny of al Qaeda as a rational actor. In this case, arguments that the targets of the September 11 attack were chosen because they were those most likely to harm the U.S. economy need not prove that such an attack *could* have plunged the United States into a crisis and end its economic power, only that it *was believed* by those who ordered the attack that this was a likely outcome.

Thus, in evaluating one or another hypothesis, we have to be careful not to reject it on the basis that, based on what we know and believe, it would not get al Qaeda any closer to its goal. Acts of terrorism are motivated by what terrorists think will get them toward their goal, irrespective of whether they are correct. To forecast what they are targeting, one must rely to the extent possible on what they think makes sense.

## Alternatives to Rational Action

One step further removed from the notion that al Qaeda's decisionmaking logic might be based on a perception of plausibility is the possibility that the process al Qaeda uses to make decisions about targets and mode of attack is not rational at all. We introduce two alternatives.

One is that al Qaeda is "not oriented to a strategic goal," specifically that it is motivated by juridical thinking wherein choices are dictated not by what they produce but by their immediate moral cal-

culus; the act, itself, is the goal.<sup>23</sup> Al Qaeda may well think of itself as the sword bearer of its own peculiar form of justice,<sup>24</sup> redolent of the Roman tenet, *fiat justitia ruat caelum* (let justice be done though the heavens fall). Many al Qaeda statements suggest the group thinks in this way, believing that the sanctification of Allah through human action in pursuit of justice is, itself, sufficient reason for violence (see Doran, 2002; Post, Sprinzak, and Denny, 2003; and Hoffman, 2003).

The other is that, for al Qaeda, terrorism—initially conceived as a means through which to achieve a larger end—has become an end in itself, a tendency known as functional autonomy (Allport, 1937). Assume that in the case of al Qaeda, the true objective is to coerce U.S. withdrawal from the Muslim world. The infliction of pain on the United States is conceived as a means through which to accomplish that end, and mass-casualty suicide bombings of U.S. personnel and assets in the region are selected as the tactic of choice. If al Qaeda were to continue a suicide bombing campaign despite a U.S. response that expands rather than contracts its presence in the region, it may

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<sup>23</sup> The major monotheistic religions each offer the world the notion of a God concerned with justice. When this religious concept becomes interpreted as law, and as a duty to God to “give what is due” to others—good or bad—then religion is expressed in its juridical aspect. For further discussion, see Sedgwick (2004).

<sup>24</sup> An interview with bin Laden presented by Al-Jazeera quoted him saying this about September 11: “This is the first time the balance of terror has been close between the two parties, between Muslims and Americans, in the modern age” (“Transcript of Bin Laden’s October Interview,” 2002). A year later, Ayman al-Zawahiri added, “Why should fear, killing, destruction, displacement, orphaning and widowing continue to be our lot, while security, stability and happiness be your lot? This is unfair. It is time that we get even” (“Full Text: ‘Bin Laden’s Message,’” 2002). Bin Laden has repeated this theme several times since; in his November 24, 2002, “letter to America,” he asked, “Is it any way rational to expect that after America has attacked us for more than half a century, that we will then leave her to live in security and peace?” On the other hand, the line between justice and coercion is not always easy to discern. As Osama bin Laden said, in responding to Taysir Alluni, on October 21, 2001,

And those individuals should stand for Allah, and to re-think and re-do their calculations. We treat others like they treat us. Those who kill our women and innocent, we will kill their women and innocent, until they stop from doing so. . . . [W]e practice terrorism that is good feat, which deters those from killing our children in Palestine and other places. (“The Unreleased Usama bin Ladin Interview by Al Jazeera Satellite Channel Reporter Tayseer Allouni on 21.10.2001,” 2001)

be argued that the group's sub-objective—causing pain—has become functionally autonomous from its true objective: coercing withdrawal. If so, the coercion hypothesis would still possess explanatory value, but the logic by which it did so would be understood as strained.<sup>25</sup>

## Organization

The coercion, damage, rally, and franchise hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. Al Qaeda's target selection and prioritization process may well be influenced by multiple motives as illustrated in Figure 3.1. Similarly, whether or not al Qaeda is a franchiser rather than an organizer of terrorism is not an either-or proposition. Indeed in its current state, al Qaeda would like to do both: act as an inspiration, facilitator, and mentor to other militant jihadist terrorist groups and individuals, while, at the same, remaining the premier authority on determining which venues to attack. The more that al Qaeda is a franchiser, the less likely it is that knowing the one strategic rationale that would help in predicting targets, if only because the initiative for selection would be in the hands of a multitude of groups or individuals. If the "franchise" consisted only of inspiration, the predictive value of knowledge of al Qaeda becomes even more tenuous. Many would be unknown to U.S. intelligence and each might well have different ideas of how a given attack may contribute to jihadist goals. At best, one is left with statistical forecasting rather than divining an opposing strategy. Only where decisionmaking processes are more linear and directed, and objectives articulated in a less disaggregated manner, can one impute a strategic rationale for target choice and preference, and so begin to consider rational allocation of U.S. homeland security resources.

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<sup>25</sup> Admittedly, claiming that terrorism has become functionally autonomous for al Qaeda does not answer the question of *why* it has become so. It may be maintained in the absence of the original reinforcement, or something done because it has become integral to the organization's self-definition and hence survival as an organization. It might be (what appears to us to be) a strategic miscalculation. In the latter case, they may reason that while one hit may excite the United States, five hits may tire it—if five do not work, try 10, and if not that, 20, and so on.

Having developed four hypotheses to link terrorism generated by al Qaeda to its strategic goals, we now go on to adduce evidence that might favor one or another hypothesis.

The method used in Chapter Three entailed constructing a model to characterize each attack by its motivation. The study examined a slate of terrorist attacks (with putative or known al Qaeda involvement) against this model to ascertain how well each accorded to the rally, damage, coercion, and franchise hypotheses.

Two approaches were used in Chapter Four. One was an exegesis of statements made by bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and their associates to discern leanings toward one or another hypothesis. This was supplemented by interviewing<sup>26</sup> seven terrorism experts and reporting

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<sup>26</sup> Each expert was asked to address the following questions:

1. Does al Qaeda have a model of dissuasion and deterrence that makes any distinction between the pain that a specific attack may cause, and the prospects for further pain that may ensue if the United States does not act as al Qaeda would want?
2. To what extent does al Qaeda pay attention to what the West reveals about its own fears (i.e., do they play on these fears, specifically)?
3. Is al Qaeda interested in goading the United States into reacting in a way that will further polarize the Islamic world?
4. Does al Qaeda think that it can commit terrorist acts that can, in fact, damage the U.S. economy to such an extent that it can no longer afford to intervene in the Islamic world?
5. Did the United States react to the September 11 attacks as al Qaeda expected, or as al Qaeda desired?
6. Does al Qaeda see any relationship between the particulars of an attack (e.g., how, where, extent) and its ability to generate a desired reaction in the Islamic world?
7. Does al Qaeda see the problem of getting credit for its attacks as something worth worrying about (conversely, would they shy away from attacks where they might have a hard time convincing others that they were responsible)?
8. Is al Qaeda still capable of operational initiative? Is it meaningful to talk about them as a group (as compared to, for instance, an ideological framework)?
9. How has Operation Iraqi Freedom affected al Qaeda's attitude toward attacking the U.S. homeland, in the near future (while U.S. forces are still engaged in Iraq) or in the aftermath?

their assessments (on a not-for-attribution basis): William Rosenau, Angel Rabasa, Kim Cragin, Sara Daly, Bruce Hoffman, Steven Simon (all from RAND), and Paul Pillar.

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10. Has killing as many people as possible become a functionally autonomous goal, perhaps even an ideology, for them?

11. In your opinion, which targets would be at greatest risk for (a) the franchise hypothesis, (b) the rally hypothesis, (c) the coercion hypothesis, and (d) the damage hypothesis? To what extent does al Qaeda believe that the symbolic value of the target matters? Conversely, do you believe that al Qaeda, as such, is interested in targets located in parts of the United States that may be unrecognizable in the greater Islamic world (e.g., Ohio)?



## **Hypothesis Testing: Quantitative and Qualitative Measures**

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The hypotheses established in Chapter Two define four possible relationships between al Qaeda's goals and the criteria by which it evaluates alternative targets and attack modalities. This chapter is dedicated to testing the explanatory power of each of these hypotheses. It begins by identifying and defining quantitatively and qualitatively the effects a terrorist attack are intended to produce. These measures are structured into a model that describes the relevance of each attribute to, respectively, the rally, coercion, damage, and franchise hypotheses. Past al Qaeda and affiliate attacks are then tested against this model. As such, the model treats each attack as an individual—but not isolated—event.

### **Measuring Intent**

Determining the intent of any human behavior is an inherently uncertain endeavor. Statements made by an individual or group that seem to identify conclusively a specific motivation are rare and, even where they exist, must be vetted to ensure the intention asserted is consistent with the act's expected—or realized—outcome. Equally, the temporal relationship between event and explanation must be scrutinized. Public assertions made prior to or immediately following an attack are more likely to reflect a perpetrator's intent accurately than are those made days or weeks later. Delayed statements are particularly vulnerable to *ex post facto* rationalizations. Fortunately, the group's public statements are only one indicator available for analysis.

### Quantitative Measures

Quantitative measures, by capturing what is empirically known about a terrorist attack, provide a foundation for inductive reasoning and enable logical inference about the effects al Qaeda intended the act to produce. The significance of the following metrics derives from their dynamic interaction; none, analyzed alone, provides sound insight into al Qaeda's intent.

- **Potential casualties:** The potential lethality of an attack may indicate the relative emphasis placed upon inflicting damage in human, rather than capital, terms.<sup>1</sup>
- **Potential damage:** The potential damage of the attack may indicate the relative emphasis placed on harming an economy. The size of the damage is measured against the economy of the affected region (rather than absolutely or compared to the affected sector).

### Qualitative Measures

Qualitative measures also provide a foundation for inductive reasoning and enable logical inference about the effects al Qaeda intended an act to produce. Although empirically grounded, qualitative measures capture the intangible and complex psychological characteristics of an attack, and so are not expressed metrically. Here again, the significance of the measures below derives from their interaction, both with each other and with the quantitative measures outlined previously.

- **Venue:** The nature of the venue—e.g., religious, economic, iconic, military—and its symbolic content may indicate the psychological, economic, or political effect an attack was intended to elicit. An individual target may pertain to multiple venues. The World Trade Center, for example, can be described accurately as both a cultural icon and an economic institution. Targets can also be

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<sup>1</sup> It is *intended* lethality that properly measures intent, not actual lethality; contrast the six who died in the 1993 World Trade Center attack with the thousands who would have died had the goal of collapsing the towers been realized in that attack.

classified as hard or soft, depending on how difficult they are to attack.

- **Modality:** The type and design of attack executed, notably whether conventional or unconventional methods were used, may indicate the relative emphasis placed upon inflicting costs in lives or property, as well as the extent of social, psychological, and economic dislocation it was intended to produce. It may also highlight a desire to elicit an emotional or inspirational response from the Islamic community, and be relevant to consideration of al Qaeda resources and capabilities.

Cumulatively, the previous quantitative and qualitative measures generate the list of relevant variables shown in Table 3.1.

## Modeling Intent

The quantitative and qualitative measures of intent can now be structured into a model that, through examination of past al Qaeda attacks, tests the explanatory power of the coercion, damage, rally, and franchise hypotheses. As stated in Chapter Two, it is expected that the four hypotheses may work together in al Qaeda's target selection process. Similarly, many of the variables identified previously may be associated with attacks intended to achieve multiple effects—a large quantity of explosives, for example, would as equally characterize an attack intended to inflict damage as it would one intended to produce mass casualties.

### Coercion

*If al Qaeda believes the optimal means of creating an Islamic caliphate is through coercing the United States and its Western allies to leave the Arab heartland, its target selection and attack modalities will be designed to raise the human cost of remaining in the region. Attacks intended to coerce will occur in venues and at times intended to maximize the vulnerability of the target population. Specifically, if the coercion hypothesis*

**Table 3.1**  
**Potential Identifying Characteristics of Terrorist Attacks**

Characteristic	Potential Values
Affiliates	Yes Likely Possible Unlikely
Potential casualties	High Medium Low
Potential economic damage	High Medium Low
Explosive potential	High Medium Low
Modality	Conventional weapon Unconventional weapon
Venue	Military Political Entertainment or commercial Workplace Icon Religious Transportation
Hardness	Hard Soft

accurately explains al Qaeda's targeting selection process, the following would characterize past attacks:

- They would have been designed to cause high numbers of casualties—large amounts of explosives, strategic placement of bombs, and timing to ensure the presence of the targeted population.
- They would have been designed to result in extensive, moderate, or low levels of physical damage: Large or medium-sized bombs placed to compromise building integrity, and timed to explode during times of high human traffic (physical damage intended to cause human casualties); and small bombs located to injure popu-

lation, with little regard to potential for damage to surrounding venue (physical damage as *by-product* of targeting population).

- They would have been on the U.S. homeland or abroad, in venues considered likely to engender fear in the target population, e.g., public transportation, places of business, recreational sites, or residential complexes.
- They would have used a wide range of modalities, especially ones that can be repeated.

Table 3.2 summarizes the characteristics of an attack consistent with the coercion hypothesis.

**Table 3.2**  
**Identifying Characteristics of an Attack Consistent with the Coercion Hypothesis**

Characteristic	Potential Values
Affiliates	Likely Possible
Potential casualties	High Medium <sup>a</sup> Low <sup>a</sup>
Potential economic damage	Low
Explosive potential	High Medium Low
Modality	Conventional weapon Unconventional weapon
Venue	Political Entertainment or commercial Workplace Icon Religious Transportation
Hardness	Hard Soft

<sup>a</sup> "Medium" and "low" are consistent with an attack designed to coerce but that was not carried out as successfully as planned.

## Damage

*If al Qaeda believes the optimal means of creating an Islamic caliphate is through reducing the ability of the United States to intervene in the Islamic world, its target selection and attack modalities will be designed to inflict a large amount of damage on the economic foundations of U.S. military, political, and financial power.* Damage attacks will be those for which the economic cost has the potential to be high, and for which target venues are selected not because of their symbolic content, but because the surrounding society is dependent upon their function, e.g., financial institutions, shipping ports, transportation hubs, or tourist sites.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, if the damage hypothesis accurately explains al Qaeda's targeting selection process, the following would characterize past attacks:

- They would have been designed to cause extensive and costly physical damage: large amounts of explosives, strategic placement of bombs, and timing not necessarily related to the presence of population.<sup>3</sup>
- They would have stricken target venues, in the United States or abroad, that are considered expensive to replace or the destruction of which puts a pall on certain activities.
- They would have exploited whatever modalities could have best disrupted critical infrastructure and key hubs of commercial and economic activity.

Table 3.3 summarizes the characteristics of an attack consistent with the damage hypothesis.

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<sup>2</sup> One reason to attack tourist targets is that Westerners would be overrepresented among the victims, compared to a similar attack in the same country but at a site with few if any tourists.

<sup>3</sup> Is it possible that al Qaeda could choose targets specifically to persuade homeland security officials to spend excessive amounts of money defending against future such attacks? Although this cannot be entirely ruled out, it would be nearly impossible to infer this motivation from the particulars of any one attack (unless al Qaeda explicitly drew the inference itself—which it has not done to date).

**Table 3.3**  
**Identifying Characteristics of an Attack Consistent with the Damage Hypothesis**

Characteristic	Potential Values
Affiliates	Likely Possible
Potential casualties	Low
Potential economic damage	High
Explosive potential	High Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon Unconventional weapon
Venue	Entertainment or commercial Commercial Workplace Transportation
Hardness	Soft

### Rally

*If al Qaeda believes the optimal means of creating an Islamic caliphate is through the international radicalization of Islam, its target selection and attack modalities will be designed to inspire Muslims outside its organizational framework to engage in jihad against the West.* These will be attacks that communicate something novel about the power of the jihadist movement—its breadth, depth, strength, and ability to damage an enemy meaningfully—that makes it more attractive to potential recruits and participants. Specifically, if the rally hypothesis accurately explains al Qaeda’s targeting selection process, the following would characterize past attacks:

- They would have been designed to cause high numbers of casualties: large amounts of explosives, strategic placement of bombs, and timing to ensure the presence of the targeted population.
- They would have inflicted extensive physical damage: also large amounts of explosives, strategic placement of bombs, and timing *related* to the presence of population.

- They would have stricken venues, in the United States or abroad, laden with symbolic content in the Islamic world, e.g., political and military targets, icons.
- They would preferably have used unconventional modalities for their shock and rallying effect, e.g., using airplanes as makeshift bombs or using biological, chemical, radiological, or nuclear materials.

Table 3.4 summarizes the characteristics of an attack consistent with the rally hypothesis.

### Franchise

*If al Qaeda no longer possesses the resources and capabilities to effect an attack itself, it may nevertheless foster its goals by functioning as an inspirational figurehead to external militant jihadist groups, providing the strategic rationale—the why—that inspires them to wage jihad against the West.* In contrast to the other three hypotheses, in which one must infer a motive, there will often be external evidence that indicates whether al Qaeda directed or supported a particular attack. Such evidence, if it

**Table 3.4**  
**Identifying Characteristics of an Attack Consistent with the Rally Hypothesis**

Characteristic	Potential Values
Affiliates	Unlikely
Potential casualties	High
Potential economic damage	High Medium
Explosive potential	High
Modality	Unconventional weapon
Venue	Military Political Icon Religious
Hardness	Hard



exists, will indicate straightforwardly whether the attack is consistent with the franchise hypothesis.

Where such evidence is lacking, one must infer the relationship between al Qaeda and the attackers, by looking at the characteristics of the attack itself. As such, franchised, as opposed to directed, attacks will be executed by affiliates using comparatively small quantities of explosives in venues likely to yield some number of casualties and moderate to minimal economic damage. Specifically, if the franchise hypothesis accurately explains al Qaeda's targeting selection process, the following would characterize past attacks:

- They would have resulted in low to medium casualties.
- They would have resulted in low to medium physical damage.
- They would have stricken seemingly unrelated venues.
- They would have used conventional modalities (largely because unconventional modalities may not be available to less well-endowed groups).

Only those attacks occurring after September 11, 2001, are tested against the franchise hypothesis. Table 3.5 summarizes the characteristics of attacks consistent with this hypothesis.

## Testing Hypotheses Against Past Attacks

The number of attacks known to have been perpetrated or directed by al Qaeda is relatively small, with the attacks of September 11 and possibly the 1993 WTC attacks being the only known instances of operations executed by al Qaeda within the United States. In many cases, al Qaeda's role—as leader, supporter, or encourager—in subsequent attacks remains unclear. Nonetheless, the 14 incidents<sup>4</sup> described below represent those in which al Qaeda is believed to have been

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<sup>4</sup> As of this writing, not enough is known about the July 7 and July 21, 2005, attacks on London or the July 23, 2005, attacks in the Sinai to include them as examples.

**Table 3.5**  
**Identifying Characteristics of an Attack Consistent with the Franchise Hypothesis**

Characteristic	Potential Values
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Medium Low
Potential economic damage	Medium Low
Explosive potential	Medium Low
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Entertainment or commercial Commercial Religious Transportation
Hardness	Soft

director, sponsor, or associate.<sup>5</sup> They provide the data set against which to test the rally, coercion, damage, and franchise hypotheses. We chose to exclude attacks directly associated with the Israel-Palestine and Chechen conflicts, or with operations in Iraq.<sup>6</sup> In all three cases, the attackers were less interested in removing Western influence in general and more interested in removing specific foreign occupiers: the Israelis from the West Bank and Gaza; the Russians from Chechnya; and the Americans from Iraq, respectively. In addition, many of the attacks in Iraq were directed against Shia, and thus reflect sectarian conflict

<sup>5</sup> Many argue that al Qaeda morphed significantly as a result of both September 11 and the subsequent U.S. overthrow of the Taliban. Thus, analyzing prior attacks and subsequent attacks together may be mixing apples and oranges. We, nevertheless, do so largely because while the *means* pursued by al Qaeda have clearly changed, there is little evidence that it has altered its *goals*, and there may therefore be continuity in its objectives throughout.

<sup>6</sup> Although al-Zarqawi has renamed his operation “al Qaeda in Mesopotamia,” he was earlier a rival to bin Laden, and many of his methods, such as videotaping the beheading of Westerners, have met with disapproval from al Qaeda leadership (see Scheuer, 2005; and Raphaeli, 2005).

within the Islamic world, rather than between the Islamic world and the West.

Multiple effects can be the intended—or actual—outcome of a single incident. The explanatory power of each hypothesis relative to the others, therefore, is a function of the attributes applicable to both attack and hypothesis. Mapping variables in this way allows for the classification of each hypothesis as relevant or irrelevant to a given event, and enables identification of its effect as primary or secondary. Within this paradigm, the two predominant influences, as determined by the percentage of variables shared between attack and hypothesis, are considered primary.

### **World Trade Center (WTC), New York, 1993**

On February 26, 1993, a bomb planted in a van located in the underground garage of the WTC's north tower exploded, creating a 200-foot by 100-foot crater, scattering debris throughout an adjacent subway station, and filling 110 floors with smoke. The effects of the blast and ensuing fire caused six deaths, more than 1,000 injuries, and nearly \$300 million in property damage (U.S. Senate, 1998). The bomb, placed with the apparent intent of toppling one tower into another and thereby causing the catastrophic collapse of both, was a 600-kilogram (kg) explosive containing poisonous sodium cyanide gas. The north tower did not buckle, however, and the heat of the explosion destroyed the cyanide gas. The bombing involved collaboration between local jihadists and an international terrorist—Ramzi Yousef—known to have been in personal contact with bin Laden.<sup>7</sup>

The characteristics of this attack, shown in Table 3.6, are most consistent with the coercion and damage hypotheses.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Peter Bergen (2001), the strongest link between Osama bin Laden and the Islamic terrorists associated with this attack was through the al Khifa center in Brooklyn. According to another source (Sedgwick, 2004), Khalid Sheik Muhammed, Osama's operations deputy circa 2001, worked directly with that group.

**Table 3.6**  
**Characteristics of the 1993 WTC Attack**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	High
Potential economic damage	High
Explosive potential	Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Workplace
Hardness	Soft

### **Khobar Towers, Riyadh, 1996**

On June 25, 1996, a terrorist truck bomb exploded outside the northern perimeter of Khobar Towers, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, a facility housing U.S. and allied forces supporting the coalition air operation over Iraq. Nineteen U.S. servicemen were killed in the attack, and 372 U.S. and Saudi citizens were wounded. The explosion left a crater 35 feet deep and 85 feet wide. Estimates of the size of the bomb range from the equivalent of 3,000 to more than 30,000 pounds of TNT, with the Defense Special Weapons Agency report estimating its size at 20,000. Although it found no operational ties between al Qaeda and Iraq, the commission investigating the September 11, 2001, attacks has concluded that bin Laden's terrorist network had long-running contacts with Iran. The commission further determined that al Qaeda may even have played a direct, although "yet unknown role" in aiding Hizballah militants in executing the attack on Khobar Towers.<sup>8</sup>

The characteristics of this attack, shown in Table 3.7, are most consistent with the rally and coercion hypotheses.

<sup>8</sup> Eggen (2004). U.S. intelligence officials initially suspected Iranian extremists only to learn later that Osama bin Laden was called by Ayman al-Zawahiri and congratulated immediately afterward (Wright, 2002).

**Table 3.7**  
**Characteristics of the Khobar Towers Attack**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Medium
Potential economic damage	Medium
Explosive potential	High
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Military
Hardness	Hard

### **East Africa Embassy Bombings, Nairobi and Dar Es Salam, 1998**

On August 7, 1998, simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania killed over 200 people—twelve of them U.S. citizens—and wounded more than 5,000. The Nairobi bomb—an estimated 600 pounds of high explosive—was detonated in a pickup truck on a road running adjacent to the U.S. embassy. The blast collapsed a neighboring office building onto the embassy, causing considerable damage to the chancery. In Dar Es Salam, a suicide bomber detonated a truck bomb at a distance of 35 feet from the outer wall of the U.S. embassy. Although bin Laden refused to take direct responsibility for the attack (despite being implicated by convictions of many of the attackers), he did express approval of the strikes and affirmed that he shared the motivations of the individuals who had carried them out. Indeed, bin Laden specifically argued that the bombings should be seen in the United States and the world as retribution for U.S. policy, comparing them to alleged “massacres” of Palestinians in historic cases familiar to many Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

The characteristics of these attacks, shown in Table 3.8, are most consistent with the coercion and rally hypotheses.

<sup>9</sup> “Bin Laden specifically cited ‘Sabra, Shatila, Deir Yasin, Qana, Heron and elsewhere.’ ‘Al Jazirah Program on Bin Laden’ *Al Jazirah Television* (Doha, Qatar), June 10, 1999,” (Blanchard, 2005, p. 4, footnote 14).

**Table 3.8**  
**Characteristics of the East African Embassy Bombings**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Medium
Potential economic damage	Medium
Explosive potential	Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Political
Hardness	Hard

### **USS *Cole*, Yemen, 2000**

On October 12, 2000, a small boat piloted by two suicide bombers and carrying between 400 and 700 pounds of explosives rammed the hull of the U.S. Navy's guided missile destroyer, the USS *Cole*. The explosion, creating a 40-foot hole in the ship's hull, killed 17 servicemen and injured 29. Bin Laden again refused to assume direct responsibility for the attack, but made statements of solidarity with the attackers (Blanchard, 2005). The characteristics of this attack, shown in Table 3.9, are most consistent with the coercion and rally hypotheses.

### **WTC, New York, and Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia, 2001**

On September 11, 2001, two hijacked passenger jets crashed into the towers of the WTC in New York and one into the west side of the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. Both WTC towers collapsed, and the Pentagon was severely damaged. A fourth hijacked plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Almost 3,000 died in the coordinated attacks. In a video aired by Al-Jazeera on September 9, 2002, Osama bin Laden was heard claiming responsibility for the September 11 attacks. He later appeared in a 2004 video—proximate to the 2004 U.S. presidential elections—stating that “there are still reasons to repeat what happened,” and that he wanted to explain why he ordered the airline hijackings so the United States would know how to

**Table 3.9**  
**Characteristics of the USS *Cole* Attacks**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Low
Potential economic damage	Low
Explosive potential	Medium
Modality	Unconventional weapon <sup>a</sup>
Venue	Military
Hardness	Hard

<sup>a</sup> The weapon was unconventional in the sense that such an attack was not expected, not in the sense that the weapon itself was particularly innovative.

**Table 3.10**  
**Characteristics of the September 11 Attacks**

Characteristic	Value(s)
Affiliates	No
Potential casualties	High
Potential economic damage	High
Explosive potential	High <sup>a</sup>
Modality	Unconventional weapon
Venue	Transportation Workplace Military Political
Hardness	Soft

<sup>a</sup> Technically, most of the damage from the aircraft came in the form of combustion rather than explosion, but the terrorists understood that a great deal of damage would nevertheless result.

prevent another attack (“The Full Version of Osama bin Laden’s Speech,” 2004; see also “Bin Laden Claims Responsibility for 9/11,” 2004).

The characteristics of these attacks are most consistent with the coercion, damage, and rally hypotheses.<sup>10</sup>

### **Bali, 2002**

On October 12, 2002, a series of bombs exploded on the Indonesian island of Bali. One small device (between 500 and 1,000 grams of explosives), carried by a suicide bomber, and one large vehicular device (between 50 and 150 kg of explosives) were detonated in a crowded nightclub district, with a third (between 500 and 1,000 grams of explosives) exploding near the U.S. Consulate in the Balinese capital. Two hundred two people were killed, and the credibility of Bali as a safe tourist destination was dealt a blow. The attack was carried out by Jemaah Islamiyah, an Indonesian group closely linked to al Qaeda (Donnan, 2002; Bociurkiw, 2002; Huband, 2002a).

The characteristics of this attack, shown in Table 3.11, are most consistent with the coercion and franchise hypotheses, although the damage hypothesis (from the indirect effects on the tourist industry) also could be applicable.

**Table 3.11**  
**Characteristics of the Bali Attack**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Value</b>
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Medium
Potential economic damage	Low
Explosive potential	Low
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Entertainment or commercial
Hardness	Soft

<sup>10</sup> Khalid Sheik Muhammed specifically told his interrogators that the World Trade Center was chosen as a target as a way of attacking the U.S. economy (see National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004, p. 153).



**Djerba, 2002**

On April 11, 2002, a suicide bomber drove a truck filled with natural gas into a wall surrounding an historic synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia. Nineteen people were killed in the explosion, and 15 were injured, the majority being German tourists. The Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Sites, an organization with links to al Qaeda, claimed responsibility (Elliott, 2002; “Eight Arrested in Paris for Deadly Tunisian Synagogue Bombing,” 2002).

The characteristics of this attack, shown in Table 3.12, are most consistent with the coercion and franchise hypotheses.

**MV *Limburg*, Yemen, 2002**

On October 2, 2002, an al Qaeda suicide operative rammed an explosive-laden boat into the French oil tanker MV *Limburg* in the waters off of Yemen, killing one, injuring four, and releasing 50,000 barrels of crude oil along 45 miles of coastline. An al Qaeda statement following the attack on the MV *Limburg* affirmed that the assault

was not an incidental strike at a passing tanker but. . . on the international oil-carrying line in the full sense of the word. . . by using a \$1,000 boat to destroy such a big tanker, one can assume the scope of risks facing the Western economic

**Table 3.12**  
**Characteristics of the Djerba Attacks**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Low
Potential economic damage	Low
Explosive potential	Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Religious
Hardness	Soft

lifeline, oil, of which the region holds the world's vast reserves (Al Qaeda communiqué, October 13, 2002, cited in Energy Information Administration, 2002; see also Allen et al., 2002)

Subsequent investigation, however, revealed that the original target may have been a U.S. military ship. However, when a good opportunity to strike such a vessel failed to present itself, the *Limburg* was pragmatically attacked as the next best option.

The characteristics of this attack, shown in Table 3.13, are most consistent with the damage hypothesis.

### **Mombasa, 2002**

On November 28, 2002, three suicide bombers detonated a car loaded with 200 kilograms of explosives at a popular Israeli-owned tourist hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, killing 15 and wounding 40. On the same day and in the same city, two shoulder-fired missiles were shot at an Israeli commercial airliner as it took off; both missiles missed. Four days later al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks on multiple Internet sites, stating, "Al Qaeda announces officially it's behind the two attacks in Mombasa. This statement comes as a challenge to the American enemy and to let it know it's capable of reaching anyplace in the world" ("Al Qaeda Claims Responsibility for Kenya Attacks," 2002; Huband, 2002b).

**Table 3.13**  
**Characteristics of the MV *Limburg* Attack**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	No
Potential casualties	Low
Potential economic damage	Medium
Explosive potential	Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Transportation
Hardness	Soft

These characteristics of these attacks, shown in Table 3.14, are most consistent with the coercion and damage hypotheses.

### Casablanca, 2003

On May 16, 2003, twelve suicide bombers armed with grenades and explosives attacked five targets in Casablanca, Morocco. The attacks—at a hotel, a Spanish restaurant, a Jewish community center, a Jewish cemetery, a Jewish-owned Italian restaurant, and near the Belgian consulate—killed 33, and injured more than 100. The operatives were members of a North African terrorist group, Salafia Jihadia, with connections to al Qaeda (“Synchronised Crime,” 2003), with additional participation from Asirat al Moustaqim.

The characteristics of these attacks, shown in Table 3.15, are most consistent with the coercion and franchise hypotheses.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 3.14**  
**Characteristics of the Mombasa Attacks**

Characteristic	Value(s)
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Medium
Potential economic damage	Medium
Explosive potential	Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon Unconventional weapon <sup>a</sup>
Venue	Entertainment or commercial
Hardness	Soft

<sup>a</sup> This refers to the missile attack on the aircraft, not the hotel bombing.

<sup>11</sup> These attacks are also consistent with the damage hypothesis, if damage, as such, is measured against the small Jewish community of Morocco.

**Table 3.15**  
**Characteristics of the Casablanca Attacks**

Characteristic	Value(s)
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Low
Potential economic damage	Medium
Explosive potential	Low
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Entertainment or commercial Religious
Hardness	Soft

### **Istanbul, 2003**

On November 15, 2003, two truck bombs exploded at the Beth Israel and Neve Shalom synagogues in Istanbul, Turkey. The explosions, detonated by suicide operatives, devastated the synagogues, killed 27 people, and injured 300 more. Five days later, two more suicide truck bombings devastated the local headquarters of the Britain-based Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) and the UK Consulate General in Istanbul, killing 57 people and wounding more than 450. A Turkish militant group quickly claimed responsibility for the blasts, with al Qaeda later stating that bin Laden himself had ordered the attacks (Zaman and Wilkinson, 2003; Birch and Bowcott, 2003; Frantz and Zaman, 2003; “Al-Qai’ida Claims Responsibility for Istanbul Bombings, Threatens Japan,” 2003).

The characteristics of these attacks, shown in Table 3.16, are most consistent with the coercion, damage, and franchise hypotheses.

### **Madrid, 2004**

On March 11, 2004, ten bombs—a total of 100 kg of Goma 2 explosives—were detonated on four early-morning commuter trains in Madrid, killing 202 people and leaving more than 1,800 injured. Four unexploded devices were later found. A letter sent to a London-based Arabic newspaper claimed responsibility for the attacks on behalf of a

**Table 3.16**  
**Characteristics of the Istanbul Attacks**

Characteristic	Value(s)
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Medium
Potential economic damage	Medium
Explosive potential	Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Religious Workplace
Hardness	Soft

group that aligns itself with al Qaeda. On March 14, a video claiming responsibility for the attack purporting to be from an al Qaeda's military spokesman in Europe was uncovered, with the speaker saying the attack was revenge for Spain's "collaboration with the criminal Bush and his allies" (Rachid Oulad Akcha, quoted in Richburg, 2004).

Coupled with the characteristics of the attack, shown in Table 3.17, the subsequent election of an administration that immediately promised to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq does, in retrospect, appear to confirm the coercion as well as the rally hypothesis.<sup>12</sup>

### **Riyadh, 2004**

On April 21, 2004, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula attacked the ministry headquarters of the Saudi General Support Service with two car bombs. The attack killed almost a dozen people and wounded over a hundred others. This was a high point in an almost two-year campaign; it was the first direct attack on a pillar of the Saudi state. Other attacks hit three Western housing compounds, non-Western housing complexes, and the offices of a petroleum company in al-Khobar.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson (2004); Rotella and Wilkinson (2004). A newly planted bomb of similar form was found on the railroad tracks of a high-speed train near Madrid two weeks *after* the election, however—an event that cast some doubt on the coercion hypothesis (Wright, 2004).

**Table 3.17**  
**Characteristics of the Madrid Attacks**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Medium
Potential economic damage	Low
Explosive potential	Low
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Transportation
Hardness	Soft

Although the characteristics of the campaign, as shown below, reflect the coercion and the affiliate hypotheses, there are strong indications that the primary purpose of the attack was to destabilize the Saudi government, in part, by raising the risk to Western companies of conducting operations in the country. As such, the attacks may have set back al Qaeda's worldwide efforts in that they energized the Saudi government to take militant jihadists seriously as a threat to their own regime. A reassessment of the role of Saudi Arabians in al Qaeda, and increased regulation of charities, followed (see "Saudi Police HQ Hit by Blasts," 2004; "Al Qaeda Organization in the Arabian Peninsula," 2005; "Saudi Press," 2003; and "Saudi Media Trends," 2003).

The characteristics of these attacks, shown in Table 3.18, are most consistent with the coercion and franchise hypotheses.

#### **Hilton Hotel, Taba, Egypt, 2004**

On October 8, 2004, two bombs detonated in quick succession at the Hilton Hotel in Taba, Egypt. A truck laden with 100–200 kg of explosives crashed into the lobby, collapsing a 10-story wing of rooms, while a suicide bomber triggered a device near the hotel's swimming pool. Of the 900 predominantly Israeli and Russian guests staying at the hotel at the time of the attack, 34 were killed and more than 100 were wounded. Two smaller devices were later detonated on tourist beaches 40 miles south of the Hilton, killing four more. Although Egypt's

**Table 3.18**  
**Characteristics of the Riyadh Attacks**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	Yes
Potential casualties	Medium
Potential economic damage	Medium
Explosive potential	Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Government (housing, industrial)
Hardness	Soft

**Table 3.19**  
**Characteristics of the Taba Hilton Attacks**

Characteristic	Value
Affiliates	Yes
Potential Casualties	Medium
Potential Economic Damage	Medium
Explosive Potential	Medium
Modality	Conventional weapon
Venue	Entertainment or commercial
Hardness	Soft

Interior Minister claimed that al Qaeda's involvement had been ruled out on the basis of confessions made by suspects and evidence gathered at the scene, Israeli officials implicated al Qaeda in the attack ("'No al-Qaeda Hand' in Egypt Bombs," 2004). The characteristics of these attacks, shown in Table 3.19, are most consistent with the coercion and franchise hypotheses.

The model, summarized in Table 3.20, indicates that coercion was a relevant motivation for 13 of the 14 attacks, damage for four, franchise for seven, and rally for four. Significantly, seven of the nine

**Table 3.20**  
**Summary Chart**

Incident	Hypothesis			
	Coercion	Damage	Franchise	Rally
WTC, 1993	x	x		
Khobar	x			x
East Africa	x			x
USS <i>Cole</i>	x			x
September 11	x	x		x
Bali	x		x	
Djerba	x		x	
MV <i>Limburg</i>		x		
Mombasa	x	x		
Casablanca	x		x	
Istanbul	x		x	
Madrid	x		x	
Riyadh	x		x	
Taba Hilton	x		x	

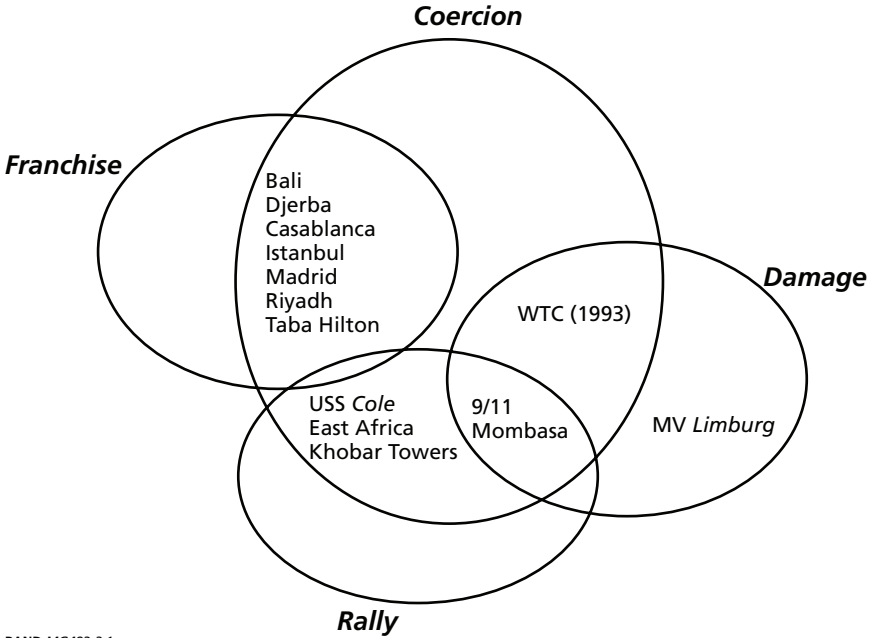
attacks discussed that have taken place since September 11, 2001, can be ascribed to affiliates rather than al Qaeda, itself. This is probably a reflection of the relative weakness of al Qaeda as a vertically integrated and structured operational entity after its base in Afghanistan was destroyed. This weakness stands in contrast to the continuing strength of al Qaeda as an inspiration and supporter of affiliates.

These findings lead to two sets of policy implications—one for U.S. foreign policy, the other for U.S. allocation of resources to protect against attacks on the homeland. The former is outside the scope of this monograph, but the latter is discussed at length in Chapter Five. Before doing so, however, Chapter Four submits the results of the model to a “common sense check,” with the assumptions of each hypothesis tested



for consistency against al Qaeda statements, and the assessments of a community of al Qaeda and terrorism experts. Figure 3.1 illustrates the distribution of attacks by hypothesis.

**Figure 3.1**  
**Attack Distribution by Hypothesis**



## Hypothesis Testing: Al Qaeda Statements and Expert Observations

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Can one infer al Qaeda's strategic motivations for the targets they attack—be it to coerce, to damage, or to rally—by analyzing what they say or what those who have studied terrorists say about them? Or, alternatively, is target selection largely in the hands of franchisees?

To be sure, al Qaeda—not atypically for a terrorist organization—is a clandestine entity and, thus, not given to making its plans transparent. There is no authoritative body of strategic work that carefully lays out options for achieving the caliphate or driving the United States out of the Muslim world, and evaluates the relative costs and benefits of each.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, with due regard for its use as propaganda, because its leaders do make public statements, one can draw, and our experts<sup>2</sup> have drawn, some conclusions.

### Al Qaeda's Reading of History Suggests the Leverage of Terrorism

Traditionally, terrorism has taken the form of indirect psychological warfare involving small-scale attacks that are designed (through what French revolutionary Carol Piscane labeled the “propaganda of the

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<sup>1</sup> Yet, see Lia and Hegghammer (2004).

<sup>2</sup> To reiterate the list: William Rosenau, Angel Rabasa, Kim Cragin, Sara Daly, Bruce Hoffman (all from RAND), and Paul Pillar.

deed”) to draw attention and amplify the perpetrators’ cause.<sup>3</sup> Terrorism, itself, is merely a means to that end. While al Qaeda’s vision of terrorism does not exclude the political dimension (as evidenced by the group’s frequent statements<sup>4</sup> aired through the Al-Jazeera network), it supports a self-defined notion that terrorism *alone* can dissuade the United States from maintaining its presence in the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup>

Al Qaeda tends to style itself as a base for a broader jihadist<sup>6</sup> revolt, but to a large extent this normative bias is a reflection of the group’s leader, bin Laden. While it may be presumptuous to summarize bin Laden’s outlook as having been shaped by a few key events, several such incidents are worth noting. There is little doubt, for instance, that his view of the United States as one that is readily deterred was shaped by Washington’s departure from Lebanon following the 1983 bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut and its withdrawal from Somalia after the deaths of 18 Rangers in Mogadishu roughly a decade later. In a tape made in the year prior to September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden noted, “We no longer fear the so-called great powers. We believe that America is much weaker than Russia; and our brothers who fought in Somalia told us that they were astonished to observe how weak, impo-

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<sup>3</sup> As Nikolai Bukh explained, terrorism was designed to

break down the prestige of government, to furnish continuous proof of the possibility of pursuing a contest with the government, to raise in that way the revolutionary spirit of the people, and finally to form a body suited to and accustomed to warfare. (quoted in McCormick, 2003)

<sup>4</sup> Remarks made after September 11 by bin Laden suggested that he considered terrorism first and foremost as a vehicle to dispatch messages—“speeches,” in his words—and with respect to events of September 11, he concluded that Americans in particular have heard and reacted to the intended communications (see Nacos, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> The distinction between violence as communication and violence, as such, is not an absolute one. As Isabelle Duyvesteyn (2004, p. 448, quoting Jenkins, 1974) noted,

What Brian Jenkins argued several years ago, “terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead,” no longer seems to apply. However, it is also a truism that the more people are dead, the more people will be watching.

<sup>6</sup> Also known as the Salafist-Jihadist movement; Salafis want to return to the organization of society as governed by the Prophet Mohammed when he was alive.

tent, and cowardly the U.S. soldier is. As soon as 18 U.S. troops were killed, they fled in the dark as fast as they could.”<sup>7</sup>

Prior to September 11, bin Laden repeatedly cited such incidents to vindicate his assertion that the United States had little tolerance for casualties and was therefore easy to dissuade. Even more formative to his outlook were the several years he spent in Afghanistan supporting the mujahideen against the Soviet Union. On one side was putatively the mightiest military power of its time; on the other, a band of ill-equipped fighters ready to die for their faith. When Moscow withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, and collapsed shortly thereafter, bin Laden interpreted this to support the belief that the damage wrought by jihadist violence can cause even a highly powerful adversary to implode. More intrinsically, his selective reading of this history underscored a belief that the United States was equally as vulnerable and, with time and effort, could be destroyed just as successfully. These learning experiences played an integral role in informing bin Laden’s unique vision of violent struggle.

Thus, notions of coercion and economic warfare, which would otherwise seem fantastic, are, to someone who interprets history in the manner that bin Laden does, quite reasonable. Are they still reasonable today? Clearly, the U.S. government has not been deterred from intervening in the Islamic world as a result of jihadist terrorism, nor has its economy teetered on the verge of implosion. It would, therefore, not be unreasonable for bin Laden to wonder whether his expectations of what terrorism (alone) could achieve were overrated. That said, the al Qaeda leader would not be unique if his earlier experiences remained dominant in his worldview to the exclusion of newer information. Moreover, in many ways, his statements and rhetorical messages continue to give salience to the twin objectives of coercion and economic damage.

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<sup>7</sup> Gerges (undated). The written source refers to “80,” but since it was based on oral media, where “18” and “80” sound similar, and “18” makes more sense, “18” was used.

## The Coercion Hypothesis

Prior to 2004, al Qaeda's rhetorical tone was less apt to be directly coercive and more prone to play up the themes of humiliation and revenge. One recurrent motif is how unfair it is for the people of the Islamic world to suffer (at the hands of the United States and its allies) while those in the West enjoy unbridled security. Terrorism in this sense was seen as an attempt to balance the scales.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, even then, the theme of terrorism as an "educational" device was present.<sup>9</sup> In two speeches delivered in 2004, bin Laden was more explicit, stating in October 2004:

O American people, I address these words to you regarding the best way of avoiding another Manhattan, and regarding the war, its causes and its consequences. . . . Although we have entered the fourth year after the events of September 11, Bush is still practicing distortion and deception against you and he is still concealing the true cause from you. Consequentially, the motives for its reoccurrence still exist. ("The Full Version of Osama bin Laden's Speech," 2004)

In March of that year, on the heels of the Madrid bombing, he delivered a similar message to Europe, in which he linked a cessation of violence to the withdrawal of European forces from the Muslim world. This message affirmed:

I hereby offer them a peace treaty, the essence of which is our commitment to halt actions against any country that commits itself to refraining from attacking Muslims or intervening in

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<sup>8</sup> As noted earlier, many local groups would also eschew attacking apostate governments of the sort that al Qaeda has singled out for aggression.

<sup>9</sup> "We by the grace of God Almighty are able to teach you the first lesson, and if you do not learn it, and this is always true of you, then we will prepare a further exposition using the same method; and if you do not learn that either, then know that the lesson the next time will be so very clear that you will not need to learn it or understand it, because when we repeat the exposition for the third time, the day of teaching will be over and you will no longer need it, because the third lesson will mean your destruction and ruin, if God wills" (Centre for Islamic Studies and Research, quoted in Eedle, 2002b).

their affairs, including the American conspiracy against the larger Islamic world. . . . [T]he peace treaty will be in force upon the exit of the last soldier of any given [European] country from our land.

Nevertheless, themes of retribution also occur in the speech:

By what measure of kindness are your killed considered innocents while ours are considered worthless? By what school [of thought] is your blood considered blood while our blood is water? Therefore, it is [only] just to respond in kind, and the one who started it is more to blame. (“Osama Bin Laden Speech Offers Peace Treaty with Europe,” 2004)

These statements offer little doubt that al Qaeda’s strategy has coercion as a major component, at least rhetorically. Nevertheless, to translate the general motive into something that informs target selection, it helps to understand how well calibrated are its actions to its motives. Is al Qaeda’s notion of coercion—at least as applied to its stated objective of creating a caliphate across the entire *umma*—well thought out or is it manifest in a confused, arguably contradictory manner?<sup>10</sup>

There was no consensus among our experts of how sophisticated al Qaeda’s approach to coercion was. Some felt that al Qaeda’s model was very unsophisticated in that it did not differentiate between the pain that an attack caused and the ability of an attack to signal the prospects for future pain (the true basis of coercion). Others suggested that al Qaeda may have had a capability to make such distinctions in the past, but lost a great deal of it with the arrest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, al Qaeda’s chief operational planner. There was some consensus that at least rhetorically, al Qaeda appears aware of the fact that coercion requires the ability to promise further pain in the future.<sup>11</sup> As noted, in 2004, bin Laden offered Europe (in the spring) and the

<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is probably a long way from Schelling’s *Arms and Influence* (1966).

<sup>11</sup> One expert we interviewed suggested that al Qaeda’s interest in weapons of mass destruction was more for their deterrence value than for the effects of using them.

United States (in the fall) some prospect that future attacks could be warded off if their governments or citizenry behaved more to his liking. One expert mentioned that even if al Qaeda was incapable of carrying out a high-level attack any time soon, it could nevertheless hold the threat in play by carrying out a series of low-level strikes to bolster the belief that some future high-level attack could be imminent. Another opined that al Qaeda likes to bring up the subject of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons (CBRN) precisely because its mention has specific coercive appeal in the United States. However, none of our experts felt that al Qaeda went to great pains to ensure that its attacks were of the sort that could be repeated. One noted that even September 11—in part by leading to the installation of secure aircraft cabin doors—had elements of unrepeatability (indeed, the failure of the fourth airplane to reach its target suggested that the 9/11 tactic stopped working before the day ended).

Expert consensus maintains that al Qaeda does pay some attention at least to what the United States reveals about its own fears. Presumably, the group does so in order to adjust its attacks (or at least threats) to what will garner the most attention in its target audience. That said, one cannot exclude the possibility that al Qaeda holds the United States as the gold standard (that is, if something is feared in the United States, it must be important to fear, and therefore a capability to hold it at risk is worth having). Compelling evidence, cited by most of the experts, were materials gathered from the caves of Afghanistan that showed then-Secretary of Defense Cohen holding up a five-pound bag of sugar (in 1997) and asserting that such a small quantity of anthrax could devastate the entire population of metropolitan Washington, D.C. This apparently highlighted to al Qaeda the value of pursuing unconventional attacks: More specifically, the group's fascination with CBRN essentially reflected our own.<sup>12</sup> Of specific inter-

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<sup>12</sup> Another explanation is that the demonstration gave al Qaeda an idea that simply was not there previously (see Cullison, 2004). A letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Muhammad Atef (1999) stated,

We only became aware of them [biological and chemical weapons] when the enemy drew our attention to them by repeatedly expressing concerns that they can be produced

est was whether there were forms of attack that had a *disproportionate* effect on the U.S. psyche—ones that raised fears much greater than mere numbers of victims would indicate. This would permit making distinctions between the direct impact of such an attack and its coercive power. One possible such example was the Beltway sniper, which transfixed the Washington area in late 2002, even though only about a dozen people died. Here experts pointed to only a modest amount of evidence that al Qaeda was aware of the psychological effects of its actions (although this angle was brought up in at least one jihadi document). Several of the experts also argued that because suicide attacks are both antithetical to Western norms and project an image of an adversary that is utterly ruthless, they inevitably raise fears in ways that most mere homicidal attacks would be unlikely to achieve.

That many of al Qaeda's attacks have been engineered to cause extensive deaths and injuries raises the question of whether casualty maximization has become a functionally autonomous goal. Half of our experts thought that al Qaeda was still pursuing political goals and would judge attacks accordingly; as such, the group was not seen to be interested in killing for its own sake. The other experts believed, by contrast, that inflicting mass casualties has become tantamount to a strategic goal, especially after September 11. Among the latter group, one pointed to the toll taken on September 11 and argued that this had set a bar for future attacks: Those that did not measure up by that criterion would be an admission that al Qaeda had lost something of its capability. Another looked at the cycle of attack and counterattack (by the U.S. government) to conclude that the group's degree of hatred for the United States (and the West) was so high that attacks had become an end in themselves. A third pointed out that al Qaeda's fascination with CBRN could only be explained as a desire to kill exceptionally large numbers of people rather than confront governments with coercive choices, particularly given that many of these attacks—especially those involving biological agents—are not likely to be (immediately) captured in news reports. Two of the experts highlighted cases in which

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simply with easily available materials. . . . A germ attack is often detected days after it occurs, which raises the number of victims.



al Qaeda created more casualties than it intended or at least expected. The size of the bombs in East Africa were dictated by the strength of the embassy al Qaeda wanted to destroy, but a bigger bomb led to more civilian deaths, the great share of which were among Muslims. The September 11 attack was not expected to topple the twin towers but to take the tops off. Additional casualties may not have been unwelcome, but running up the numbers was not the point. Despite this, there does seem to be clear evidence that bin Laden has concluded that exploiting popular sensitivities to casualties is the most effective way of combating the West:

Our method. . . in this battle has been to continue to pile up more American corpses onto their unjust government until we break the arrogance of the United States, crush its pride and trample its dignity in the mud of defeat. (bin Laden, quoted in “World Islamic Front’ Threatens New Operations Against Americans,” 1998; see also Pape, 2005)

One criterion in determining the coherence of the coercion hypothesis is the ability to communicate clearly what al Qaeda was trying to compel the United States to do. The simple notion that the group merely wanted the United States to leave the Islamic world vies with the more complex idea that it was seeking to mire the United States in the Islamic world so thoroughly that it would leave and forever despair of becoming directly—politically or militarily—enmeshed in Muslim affairs again. The consensus among experts was that al Qaeda did, in fact, expect the United States to react to the September 11 attacks by attacking Afghanistan (which it did), forcing it to become bogged down in an intractable war of the sort that would lead to a full-scale U.S. collapse (which it did not, at least not in Afghanistan), in the same way that befell the Soviet Union 10 years earlier.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Later, when it was the Taliban rather than the United States that collapsed, bin Laden claimed, “Islamic countries are responsible for the fall of the Taliban” (90-minute speech posted on various Internet forums, here quoted in “A New Bin Laden Speech,” 2003), lamenting that the loss of Afghanistan meant the loss of a regime that was closest to the ideal form of a restored caliphate. If these were not crocodile tears, perhaps bin Laden regarded

That al Qaeda sent suicide bombers to kill Ahmed Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance (NA) and thus the Taliban's most serious opponent, two days prior to such attacks, suggests that a great deal of calculation was, in fact, involved. However, there was also a consensus that al Qaeda did not expect that September 11 would make countering terrorism the primary leitmotiv of U.S. foreign policy, or that the United States would put other goals on hold to acquire allies in this fight (for example, Pakistan, which hitherto had been subjected to intense pressure on the issue of nuclear proliferation). One expert claimed that, in retaliation for September 11, al Qaeda expected a reaction along the lines following the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings—strikes without the serious commitment of U.S. forces. There was a general belief that if the scale, scope, and speed of the Bush administration's response was unexpected, it may have been that al Qaeda underestimated the level of damage that they expected to cause.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, bin Laden himself admitted in a videotape a month after the strikes that even his forecast of casualties was lower than what transpired.

## The Damage Hypothesis

There is considerable evidence in al Qaeda statements and documents to vindicate the general salience of economic motivations in influencing the group's targeting preferences and selections. Several times after September 11, for instance, bin Laden specifically boasted that an operation costing only \$500,000 had resulted in fiscal and commercial

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the fall of Afghanistan as the loss of something precious rather than as an acceptable risk to be run in the cause of inciting a greater jihad.

<sup>14</sup> Bin Laden, in the November 2001 videotape, asserted,

We calculated in advance the number of casualties from the enemy, who would be killed based on the position of the tower. We calculated that the floors that would be hit would be three or four floors. I was the most optimistic of them all. (. . . Inaudible. . .) due to my experience in this field, I was thinking that the fire from the gas in the plane would melt the iron structure of the building and collapse the area where the plane hit and all the floors above it only. This is all that we had hoped for. ("Transcript of Usama bin Laden Video Tape," 2001)

damage more than a million times greater. Just as indicative was the 2002 bombing of the MV *Limburg*. The attack was noteworthy not only for its effect on international oil prices,<sup>15</sup> maritime insurance rates (which tripled), and the Yemeni economy,<sup>16</sup> but also in its ultimate confirmation of al Qaeda's stated intention to target the financial anchors underpinning the Western capitalist system. As bin Laden explained afterward, "By striking the oil tanker in Yemen with explosives, the attackers struck at the umbilical cord of the Christians, reminding the enemy of the bloody price they have to pay for continuing their aggression against our nation."<sup>17</sup>

Further evidence that al Qaeda considers economic impacts when planning attacks can be derived from targeting and operational documents that were periodically released during 2004. One guidance paper, reportedly written by the late Abdul Azziz al-Moqrin<sup>18</sup> and titled *Camp al Battar [the Sword] Magazine*, specifically prioritizes targeting the Middle East's oil industry, rationalizing this tactic in the following terms:

The purpose of these targets is to destabilize the situation and not allow the economic recovery. . . . [H]itting oil wells and pipelines . . . will scare foreign companies from working there and stealing Muslim treasures. Another purpose is to have foreign investment withdrawn from local markets. Some of the benefits of those operations are the effect it has on the economic powers like the

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<sup>15</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the attack, the price of Brent Crude rose by \$0.48 to \$28.60 per barrel (Allen et al., 2002).

<sup>16</sup> The bombing also had a profoundly negative impact on the Yemeni economy (allegedly a main objective of the attack given the San'a government's support of U.S. counterterrorism efforts), causing the country to lose an estimated \$3.8 million per month in port revenues (Herbert-Burns, 2004). See also Richardson (2004, p. 18); Sheppard (2003, p. 55); Allen et al. (2002); "Who Dunnit?" (2002).

<sup>17</sup> Statement attributed to bin Laden and quoted by Al-Jazeera television, October 10, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Moqrin was reputedly killed by Saudi security forces in Riyadh on June 18, 2004.

one that had happened recently in Madrid [the 2004 train bombings] where the whole European economy was affected.<sup>19</sup>

The consensus among our terrorism experts is that al Qaeda truly came to appreciate the potential for economic terrorism only in the wake of September 11.<sup>20</sup> Although the World Trade Center and Pentagon were primarily chosen for their symbolic status as the seat of U.S. commercial and military power, the knock-on financial damage wrought by the two strikes was enormous (especially in the former case), negatively affecting New York business<sup>21</sup> and contributing to a crisis in the tourism and airline industry that is, arguably, continuing as of this writing.<sup>22</sup> Just as important, the attacks graphically underscored the vulnerability of this country's highly complex critical infrastructure—the systems deemed essential to the effective day-to-day running of the country<sup>23</sup>—demonstrating how quickly devastating cascading effects can result from single disruptions to networks that have become increasingly interdependent in nature (in this case civil aviation, which was fully grounded for 24 hours and took a full two weeks to regain a semblance of normalcy) (Kunreuther and Michel-Kerjan, 2004, p. 206; see also Michel-Kerjan, 2003; and “Civil Aviation Post-9/11/01,” undated). The common wisdom is that, for bin Laden, these cascading effects exposed the United States for what it is: a “paper tiger” on the

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<sup>19</sup> Moqrin, quoted in Hoffman (2004, p. 553). The original transcript is reproduced in Intel-Center (2004, pp. 6–9; the quote appears on p. 7).

<sup>20</sup> As early as 1996, bin Laden was calling for an economic boycott in the Islamic world of U.S. goods as a way of generating economic pressure.

<sup>21</sup> According to one study conducted by one of New York's leading management consulting firms, the attacks on the twin towers of the WTC cost the city roughly \$83 billion in direct economic losses. Figure quoted in Ellis (2004, p. 123).

<sup>22</sup> U.S. airlines experienced overall revenue losses in excess of \$17 billion between September 2001 and the end of 2002, two-thirds of which were tied to reduced passenger manifests post-September 11 (see MacKenzie, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> These are generally taken to include telecommunications, energy, banking, transportation, finance, water systems, emergency services, and agriculture.

verge of financial ruin.<sup>24</sup> Certainly this appears to be the message on a videotape released in late 2001: “It is important to hit the economy [of the United States], which is the base of its military power. . . . If it is hit, they will become preoccupied” (bin Laden statement quoted on “Marketplace,” 2001).

This theme was reiterated in a message delivered prior to the 2004 U.S. presidential elections:

We are continuing in the same policy—to make America bleed profusely to the point of bankruptcy. . . . Even more serious for America is the fact that the *Jihad* fighters have recently forced Bush to resort to an emergency budget in order to continue the fighting in Afghanistan and in Iraq, which proves the success of the plan of bleeding [America] to the point of bankruptcy—Allah willing.<sup>25</sup>

Overall, our experts agreed that the remaining al Qaeda leadership core does not appear to have changed its views on the general utility of economic aggression, noting the publication of various recruitment videos and statements that specifically urge young Muslims to bleed the United States dry through repeated strikes against key pillars of the country’s economy (see, for instance, Campbell and Gunaratna, 2003, pp. 73–74; and Eedle, 2002a). Several also highlighted the 2004 plot to target prominent financial institutions in New York, Newark, and Washington, D.C.—including the New York Stock Exchange, Citicorp, the headquarters of the Prudential group, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Peterson and Meyer, 2004; Meyer, 2004; Johnston and Lichtblau, 2004)—as evidence that

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<sup>24</sup> In an interview with Al-Jazeera, for instance, bin Laden remarked that the September 11 attacks generated billions of dollars in losses to Wall Street, in the daily income of U.S. citizens, in building costs, and to the airline industry. All this damage, he observed, was “due to an attack that happened with the success of Allah lasting one hour only” (see Flynn, 2004, p. 25).

<sup>25</sup> “The Full Version of Osama bin Laden’s Speech” (2004). Incidentally, bin Laden may have misunderstood the use of the term, “emergency,” as such, when it may be more like an artifact of the U.S. government’s budgeting process: an emergency supplemental appropriation of the type under which the Iraq war has been fought for nearly three years.

the group actively continues to seek to engage in a campaign of internal economic disruption.

There was a strong belief among the experts that al Qaeda did indeed think that the U.S. economy was vulnerable—but as one opined, this is largely a notion of which al Qaeda persuaded itself; it does not necessarily reflect reality.

## The Rally Hypothesis

As noted previously, the majority of attacks by militant jihadists after September 11 have not been spectacular in manifestation, suggesting that galvanizing fundamentalists to the cause has not been a primary motive.<sup>26</sup> That said, bin Laden is clearly concerned with consolidating and entrenching Islam's resistance to Western civilization. While this does not necessarily depend on the physical survival of al Qaeda *per se*, it does require the existence of a jihadist message that continues to inspire and be viewed as germane to the affairs of the Muslim world. In other words, strikes need to demonstrate visibly a capacity to harm the United States (the chief harbinger of Western values) and its allies.<sup>27</sup> As bin Laden himself has remarked on at least one occasion,<sup>28</sup> "Given a choice between a weak and strong horse, people will always prefer the strong one."

Two explanations consistent with this hypothesis can be adduced. First, bin Laden "sought—and has received—an international mili-

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps al Qaeda no longer needs to stage spectacular attacks to draw attention to itself (a point made at the end of the monograph), but it may need to keep attacking in order to keep its own forces rallied. The rally hypothesis would then be technically valid, but it would no longer say very much about which targets are most likely to be attacked next.

<sup>27</sup> For instance, consider this from an al Qaeda Political Bureau statement of December 2, 2002: "These two operations [of the Mombasa attack] put a thousand question marks and exclamation points in front of the allied countries that spent millions on programs to protect airplanes from the inside. Here are the fighters attacking them from the outside, so how could they defeat that?"

<sup>28</sup> This particular version came from a videotape made a few months after the September 11 attacks and recovered in the wake of Operation Enduring Freedom.

tary crackdown, one he wants to exploit for his particular brand of revolution,” and that the animus against the United States is merely a means to an end, the end being the restoration of the caliphate. The attack on the United States was purely tactical, a way of reasserting the movement’s primacy in the face of its inability to foster the rise of friendly governments through purely local action. In this manner, the jihad chose to focus on fighting the United States—essentially to create a new “lens” through which it could appeal to the Salafi-Jihadist movement (Doran, 2002). According to the detailed manual of the Afghan jihad that was used for instruction of would-be terrorists in al Qaeda’s training camps, publicity was (and most probably still is) an overriding consideration in planning terrorist acts. Thus, the manual advised holy warriors to target “sentimental landmarks” such as the Statue of Liberty in New York, Big Ben in London, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris because their destruction would “generate intense publicity” (see Nacos, 2003, pp. 4–5).

Among our experts, there was a clear consensus that al Qaeda’s attacks and statements do play to the Muslim world. If nothing else, interpreting the group’s statements requires an understanding both of the Koran and key events in Islamic (which is largely to say, Arab) history, such as the Crusades, or the sacking of Baghdad by Hulugu the Mongol. One expert observed that al Qaeda deliberately hesitated to affiliate itself with strikes in Saudi Arabia, preferring to wait and gauge the fallout from other attacks before taking credit.

The experts agreed that many of the targets selected by al Qaeda were or were made to be focal points of resentment in the Islamic world, such as the Pentagon, the World Trade Center (believed, somehow to be the heart of globalization), and military assets such as the USS *Cole* or Khobar towers.

Our experts additionally agreed that one of al Qaeda’s long-term goals is to further a “conflict of civilizations” and that setting the United States at war with Islamic states fostered the perception that such a struggle was already going on (and was started by the West). To that end, al Qaeda’s activities are consistent with those of earlier terrorists.

Experts agreed that, in order to encourage potential followers, al Qaeda must, therefore, foster the impression that victory is not only plausible but also inevitable. Projecting an image of strength and destructiveness is critical to this objective—a goal that al Qaeda has typically sought to achieve by one of two means: penetrating and destroying hardened targets, or carrying out coordinated assaults that result in substantial numbers of casualties.

Hard—that is, well-protected—targets include facilities such as embassies, government buildings, and military installations. These sites are not only symbolic of the strength and influence of bin Laden’s self-defined enemies, they often represent the most difficult to penetrate. By striking and destroying them, al Qaeda has been able to underscore its credentials as a meaningful force, establishing a benchmark of power that it has then used to build morale among existing members and attract new recruits.

The group’s ability to strike high-profile targets, however, has progressively atrophied since September 11 because of setbacks engendered by the global war on terrorism (GWOT). In order to rally Islamists to the cause, al Qaeda has, accordingly, progressively switched to soft targets—hotels, transportation hubs, synagogues, restaurants, nightclubs—“farming out” attacks to its global affiliates as opportunities arise. Although lacking the symbolic prominence of more strategic buildings and bases, these venues tend to be characterized by largely unimpeded public access, concentrating large numbers of people in a single space. They are, in other words, easy to attack in a manner that is likely to yield a significant body count.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, given their ease of execution, strikes against soft targets provide greater scope for locally based cells and supporters to carry them out—availing al Qaeda of a highly useful “force multiplier” that effectively puts the organization in all places at all times. All this suggests that the rally hypothesis is relatively weak, as least as evidenced by attacks seen to date.

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<sup>29</sup> Determining what constitutes a “significant” body count is, of course, entirely subjective. For the purposes of this book, anything over 20 fatalities per attack is deemed to meet this threshold; this figure equates to 20 percent of the number of deaths that have typically been used to define an act of (conventional) mass destruction terrorism (see Tucker, 2001, p. 8).



The focus on soft targets for the purpose of inspiring jihadists is likely to be especially effective if attacks take the form of suicide assaults. This is because, apart from striking fear in target audiences, martyrdom retains a proven capacity to radicalize and mobilize additional supporters and recruits by emphasizing a misguided altruism that glorifies death and the afterlife in pursuit of a just cause. More specifically, suicide terrorism appeals and attracts because, far from being viewed as a final act of desperation, it is venerated as the ultimate expression of selflessness, loyalty, and commitment. In so doing, these modalities have been directly instrumental in triggering further acts of aggression, which have, in turn, helped to ensure that attack tempos are both sustained and remain visible (Hoffman, 2003, p. 437; Harris, 2003; Burke, 2003). Attack modalities, as such, matter in and of themselves.

Al Qaeda has also been sensitive to the need to present the after-effects of its attacks in a good light to the Islamic world. This was a particular problem with the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania embassy attacks where a large percentage of the victims were Muslim.

Many experts emphasized that the opportunistic nature of these attacks makes it difficult to determine if their selection were optimized to play to the Muslim world. East Africa may have been less the best place to attack the United States than it was the most opportune location to strike given the limited range and capabilities of al Qaeda at the time.

There was consensus but not perfect agreement that al Qaeda could be concerned that an attack would actually be perceived as an attack, rather than as an accident (e.g., a chemical spill) or act of nature. Conversely, only a few experts felt that al Qaeda itself, as opposed to another jihadist group, needed to be the one accorded credit for the attack;<sup>30</sup> most felt that the assault merely needed to demonstrate vis-

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<sup>30</sup> Many terrorist groups claim credit under hitherto unknown names. The Western media cannot therefore blame the correct group. There was no discussion of the possibility that the target audience back home may be able to assign credit correctly even if Western audience cannot.

ibly the group's ability to circumvent the best efforts of the international counterterrorism community. By doing so, it rallies potential supporters.

To the extent that terrorism can be understood, as it has been traditionally, as propaganda of the deed (that is, as information warfare), it certainly makes a difference whether the effects of any one attack were caused deliberately, were an accident, or were statistically indistinguishable from normal mortality. As one expert noted, in terrorism, political goals are primary and such goals could not be attained without proper description. However, this does not necessarily require attribution. In this vein, another expert observed, if al Qaeda's purpose is to stimulate a worldwide revolution, and then become irrelevant (or as another put it, become a franchise operation, serving as the base of a larger uprising), then concentrating on proper attribution is akin to dwelling on which match started the fire.

The desire for attribution, or at least correct causality, is consistent with the rally hypothesis. If al Qaeda's primary interest in bringing the U.S. economy to its knees or killing U.S. citizens is to meet the standards of retributive justice, then causality is less important. To take a hypothetical example, an operation carried out against vehicle brake manufacturing that made cars inexplicably less safe and thereby hiked the automobile accident rate 10 percent would almost certainly kill more people every year than the number who died on September 11. It, therefore, might be as ultimately satisfying, although far less spectacular, than a conventional terrorist attack. However, it would communicate nothing to the wider Islamic world nor would it, unless revealed, contribute anything to coercion. Equally, and somewhat less hypothetically, a biological attack that killed people with something that looked like influenza may be indistinguishable from a particularly bad flu season and would therefore have little coercive impact here or mobilization impact back home.

*So, would terrorists target Ohio?* There was a general consensus among our experts that al Qaeda, at least in the U.S. context, would prefer their targets have symbolic value in the Islamic world. New York City and the Washington area are far richer in this sense than is Ohio. Thus, were al Qaeda central planning an attack, especially if it involved

jihadists who had to be sent from overseas or actively recruited in the United States and then vetted, it is highly unlikely that Ohio would be a target.

Nevertheless, three possible exceptions to this rule are highlighted. One is if the attack were initiated, planned, and largely resourced by an Ohio-based (and, as such, an indigenously self-generated) cell—rather than one introduced for this purpose—or a smaller handful of individuals. A Somali-born individual has already been indicted for planning to attack a shopping mall near Columbus, Ohio. Here, al Qaeda's role would, in retrospect, be far smaller than it was for the September 11 attacks, and may even be limited to no more than general ideological guidance, and perhaps a specific blessing for the event.

The second exception is if al Qaeda decided to attack a target in Ohio because all the more symbolic targets were so well protected that the odds of their succeeding were deemed too low, and so al Qaeda instead attacked a general class of venues known to be less well protected, such as shopping malls. Under these circumstances there is no reason to believe that a site in Ohio is any less likely to be selected than one elsewhere.

A third exception would arise if the attack took the form of a contagion (i.e., a biological attack on people or agriculture) whose release point was ultimately irrelevant. Again in this instance, there would be little reason to believe Ohio would be necessarily safer than another comparable part of the country.

## The Franchise Hypothesis

As noted, al Qaeda has defined its long-term objective as the creation of a pure Islamic state governed by Koranic law (*Sharia*) (Gerecht, 2002). In his 1996 *fatwa*, bin Laden identified guerilla warfare as the means through which to drive corrupting U.S. and Western forces out of the Arab heartland and otherwise foster the global conditions needed to establish the desired caliphate (see also Hoffman, 2004, p. 553).

During the late 1990s, al Qaeda pursued this objective as a hierarchical and unified organization. Benefiting from access to secure ter-

ritorial basing in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan, the movement had taken on many traits of a hierarchical organization by the late 1990s, complete with permanent installations, fixed structures, standardized methods, and regular procedures.<sup>31</sup> Outside sympathizers were willing and able to support al Qaeda's goals, but did not generate the organization's strategy. Al Qaeda itself designed, equipped, and executed the 1998 bombings at two U.S. embassies in East Africa, damaged the USS *Cole* in 2000, and, ultimately, attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

In the years since September 11, however, the U.S.-led GWOT has successfully destroyed most of al Qaeda's organizational physical infrastructure in Afghanistan, which was crucial to the planning and execution of large-scale strategic attacks. Moreover, following Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which scattered the core of the group's leadership to various locales in the Middle East and throughout Central, South, and Southeast Asia (Alden, Fidler, and Huband, 2003), a campaign of harassment and intelligence tracking has resulted in the capture or (in the case of Mohammed Atef) death of many al Qaeda central commanders, which as of May 2005 included, among others:

- Ramzi bin al-Shibi (captured), the reputed recruiter for the September 11 attacks (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001)
- Mohammed Atef (killed), Abu Zubaydah (captured), Khalid Sheikh Mohammad (captured), and Mustafa Ahmed Hawasawi (captured), all senior operational planners (Van Natta, 2003; Finn, 2002; Eccleston, 2003; Federal Bureau of Investigation, undated; "A Timely Arrest," 2003)
- Abd al-Rahim al-Nashirih (captured), bin Laden's alleged point-man on the Arabian Peninsula and chief organizer for maritime attacks such as the USS *Cole* suicide strike in 2000 (Shenon, 2002)
- Riduan Isamuddin, aka Hambali (captured), al Qaeda's main link to Southeast Asian militant groups and the accused mastermind

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<sup>31</sup> For an excellent overview of this period, see Rashid (2000, Chapter 10).

of the 2002 Bali attacks in Indonesia (“Key Asian Terror Suspect Seized,” 2003)

- Ahmed Khalfan Ghilani (captured), one of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI’s) 22 most wanted terrorists and believed to be a key figure behind the 1998 U.S. embassy attacks in Kenya and Tanzania (Johnson and Diamond, 2004)
- Abu Faraj al-Libbi (captured), thought to be al Qaeda’s third most senior leader in 2005 and main coordinator for operations in Pakistan (Masood, Khan, and Sengupta, 2005)
- Haitham al-Yemeni (killed), described as a central figure in facilitating the international dissemination of jihadist communications and supplies (Jehl, 2005)
- Tawfiq bin Attash (killed), deputy operational leader (“Bush Hails Capture of Top al Qaeda Operative,” 2003)
- Abu Hamza Rabia (killed in Waziristan), described as the successor to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (“Blast ‘Kills al-Qaeda Commander,’” 2005).

On the monetary front, al Qaeda has also suffered. Thus far, over \$136 million<sup>32</sup> in identifiable assets have been seized or frozen, potentially representing the equivalent of two to two-and-a-half years of operating funds.<sup>33</sup> Of greater significance, the heightened imperative attached to cutting decisively the international flow of terrorist finances has forced al Qaeda to adapt progressively its jihadist “business model” and switch to more secure, but less lucrative, localized collection methods. The resulting drop in revenue has compounded the strategic setbacks noted previously, further robbing the group of the necessary resources to plan and execute large-scale, complex attacks on the scale of September 11 (Kiser, 2005). Remarking on the general utility of this aspect of the GWOT, David Aufhauser, the former general

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<sup>32</sup> Of this amount, \$36 million has been confiscated by the United States and \$100 million by other nations. It should be noted, however, that the former figure includes assets seized under the Clinton administration, while much of the latter has been unfrozen due to lack of concrete evidence that these monies were being used to support terrorism.

<sup>33</sup> Alden, Huband, and Fidler (2003). This figure is based on estimates that during its heyday, al Qaeda enjoyed an annual operating budget of between \$30 and \$50 million.

counsel for the U.S. Department of the Treasury, observes: “Starving them [al Qaeda] of money really has a dramatic impact on the licence and liberty with which they previously roamed the world” (quoted in Alden, Fidler, and Huband, 2003).

During the course of the past three years, al Qaeda’s institutional structure has become progressively more fluid and decentralized. Specifically, the loss of a secure haven in Afghanistan combined with the loss of key human and capital resources has denuded the group of the vital command, logistical, and functional assets needed to operate in a vertically organized manner.

Accordingly, al Qaeda has been increasingly forced to reconfigure its operational agenda away from centrally controlled strategic assaults executed by an inner core of militant jihadist activists, and toward tactically oriented strikes undertaken by affiliated cells as and when opportunities arise. In many ways, the largely monolithic structure that emerged out of Afghanistan in the late 1990s now better correlates to an amorphous “movement of movements” that, though undoubtedly motivated by the continuing message of transnational jihadism, is nebulous, segmented, and polycentric in nature.<sup>34</sup>

Commenting on this evolutionary dynamic, various analysts argue that the GWOT, far from destroying bin Laden’s movement, has actually given rise to new, less predictable organizations composed of dozens of like-minded extremists, many of which have willingly taken up the Saudi renegade’s call for global jihad, independent of either his money or his training.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, these observers argue that the al Qaeda core now exists merely to give ideological succor, inspiration, validation, and advice (face-to-face or via the Internet) to

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<sup>34</sup> Comments made during the “New Trends in Terrorism: Challenges for Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism” Seminar, Lisbon, July 4–5, 2002. See also Gunaratna (2004) and “The Other War” (2003).

<sup>35</sup> “Al Qaeda: Organization or Ideology?” (2003). See also Kenney (2003). Drawing on the example of the Medellin Cartel in Colombia, Kenney argues the type of decapitation strategy as instituted through the GWOT can have the unintended consequence of transforming a targeted enterprise into an entity with no central leadership but with a continued capacity to operate; he further warns that the actions of these movements are likely to be more difficult to predict and, hence, less easy to preempt.

Islamists who act according to their own idiosyncratic interpretation of the wider international jihadist cause.<sup>36</sup>

The consensus on this issue among our experts was that al Qaeda was still capable of operational initiative, but in no way to the extent that it was prior to September 11. One interviewee compared September 11 to the original Big Bang—the militant jihadist movement retained all the energy it had before that event but the energy is parceled out into many organizations, none of which is as individually well resourced as al Qaeda was. Several also noted that many of the attacks that have been associated with al Qaeda—including (perhaps even especially) those that have taken place in Saudi Arabia—were actually carried out by groups on the periphery.

The difficult question, then, is whether al Qaeda has sufficient command and control over target selection for attacks executed by its followers. To the extent the organization's leadership retains such authority, al Qaeda's target preferences matter. If al Qaeda is unable to exercise such control, however, then it is the priorities of the groups or individuals carrying out the attack that count.

This has an implication for the United States. With the possible exception of the attack on the Taba Hilton in October 2004, every terrorist attack since late 2002 associated with al Qaeda has been either by a “franchised” or “unaffiliated” group. *If* this pattern continues,<sup>37</sup> then the terrorism risk to the United States may be limited to jihadists organized and operating within the country.

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<sup>36</sup> Hoffman (2004) has argued: The computer records, email traffic, and other documents seized by Pakistani authorities when a computer-savvy al Qaeda operative named Mohammed Naeem Noor Khan was apprehended in August 2004 point to the existence of a more robust, centralized entity than had previously been assumed.

<sup>37</sup> By contrast, as reported in *The New York Times* (Risen and Rohde, 2004), “Mr. bin Laden remains much more than just an iconic figurehead of Islamic militancy, most American intelligence officials now say. . . . [H]e controls an elite terrorist cell devoted to attacking in the United States . . . [and officials] contend that he personally oversees the group of Qaeda operatives, which he hopes to use for another ‘spectacular’ event, like the Sept. 11 hijacking plot.”

## Conclusions

In sum, on the basis of past al Qaeda operations and statements, it would appear that the group's target selection has been heavily influenced by three motivations: primarily to coerce and to damage economies, and, secondarily, to rally supporters and potential supporters. The certainty with which these motivations can be linked to attacks, however, has been vitiated by the large number that are supported rather than directed by al Qaeda itself.

It is evident that al Qaeda's operational and organizational character has changed markedly since 9/11. The group's increasingly fluid and disaggregated nature has necessitated a move toward assaults that are cheap and easy to manage, and that can be executed through locally based affiliates (who may be more or less an integral part of the wider international jihadist network) as and when circumstances require. Based on observable trends in other parts of the world, the focus is likely to be on venues that are either civilian-centric or that carry significant implications for economic stability. In terms of modalities, one can expect to see an ongoing emphasis on coordinated bombings—which may take the form of synchronized martyr strikes—possibly interspersed with the adoption of less conventional tactics such as radiological releases and the deliberate contamination of the food supply or agriculture.

A plethora of potential attack sites and contingencies in the United States would accord with this general context. Given this open-ended target menu, it would be useful to try to delineate the probability of one type of assault—including its underlying motivational rationale—occurring relative to another. It is to this purpose that Chapter Five turns.





## Ramifications for al Qaeda Attack Planning in the United States

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Chapter Two expressed certain assumptions about the rationality and organizational structure of al Qaeda. The next two chapters determined that past selections of modalities and targets for attack have been motivated by al Qaeda's desire to coerce and damage the United States and its allies, and, secondly, to energize current or potential militant jihadists. This chapter is dedicated to relating these findings to plausible attacks within the United States.

The precise form that future al Qaeda–instigated acts of aggression might take in the United States is impossible to predict, and the number of targets vulnerable to attack is limitless. Thus, although they do not isolate particular techniques or locations, the coercion, damage, and rally hypotheses tend to provide useful insight into the modalities likely to be used and general type of domestic U.S. venues that are at comparatively high risk for attack. Because its ability to explain target selection was inherently limited, the franchise hypothesis is considered here only as regards the ability of an operationally independent affiliate group to carry out a given attack.

As noted in Chapter Three, multiple effects can be the intended—or actual—outcome of a single incident. Similarly, although categorized by the hypothesis that provides the primary motivation for attack, it is understood that the targets and modalities discussed below may be consistent to a greater or lesser degree with more than one of the coercion, damage, and rally hypotheses.

The contingencies examined are not intended to represent the entire universe of possible attack scenarios; neither are the conclusions

reached presented as authoritative. To the contrary, both the events selected for analysis, and judgments made, are educated guesses as to the plausibility of each eventuality. Tables 5.1a, 5.1b, 5.1c, and 5.1d lay out a master list of modalities and attack types that form a basis from which much of the discussion to follow is drawn. Note that many of these attack modalities correlate to the 15 planning scenarios of the Homeland Security Council<sup>1</sup> in July 2004. Such correlations are indicated parenthetically after the relevant modality. For instance, “Cyber-attack (15)” means that Planning Scenario 15 is a cyberattack.

## Coercion

The coercion hypothesis posits that al Qaeda’s target selection and attack modalities are designed to raise the human cost of maintaining the U.S. presence in the Muslim world. Attacks on the U.S. homeland will be particularly attractive, according to this hypothesis, both because civilian targets are “softer” than are the heavily fortified U.S. outposts in the Muslim world, and because pain inflicted upon the U.S. population itself is believed by al Qaeda to have a larger political effect than attacks on military personnel and facilities abroad.

## Soft Targets

The increased emphasis on soft targets seen overseas may be replicated in the United States in large part because more prominent venues have become hardened. Since September 11, concerted moves have been made to upgrade security around high-profile landmarks such as the Pentagon, the White House, the Capitol, state legislatures, and foreign diplomatic missions. New York City has been on a continuous state of Orange Alert since March 2002 (when the color-coded threat index was first introduced).<sup>2</sup> To be sure, these initiatives have exacerbated

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<sup>1</sup> See Howe (2004). Of the 15 scenarios, thirteen are terrorist-related and two (numbers 9 and 10) are natural disasters.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson and Meyer (2004). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) introduced a color-coded terrorism warning index in 2002. Known as the Threat Advisory System

**Table 5.1a**  
**Bombing Scenarios**

Bomb Type	Description
Truck bombs	The destruction of a tall building, using, for instance, an 18-wheeler filled completely with dynamite or ANFO (ammonium nitrate and fuel oil). <sup>a</sup> This category also includes the use of fueled commercial aircraft as weapons.
Car or van bombs	A smaller class of attack, and, as such, easier to manage (especially if simultaneous strikes are desired) and not as costly (both in terms of execution and impact).
Landmarks	Striking targets chosen as much for their symbolic value as for how many are killed or the cost of repairing the damage.
Infrastructure	Attacks against such targets as bridges, tunnels, rain lines, power lines, pipelines, and water works.
Roadside	This modality would target motorists and would be aimed at reducing actual or perceived security on major U.S. interstates.
Crowded venues	Attacks on such targets as shopping malls, nightclubs, movie theaters, and train stations—locations with unrestricted public access where many people are concentrated in a small space.
Events (12)	An attack on a public gathering such as a baseball game, the Oscars, a New Year’s Eve celebration at Times Square, a parade, or a political gathering. Events tend to be more heavily protected than crowded venues because of their higher profile and, often, size.
Military targets	Attacks on military sites in the United States would have to surmount high levels of force, protection, and, in many cases, penetrate deeply into a facility.

<sup>a</sup> Obviously, explosive payloads will depend on the size of the complex to be hit. The Alfred Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was destroyed using 1 ton of ANFO (ammonium nitrate and fuel oil).

the difficulty of attacking prominent sites in the United States; however, in so doing, they have arguably also triggered a process of potential threat displacement toward softer targets such as sports stadiums, shopping malls, hospitals, restaurants, nightclubs, cinema complexes,

(and cynically referred to as the “traffic lights of death”), the schematic delineates the extant danger of terrorism to the U.S. homeland in the following manner: Green indicates low, blue indicates guarded, yellow indicates elevated, orange indicates high, red indicates severe. For further details, see U.S. Department of Homeland Security (undated).

**Table 5.1b**  
**Attack Modalities and Target Types: Other Conventional Means**

Attack Modality	Target Type	Description
Direct Attack	Assassination	The killing of heads of states, second- and third-level officials, diplomats, senior members of the armed forces et al. Al Qaeda and its affiliates have been linked to several high-profile assassinations attempts, including plots against Presidents Bush and Musharraf as well as the former pope, but succeeded only with Ahmad Shah Massoud (the head of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan) just prior to the September 11 attacks.
	Sniping	A series of attacks against randomly selected targets (e.g., the Washington Beltway sniper), with effects similar to those generated by roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs). <sup>a</sup>
	Hostages	Hostage-taking has been used in Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Russia (Chechnya <sup>a</sup> ), the Philippines, and Colombia. Kidnapping received global attention last year with the Beslan siege, which culminated with the slaughter of some 330 victims, mostly children.
Aircraft	On-board attack	Bombs or mad hijackers can and have destroyed aircraft in flight.
	Off-board attack	Notably, shooting down a jet airliner with a man-portable air defense system (MANPADS). Al Qaeda attempted an attack of this sort in 2002 in its Mombasa attack (which failed, though only narrowly).

<sup>a</sup> *Al Battar* (from "The Targets Inside Cities") has listed in rough rank order of priority the type of people who should be targeted for attack: "It said businessmen and economists were first on the list of those specific occupations to be targeted, followed by diplomats, scholars and scientists, tourists and entertainment tours." These target attacks achieve dual goals: "spreading fear in enemy lines . . . and lifting the moral of the Islamic nation" (al-Muqrin, 2004).

office buildings, airport arrival halls, and train stations. There are a plethora of these venues across the country, which, given their emphasis on public access, necessarily preclude the type of intrusive and sustained security that can be placed around "high-value" targets. Moreover, because large congregations of people typically gather at these locations, the opportunity for achieving a large number of casualties is significantly increased.

**Table 5.1c**  
**Attack Modalities and Target Types: Chemical and Biological Attacks**

Attack Modality	Target Type	Description
Chemical	Airborne (5, 6, 7, 8)	Airborne chemicals have been used in one terrorist attack (by Aum Shinrikyo on the Tokyo subway system in 1995). Agents can also be dispersed narrowly within closed spaces or more widely by attacking containers of toxic chemicals (e.g., derailing chemical cars to induce a chlorine effusion or attacking a facility to replicate what happened in Bhopal).
	Waterborne (13)	Examples of this modality would include poisoning the water supply or contaminating the food supply.
Biological	Human contagious (3, 4)	The dissemination of agents such as smallpox or a highly resilient strain of influenza. While potentially deadly, once such an agent is released there is no possibility of a deal or a second application. Also, unless contained, it will spread globally and is likely to kill a far higher percentage of the Islamic than the Western population because of differences in health care systems, sanitation, and population density.
	Human noncontagious (2)	The effects of noncontagious pathogens, such as anthrax or plague, are comparable to that of a major chemical attack—high casualties, potentially large remediation costs, but little direct property damage.
	Counteragricultural (14)	Attacks against agriculture could take the form of introducing a viral agent such as foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) into the U.S. livestock.

Combined, these facets provide al Qaeda with an ideal violence formula that can be readily leveraged to punish U.S. citizens collectively for the “sins” of their government. If carried out consistently, this type of campaign could well elicit popular pressure on the U.S. government to withdraw its forces from the Islamic world as the costs of these deployments would now be borne directly by the U.S. civilian population (as opposed to soldiers overseas who are trained to accept such risks as part of their job and casualties among which tend to be understood by the U.S. population as an inevitable concomitant of duty). Moreover, because attacks on soft targets are relatively easy to execute and potentially deadly, they can be visibly and repeatedly exploited to

**Table 5.1d**  
**Attack Modalities and Target Types: Other Unconventional Attacks**

Attack Modality	Target Type	Description
RDD <sup>a</sup>	RDDs (11)	Radioactive material can be dispersed via a conventional explosion (the so-called “dirty bomb”) or by airborne dispersion. Few immediate casualties would result (other than by the proximate explosive effect), although those affected may see long-term health effects (e.g., a greater likelihood of cancer). Remediation costs may be expensive, but a great deal depends on what people concede is an acceptable level of background radiation.
Nuclear attack	Nuclear attack	This modality would most likely involve the detonation of a crude nuclear device, most probably in a major urban core.
Cyberattack <sup>b</sup>	Cyberattack (15)	Attacks in cyberspace can range from ones so modest that it is unclear whether anything has been done, to something as consequential as disrupting a nation’s financial markets and corrupting every transaction thereafter—at least in theory. Al Qaeda has evidenced interest in cyberattacks (papers and hard files captured in Afghanistan included information downloaded from the Internet on the vulnerabilities of certain utility-control systems). However, it has yet to be associated with any specific attack; moreover, the group is not known to have trained jihadists in hacker techniques. <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> RDD = radiological dispersion device.

<sup>b</sup> The only known cyber terrorist attack was one instigated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1997, which involved overloading the email servers of Sri Lankan consulates in Ottawa; Washington, D.C.; and Seoul (see Chalk, 2000, p. 15; and “First ‘Terrorist’ Cyber-Attack Reported by US,” 1998). Finally, in comparison to the roughly \$60 billion in direct damage from September 11, a worst-case damage scenario imagined for a worm attack was estimated at \$50 billion (Weaver and Paxson, 2004).

<sup>c</sup> Nevertheless, from Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed (interviewed by Dan Verton for Computerworld on November 25, 2002): “In a matter of time, you will see attacks on the stock market [referring specifically to exchanges in New York, London, and Tokyo]. . . . That is what al-Qaeda is skillful with. I would not be surprised if tomorrow I hear of a big economic collapse because of somebody attacking the main technical systems in big companies. . . . I would advise those who doubt al-Qaeda’s interest in cyberweapons to take Osama bin Laden very seriously. . . . The third letter from Osama bin Laden a few months ago was clearly addressing using the technology in order to destroy the economy of the capitalist states” (Verton, 2002). That noted, it is by no means clear that he is taken seriously or trusted by militant jihadists associated with al Qaeda.

demonstrate al Qaeda's continued durability—both as an ideology and as a concept.

Strikes against soft targets will likely take the form of assaults that can be put together on short notice and carried out on a largely autonomous basis. Attack sites will not necessarily focus on perceived high-risk cities such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington. They could, in fact, be more probable in unprepared areas that are not considered to be primary target areas. Indeed, as noted in Chapter Four, a Somali has already been indicted (in 2004) for plotting to blow up an unnamed shopping mall in Columbus. He was linked to another Ohio South Asian immigrant, Iyman Faris (an alleged representative of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed), who as part of a plea agreement admitted that he had considered bombing New York's Brooklyn Bridge and a train in Washington (Serrano, 2004); that neither of these venues was ultimately chosen would suggest they were abandoned on account of the difficulties presented with definitely destroying these targets (especially true of the Brooklyn Bridge) and, possibly, of hiding in an appropriate resident population that was within easy reach of the respective target area.<sup>3</sup> Perpetrators are liable to be U.S. citizens or residents—both on account of heightened immigration and visitation procedures enacted after the September 11 attacks (which has made it harder to covertly infiltrate externally based cadres into the United States) and due to al Qaeda's own reliance on operatives who need minimum logistical support.<sup>4</sup> Caucasian males and females, either acting on their own initiative or recruited from mosques, low-income neighborhoods, or prisons, could be especially favored as they will not be readily identifiable as adherents of the international jihadist cause and are, therefore, unlikely to have attracted the dedicated attention of law

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<sup>3</sup> "After months of casing the target, he [Iyman Faris] sent a message to his Al Qaeda handlers that '[t]he weather is too hot,' which investigators took as a reference to intensified police activity around the bridge" (Finnegan, 2005, p. 71).

<sup>4</sup> There are numerous benefits to using recruits from Western countries: Such individuals can leave and re-enter their country of residence or citizenship repeatedly (so long as they exercise caution); are generally able to travel between such countries without visas; and, arguably, have greater latitude for procuring actionable intelligence.



enforcement.<sup>5</sup> While Muslim converts will obviously be singled out on account of their religious affinity—“shoe bomber” Richard Reid<sup>6</sup> is a case in point—there is speculation that al Qaeda might also seek to co-opt secular extremists motivated by anti-U.S., antiglobalization, or anti-Jewish sentiments, including anarchists, environmental radicals, and right-wing xenophobes. Certainly bin Laden’s railings against capitalism, multinational companies, the Zionist lobby, and a White House clique steering “world policy from behind an iron curtain,” are expressions that resonate with the ranks of the far left as well as the far right.<sup>7</sup>

### Categorizing Potential Attacks

As a general rule, a terrorist attack that generates casualties would be a plausible candidate if al Qaeda operated only by the tenets of the coercion hypothesis. Of the 21 attack modalities noted, almost all of them lead to casualties (the few that do not, such as cyberattacks, are consistent with the damage hypothesis).

Whether al Qaeda values certain attacks for their coercive potential more or less than might be predicted based solely on how many people they kill depends on the level of sophistication of the group’s thinking on coercion. Certain attacks may result in disproportionate psychological impact: e.g., roadside bombs and sniper attacks (see

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Cozzens (2005) and Blanche (2005). Some Western nationals have already been detained for plotting terrorist attacks in pursuit of the international jihadist cause, including Willie Brigitte (Australian, arrested in 2003), Lionel Dumont (French, arrested in 2003), David Courtailler (French, arrested in 2004), Christian Ganczarski (German, arrested in 2003), Richard Reid (British, arrested in 2001), and Jose Padilla (U.S. citizen, arrested in 2002). Indeed, according to a study undertaken by Robert Leiken of the U.S. Nixon Center, of the 373 radical Islamic terrorists killed or arrested in the United States and Europe between 1993 and 2004, 41 percent were Western nationals, naturalized, second generation, or converts to Islam (see Dickey, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Reid was arrested in December 2001 after trying to detonate an explosive device hidden in his shoe while on a flight from Paris to Miami. For further details on Reid’s background and conversion to Islam, see “Who Is Richard Reid?” (2001).

<sup>7</sup> Comments made during the Comparative Government for Homeland Security Executive Course, Monterey Postgraduate Naval School, Monterey, January 31–February 4, 2005. See also Jenkins (2004).

the Beltway sniper of 2002), contagious and noncontagious biological agents (see the anthrax incidents of late 2001), and RDDs (as discussed previously). Conversely, if al Qaeda thought in terms of repeatability as an element of coercion, certain attacks, such as contagious biological agents, may lose some of their potency.

Perhaps needless to add, some of the attacks in Tables 5.1a through 5.1d are extremely difficult to execute, irrespective of how badly terrorists may want to do so.

## Damage

The damage hypothesis suggests that al Qaeda will select targets and attack modalities based upon their ability to undercut the U.S. economy. This may mean maximization of the direct dollar value of an attack's destructiveness, or the degradation of infrastructure necessary to commercial activity—e.g., power lines, transportation systems, financial hubs. Another feasible methodology would be to strike targets that will disrupt consumer patterns and produce ripple effects. Attacks against the food chain could be instrumental in this regard, as the effects of such assaults can be expected to radiate well beyond narrow commercial and agricultural enterprises. Hitting soft targets such as restaurants, shopping malls, and hotels will, by default, have an adverse effect on the economy by denting consumer confidence or spending, discouraging tourism, and undermining investment (domestic and international). However, there are other, more direct methods that al Qaeda could bring to bear against the United States in order to elicit economic damage.

Attacks against the country's increasingly fragile and interdependent critical infrastructure (CI) could be especially alluring given the cascading effects that such strikes can elicit—often at enormous cost. As Kunreuther and Michel-Kerjan observe, the September 2001 attacks were particularly instructive in this regard:

The 9/11 events. . . demonstrated also a new kind of interdependent vulnerability: terrorists can use the capacity of the country's

critical infrastructure to have a large-scale impact on the nation by turning the diffusion capacity of our own networks against ourselves. (Kunreuther and Michel-Kerjan, 2004, p. 206)

In many ways, the essence of this argument is captured in the so-called “spider web theory” that was first advanced in Israel in the context of Palestinian terrorism. The notion likens contemporary Western society to a spider web—highly intricate, complex, and beautiful, but inherently fragile. If the web is left alone, it continues to exist; however, when it is touched, it disintegrates (Steven Simon, 2004).

Given al Qaeda’s disaggregated character, should the group seek to undertake a CBRN attack, it is liable to focus on modalities that are inexpensive, low-risk, and within the operational capabilities of locally based cells or affiliates acting on a semi-autonomous, if not fully independent, basis. The objective would be to cause social and economic disruption as opposed to large-scale loss of life per se. Two types of assault fit this profile: radiological and low-tech biological.

### **Radiological Releases**

This type of attack would involve releases of radiological material through modified conventional explosions or so-called “dirty bombs.” There are myriad sources of material inside the United States that could be used for this purpose,<sup>8</sup> ranging from radiation equipment employed in medical facilities to U.S. research stations, commercial sites, and atomic waste storage tanks located at prominent nuclear reservations (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 34; Flynn, 2004, p. 13; Cockburn, 2003; Wald, 2004). Most of these venues lack the type of rigorous security found at military installations (something that is particularly true of radiotherapy clinics) and at least some power plants have already been the locus of accidental releases of radioactive materials? Moreover, although Washington has made preventing the spread of CBRN materials a top

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<sup>8</sup> It should also be noted that material could also be imported from outside. Indeed, in late 2003, intelligence reports indicated that Adnan El Shukrijumah, a reputed key al Qaeda operative in North America, had attempted to acquire radioactive components from a 5-megawatt research reactor in Hamilton, Canada, for an attack that was reputedly being planned for the United States in 2004.

priority, the Bush administration has slashed funds to dispose of commercially held radioactive materials that could be used in dirty bombs such as cobalt-60, americium, and cesium-137. Indeed at the time of writing, the U.S. Congress had approved passage of legislation that would allow the U.S. Department of Energy to leave residual stocks of atomic waste in tanks located in South Carolina and Idaho, instead of pumping it out and preparing it for deep burial. One environmental group has calculated that, if as little as one part in 1,000 of this material leached into the local drinking water supplies (at any time over the next thousand years), they would be polluted well above allowable standards.<sup>9</sup>

The overall social, political, and economic ramifications of a successful radiological attack occurring in the United States could be enormous, irrespective of the number of people killed. Depending on the sophistication and size of the dirty bomb employed, areas as large as tens of square miles could be contaminated for years at levels above recommended civilian exposure limits. In serious cases, demolition may be the only practical solution for dealing with affected buildings; should such an event take place in a city such as New York, it would result in huge economic losses (Richardson, 2004, pp. 51–52). As Stephen Flynn (2004, p. 25) remarks, a radiological release at a major port would be equally if not more costly:

[A] dirty bomb . . . set off in a seaport would likely kill only a few unfortunate longshoremen. . . . But if there is no credible security system to restore the public's confidence that other containers are safe, mayors and governors throughout the country, as well as the president, will come under withering political pressure to order the shutdown of the intermodal transportation system. Examining cargo in tens of thousands of trucks, trains, and ships to ensure it poses no threat would have devastating economic consequences. When containers stop moving, assembly plants go idle, retail shelves go bare, and workers end up in unemployment lines. A three-week shutdown could well spawn a global recession.

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<sup>9</sup> The Fernald plant in Ohio, for instance, has a history that includes cumulative releases of at least 500 tons of toxic uranium dust.

The October 2002 lockdown of all 29 ports along North America's Pacific coast provides an indication of the type of economic damage that could result from even a temporary closure of major shipping terminals, either here or overseas. The work stoppage, which resulted from a labor dispute between unions and management and lasted nearly two weeks, delayed more than 200 ships carrying 300,000 containers. The direct cost to the U.S. economy associated with cargo disruptions alone from that event have been estimated at \$467 million, while the month-long process of clearing subsequent freight backlogs is estimated to have removed between 0.4 and 1.1 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) from prominent Asian exporters such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia (Richardson, 2004, p. 66; see also Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2003, pp. 17–18; and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT], 2003).

The United States has already confronted the potential specter of a dirty bomb. In June 2002, the federal government announced that it had arrested a U.S. citizen, Jose Padilla, suspected of having established links with al Qaeda and who was believed to have been in the process of developing plans to explode a uranium-enriched RDD. While U.S. officials have admitted the plot had probably not developed much past the discussion stage, they do assert that substantial initial surveillance had taken place on various alternative attack locations (including in the federal capital region), and had Padilla not been detained, the attack plans might well have gone ahead.<sup>10</sup>

### **Biological Attacks on Agriculture**

Attacks against the agricultural sector may pose the most serious threat given their ease of execution and potential socioeconomic fallout (both of which fit well with the general evolutionary dynamic of al Qaeda in the post–September 11 era). Small- and medium-scale food processing and packing plants are especially at risk. Thousands of these facili-

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<sup>10</sup> Padilla was declared an enemy combatant in June 2002 and moved to a military brig in South Carolina. As of this writing, he continues to be held without full access to lawyers or the automatic right to a trial. For further details, see Richardson (2004, pp. 56–58); Blanche (2005, p. 27); Lewis (2005); Karon (2002); Lane (2004); “Officials: Dirty Bomb Plot Disrupted” (2002); Ryan (2005).

ties exist across the country, many of which exhibit uneven internal quality control;<sup>11</sup> questionable biosurveillance; and highly transient, unscreened workforces. Entry-exit controls are not always adequate (and occasionally do not exist at all) and even basic measures, such as padlocking storage rooms, may not be practiced. This lack of concerted and uniform security has necessarily exacerbated the ease of orchestrating a toxic or bacterial food-borne attack, which even in a limited form could trigger widespread public angst—particularly if human deaths did occur and the source of the contamination was not immediately apparent.<sup>12</sup>

An act of agro-bioterrorism might additionally take the form of a viral strike directed against the lucrative U.S. cattle industry<sup>13</sup> (which would fit well with al Qaeda's general emphasis on delivering a crippling blow to the U.S. economy). Weaponizing a disease such as FMD—the agricultural equivalent of smallpox given its rate of subject-to-subject transmission—is neither difficult nor expensive. Because the microbe is nonzoonotic in nature, terrorists would not require any substantive containment procedures or personal protective equipment. The means for disseminating FMD could be as simple as scraping a viral sample directly on to a cow or merely introducing the agent into a silage bin at an animal fair or auction barn. Because the disease is so contagious and given the extremely concentrated and intensive nature of contemporary U.S. livestock farming practices, a multifocal outbreak across several states could well ensue. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has concluded that if a catastrophe of this sort occurred, it would cost

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<sup>11</sup> In 2002, the Bush administration introduced plans to upgrade the screening of workers employed at food processing plants and packing facilities. It is not clear, however, how comprehensive these screening checks will be and to what extent they will apply to the thousands of small- and medium-scale plants that exist throughout the United States (which, due to a lack of federal inspectors, necessarily operate on a system of self-regulation).

<sup>12</sup> Chalk (2004, pp. 11, 16, 26). Quickly identifying and containing the source of a specific food contaminant introduced (deliberately or by accident) at small and medium processing plants is problematic as many of these facilities neither keep accurate records of their distribution networks nor have in place concerted product-recall plans.

<sup>13</sup> Dairy and cattle farmers raise, on average, between \$50 and \$54 billion per year through dairy and beef sales.

the country billions of dollars in lost beef exports and trade sanctions and could possibly preclude a full return to the international market for several years, if not decades (see, generally, Chalk, 2004).

### **Categorizing Potential Attacks**

Many of the attacks in Tables 5.1a through 5.1d are capable of wreaking large amounts of damage (Chalk et al., 2005). Truck bombs, infrastructure attacks, agricultural attacks, RDDs, nuclear weapons, and cyberattacks can cause billions dollars worth of harm directly. Van bombs, attacks on landmarks, roadside bombs, attacks on crowded venues or events, sniping, attacks on aircraft, waterborne chemicals, and noncontagious biological agents are also capable of depressing economic activity and thereby causing perhaps even more harm indirectly. Finally, although it is unclear that al Qaeda factors such contingencies into its planning, programs to protect infrastructure after an attack may be quite expensive,<sup>14</sup> even if the attacks themselves may not be.

### **Rally**

The rally hypothesis posits that al Qaeda's target selection and attack modalities are designed to inspire Muslims outside its organizational framework to engage in jihad against the West. Attacks spectacular in size, nature, or consequence will be pursued as a means through which to emphasize the group's power, underscore its operational credibility, and "prove" that Allah is on al Qaeda's side—a powerful mechanism through which to embolden current radicals and attract new adherents. Nevertheless, the frequency with which martyrdom is referred to in al Qaeda statements suggests that this feature of an attack may serve to rally adherents and sympathizers.

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<sup>14</sup> One program of in-flight security, at this writing under consideration by the Bush administration, involves equipping commercial jets with expensive anti-aircraft systems; the program has an estimated price tag of \$50 billion over the next two decades (see Lipton, 2005).

### Suicide Terrorism

The ethos of suicide terrorism is firmly embedded in both the ideology and strategy of al Qaeda. Although several other Islamist organizations<sup>15</sup> have utilized and justified these tactics (for example, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic jihad, Hizballah, and the al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade), al Qaeda appears to have placed an especially heavy emphasis on martyrdom, something that is now more broadly accepted as a recurrent trait of the movement. Reflecting what Juan Cole and others have referred to as a highly effective and pervasive form of collective psychological self-belief (Gunaratna, 2003, p. 7; Cole, 2003), martyrdom has become as much a characteristic trait of al Qaeda as has the belief in and general endorsement of global jihad. Indeed to the degree that al Qaeda stresses training of its operatives for missions, the organization appears to place greater emphasis on psychological than military preparation, especially in terms of mentally conditioning its cadres to accept (and venerate) their religious obligation to die in the service of Allah.<sup>16</sup>

Although al Qaeda's rationalization for martyrdom tends to be couched in religious terms, the overarching emphasis on and commitment to this form of aggression is driven by considerations of a far more practical nature. As Chapter Four alluded, two principal factors have been particularly important in this regard. First is the practice's potential to elicit large-scale damage,<sup>17</sup> which as noted, is an important consideration weighing in the group's apparent switch to soft targets

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<sup>15</sup> And non-Islamic terrorists such as Sri Lanka's LTTE.

<sup>16</sup> In one seven-minute recruitment video seized by U.S. forces in 2002, al Qaeda gives clear expression to the transcendental dimension of suicide terrorism and the central place it plays in the group. The tape presents various scenes of jihadists in combat, followed by the images of 27 martyrs, 12 of whom are shown in a concluding section celebrating to an accompanying voiceover quoting the Koran (3:169–171): "They rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah: And with regard to those left behind who have not yet joined them in their bliss, the martyrs glory in the fact that on them is no fear, nor have they cause to grieve" (unclassified portions of Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2002, p. 9).

<sup>17</sup> According to Robert Pape (2003, pp. 4–5), between 1980 and 2001, suicide bombings accounting for an average of 13 deaths per strike, compared to only one killing for attacks of a more conventional nature. He further notes that although acts of martyrdom amounted to only three percent of terrorist incidents during the period, they accounted for nearly half (48



and the related purpose of coercion. Suicide terrorism is well suited to achieving this objective with the minimum amount of cost. Indeed al-Zawahiri explicitly sets forth this belief in his “last will,” *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, stressing that al Qaeda operatives must necessarily concentrate its energies on martyrdom as these modalities are the “most successful way of inflicting damage against the opponent [and are the] least [burdensome] to the mujahideen in terms of casualties” (“Al-Sharq al-Awsat Publishes Extracts from Al-Jihad Leader Al-Zawahiri’s New Book,” 2001).

Second, suicide bombings can be used as a means of radicalizing and mobilizing additional supporters and recruits, not least because martyrdom is venerated both as the most expressive way of demonstrating loyalty to Islam and as the most expedient means of establishing a true pioneering vanguard for the Islamic faith (Gunaratna, 2003, pp. 73, 91–92; see also “Al-Qaeda Is Replicating, Rejuvenating and Reorganising to Strike in the Region,” 2002). In so doing, suicide terrorism serves to inspire further acts of aggression, which accords directly with the underlying premise of the rally hypothesis.

It is important to understand, however, that striking fear is not an end in itself, but rather an essential step in achieving a larger strategic objective. Just as critically, suicide bombings can be used as a means of radicalizing and mobilizing additional supporters and recruits. In so doing, martyrdom elicits a second benefit—inspiring further acts of aggression, which helps to ensure that attack tempos both are sustained and remain visible (Hoffman, 2003, p. 437; Harris, 2003).

In the four years since September 11, 2001, al Qaeda has been linked to a string of suicide attacks across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East that have collectively killed in excess of 900 people.<sup>18</sup> The range of targets has been as diverse as the locations, extending from nightclubs, restaurants, hotels, and housing compounds to oil refineries, synagogues, cemeteries, commercial ships, and security establishments.

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percent) of all deaths. See also Sprinzak (2000), Schweitzer (2001), Stern (2003), “Special Report” (2004), and Bloom (2005).

<sup>18</sup> This figure is an approximation based on numbers quoted in various government reports, newspaper articles, and analytical assessments. It does not include attacks in Iraq.

This litany of violence bears stark testimony to a group that clearly continues to view martyrdom as the most salient way of balancing against greater powers and thereby pursuing and prosecuting an effective war of attrition against the West.<sup>19</sup>

What relevance do these considerations have for attack modalities in the United States? The United States has, of course, already been subjected to a major act of martyrdom stemming from the network: September 11, 2001. Indeed, the debate over whether this manifestation of terrorism could eventuate in the country had, arguably, already been answered some four years earlier with the arrest of two Palestinians who were plotting to carry out a suicide assault on the B line of the New York City subway. Although the pair was never formally linked to al Qaeda, they were clearly motivated by the same type of jihadist fervor that has underscored bin Laden's exoneration and glorification of martyrdom—not least the duty to die in the service of Allah. According to law enforcement officials, the terrorists were probably within a day of striking when they were detained.<sup>20</sup>

These incidents notwithstanding, the United States has not been subjected to repeat attacks (actual or attempted) in the post-September 11 era—remaining free of what many now regard as the defining trait of the transnational jihadist movement. It is difficult to speculate exactly why this has been the case, although myriad explanations have been advanced, notably these: (1) the difficulty of covertly infiltrating suicide operatives into the United States, particularly in light of strengthened internal intelligence, border, and customs arrangements instituted over the past three years; (2) the problematic nature

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the frequency and tempo of suicide strikes has risen markedly since September 11, 2001. Although this no doubt reflects the increased emphasis on using affiliates to carry out attacks on soft targets of opportunity (which, as noted in the text, can be executed on both a sustained and largely semi-autonomous basis), it is also indicative of the “positive utility” that this form of terrorism has in terms of cost/benefit ratios.

<sup>20</sup> See Pipes (2002, pp. 201–202); and “Deadly Imitation” (1997). Although not al Qaeda-connected, Timothy McVeigh also considered a suicide attack in his plans to bomb the Oklahoma City Alfred Murrah federal government office building in 1995. McVeigh repeatedly discussed how he contemplated employing this tactic before he came up with a suitable plan that satisfied intentions but which did not require him to sacrifice his life in the process. See Michel and Herbeck (2001, pp. 102, 144–145, 332, and 358).

of (externally) indoctrinating and motivating cadres that may already be in place—a psychological dimension that is absolutely crucial to the systematic perpetration of this type of terrorism;<sup>21</sup> and perhaps the felicitous possibility that American Muslims, on the whole, have fully assimilated into U.S. society and have, as a result, strongly bought into the country's sense of civic nationalism (how well this survives over the next decade remains to be seen).

While all of these hypotheses warrant consideration, a more mundane (but no less significant) reason may account for the paucity of suicide strikes: luck, and the attendant premise that al Qaeda has so far preferred to target other countries in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (where it has a larger and more established extremist following) than the United States itself. If so, it may only be a matter of time before more directed attention is devoted to attacking the United States on its own soil. Certainly there are inherent qualities about the U.S. theater that are well suited to the perpetration and amplification of martyrdom. Not only does the U.S. context provide a rich and extensive array of soft venues to attack, but domestic law enforcement also has comparatively little experience in dealing with this manifestation of terrorism.<sup>22</sup> Compounding the situation is the highly risk-averse nature of the wider U.S. civil society, which is likely to amplify the negative psychological effects of suicide bombings. It is also worth bearing in mind that spokesmen representing al Qaeda or its various affiliates have made it known that they understand and appreciate the salience of these facets, and remain ready, willing, and able to mete out maximum collective punishment on the civilian population: “Those youths that destroyed Americans with their planes, they did a good deed. There are thousands more young followers who look forward to death like the Americans look forward to living” (Abu Gheith, 2001).

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<sup>21</sup> Comments made during the Comparative Government for Homeland Security Senior Executive Course, Monterey Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, January 27–February 4, 2005. See also Shrader (2004).

<sup>22</sup> This inexperience is especially noteworthy in terms of profiling and identifying prospective suicide bombers and proactively isolating them before they reach their intended target.

### **Categorizing Potential Attacks**

Although it is always unclear what is likely to attract the admiring attention of jihadists and potential jihadists, one may surmise that spectacular attacks, particularly those of sufficient novelty, have this potential.

Over and above such rallying effects as spectacle or suicide bombings may have, certain attack modalities may, in and of themselves, be more likely to the extent that the rally hypothesis obtains. They include attacks on landmarks, popular events, military facilities, and internationally known leaders.

### **Franchise**

The largest difference between the class of targets at risk by an attack by al Qaeda, and those at risk by affiliates and franchisees, is less one of desirability and intent and more one of resources and organization. Many of the attacks listed in Tables 5.1a through 5.1d are putatively beyond the reach of any group organized in the United States but unable to benefit very much from al Qaeda's direct support.

Among the attack options that are clearly within the range of local franchisees would be small van or car bombs, roadside IEDs, random shootings, hostage-taking, on-board aircraft sabotage, noncontagious biological strikes (including contamination of the food supply and the release of animal pathogens), disruptive cyberstrikes, small-scale radiological releases via a conventional explosion; and assaults directed against landmarks, crowded venues (e.g., cinemas, shopping malls, sport stadiums), and public infrastructure. Several other operational modalities may be within the ambit of a somewhat more sophisticated domestic cell, including large-scale truck bombs (which are inherently more difficult to prepare and deploy than smaller vehicular devices), selective assassination of high-profile leaders and politicians, and ground-to-air attacks on aircraft.

## Is the United States Off the Target List for the Time Being?

To reiterate, the central question of this study is, “If the United States were to be hit by an al Qaeda terrorist attack, what would be their purpose in so doing?” While not strictly the subject here, but of comparable relevance (e.g., when calculating year-to-year odds that a target may be hit) is what interest al Qaeda has in attacking U.S. targets at all. This question arises in part because, as of this writing, the United States has been spared an attack since September 11, 2001, and in part because of the possibility that al Qaeda now believes defeating the United States in Iraq (rather than terrorizing it at home) will best serve its goals.<sup>23</sup>

Among our experts, there was no agreement on whether the short-term result of Iraq was to reduce al Qaeda’s desire to hit the U.S. homeland. Those who believe that al Qaeda has become distracted in Iraq believe it has done so because it sees more opportunity there—not only is it easier to transport, field, and support forces closer to home, but inducing casualties in this theater provides unambiguous argument that the U.S. government presence in this part of the world is costly. At least one expert suggested that the U.S. intervention in Iraq has landed the Bush administration in the type of quagmire that al Qaeda was hoping would eventuate from the September 11 attack.

Respondents who maintain that al Qaeda has not been distracted argue that the group has plenty of resources upon which to draw; that Iraq is being run by al-Zarqawi, who is not using al Qaeda resources as such; and that the lack of strikes in the United States is explained by the fact that the organization plans attacks over long periods. One

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<sup>23</sup> The administration’s contention, expressed in the President’s December 18, 2005, speech to the nation, “if we were not fighting them [the terrorists] in Iraq, . . . they would be on the offense, and headed our way” (Bush, 2005b), speaks to the perceived linkage between efforts in Iraq and terrorists’ desire to attack the U.S. homeland. Earlier, in the President’s November 30, 2005, speech to the Naval Academy, he argued,

Their objective is to drive the United States and coalition forces out of Iraq, and use the vacuum that would be created by an American retreat to gain control of that country. They would then use Iraq as a base from which to launch attacks against America, and overthrow moderate governments in the Middle East, and try to establish a totalitarian Islamic empire that reaches from Indonesia to Spain. (Bush, 2005a)

also pointed to 2004 surveillance activities that al Qaeda is thought to have conducted in the United States against financial institutions (see above) as evidence of its ongoing interest in directly hitting the U.S. homeland; another suggested that they had plans (including surveillance) that could be dusted off should the group decide to reengage.

In the end, the relationship between jihadist activities in Iraq and in the United States is more complex than a simple either-or relationship would suggest. If al Qaeda perceives that the U.S. government has been defeated, it may be encouraged to believe that it can act with impunity in the U.S. homeland. Conversely, if al Qaeda perceives that it has been defeated, this may trigger a determined attempt to regain the initiative either by pulling off another September 11–scale spectacular or by engaging in a persistent campaign of attrition that seeks to undermine U.S. resolve through a “war of a thousand cuts.”

It should be finally noted that bin Laden’s supposed asking of al-Zarqawi to conduct attacks in the United States during 2005<sup>24</sup> vitiates the thesis that operations in Iraq necessarily take precedence over those here.

## Conclusions

The study has outlined four hypotheses to explain how terrorist attacks are chosen to help further al Qaeda’s aims. Three of the hypotheses—coercion, damage, and rally—refer to attacks over which al Qaeda has operational command and control. The fourth, the franchise hypothesis, assumes al Qaeda has *little* operational command and control, and inspires or, at best, supports attacks generated by others.

The study has adduced evidence that supports one hypothesis or another, concluding that the coercion and damage hypotheses have a higher *prima facie* likelihood of applying than the rally hypothesis. We

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<sup>24</sup> As CNN reported, “U.S. intelligence has intercepted a communication from al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq that ‘reiterates the desire by al Qaeda to target the homeland,’ U.S. officials have said” (Meserve, 2005).

then examine how each hypothesis may predispose al Qaeda, or franchisees thereof, to favor one or another type of attack.

Thankfully, as of this writing, the United States, itself, has not been hit by a terrorist attack since 2001. This fortunate event, however, makes it difficult to predict what the next attack might look like. The run of attacks subsequent to that date have all taken place overseas, and for the most part, by jihadists who were attacking targets near where they lived and worked. Thus, while a study such as this might shed light on what the adversary may be thinking, and the consequences of such thoughts, it cannot be used to rule out an attack of one form or another. The next attack may well take place in Ohio even if there are reasons to believe that Ohio (or most of the other 50 states) is not particularly favored for an attack.

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