How Terrorist Groups End

By Leonard Weinberg and Arie Perliger

THE CURRENT FIGHT against al-Qa`ida appears to have no end. Various tactics have been employed to defeat the terrorist group, including assassinating cell leaders and "re-educating" members. Yet the network persists and bombs continue to be detonated in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Yemen, among other countries.[1]

To assess the future of Salafi-jihadi terrorism, it is important to take the history of modern terrorism into consideration. By examining the past, it is clear that almost all terrorist groups and all terrorist campaigns that appeared so menacing in previous decades have passed from the scene. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, for example, the public in much of the Western world was gripped by fear that anarchist bands posed a serious challenge to the prevailing social and political order.[2] Kings, presidents, government ministers, captains of industry and members of the general public were murdered with some frequency. The leading newspapers of the era stressed the extreme danger represented by anarchist conspirators. In the United States, the Sacco and Vanzetti case (two anarchists who were convicted and executed for murder and bank robbery in Massachusetts) probably received as much worldwide attention as have the detainees in Guantanamo Bay.[3] Yet with the exception of a handful of eccentrics (such as the Unabomber), violent anarchism now seems a historical curiosity. In fact, by Audrey Cronin's estimate, the lifespan of individual terrorist groups in general is on average (median) between five and ten years.[4]

While some groups pursued their aims through violence for decades—such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—these seem to be exceptional cases. Other observers, such as David Rapoport, suggest the median duration of terrorist groups is only about one year.[5]

Yet are these figures irrelevant if the causes for which the terrorist group struggles persist? The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria, for example, may have been beaten back by the authorities, but it was replaced by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) which, in turn, gave rise to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[6] According to Rapoport, these causes have come in a series of distinct "waves." Since the advent of modern terrorism during the last third of the 19th century, he believes there have been four such waves. Anarchism was the dominant cause of the first. The pursuit of national independence defined the second, while left-wing revolutionary objectives of the 1960s and 1970s characterized the third. The world now faces a fourth wave whose *leitmotif* is religious revivalism, Islamism especially.[7] Each of the previous three waves lasted about a generation, or 30-40 years, before receding. If this is true, is there any evidence to suggest the current wave of terrorism will last longer? This article addresses that question, first by calculating frequencies of how past terrorist groups have ended, and then examining whether al-Qa`ida-related terrorism is a unique phenomenon in the history of terrorism.

How Terrorist Groups End

How have terrorist groups ended in the past? Observers have tended to stress four general causes: external repression,

internal collapse, public rejection and success. With the exception of the latter, these causes are not mutually exclusive. One cause may, in reality, reinforce the other.

Through the work of Audrey Cronin, along with the authors' own categories, it is possible to calculate the frequencies of how terrorist groups end, as seen in Table 1.

Outcome	Frequency	Percentage
Capture or killing of group leadership	71	30.6%
Repression by the authorities	51	21.9%
Group abandons terrorism in favor of non-violent tactics	29	12.5%
Merger with another terrorist group	28	12.1%
Group achieves its goals	18	7.7%
Loss of public support	10	4.3%
Internal ideological disputes and power struggles	8	3.4%
Loss of state support (for groups that were state supported)	8	3.4%
Failure to recruit a new generation	6	2.5%
Group adopts other types of violence	3	1.2%

Table 1. How Terrorist Groups End.[8]

As depicted in Table 1, terrorist groups rarely achieve their goals. For instance, none of the "urban guerrilla" groups active in Europe and Latin America

1 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda Has a Plan — Where's Ours?" *Washington Post*, January 15, 2010.

2 Pyotr Kropotkin, "The Spirit of Revolt," in Walter Laqueur ed., *The Terrorism Reader* (New York: New American Library, 1978).

3 Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

4 Audrey K. Cronin, *Ending Terrorism: Lessons for Policymakers from the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups*

(New York: Taylor and Francis, 2009). Cronin used data compiled by the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism.

5 David Rapoport, "Terrorism," in Mary Hawkeworth and Maurice Kogan ed., *Encyclopedia of Government and Politics, Volume 2* (London: Routledge, 1992).

6 Fawaz Gerges, "The Decline of Revolutionary Islam in Algeria and Egypt," *Survival* 41:1 (1999): pp. 113-125.

7 David Rapoport, "The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism," *Current History* 100:650 (2001): pp. 419-429.

8 The table is based on a dataset that was constructed with information gathered from three well-known and reliable sources in the field of terrorism studies: 1) Alex P. Schmid and A.J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories and Literature* (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005); 2) The MIPT terrorism knowledge base; and 3) The U.S. Department of State's Patterns of Global Terrorism Project. The dataset contains groups whose activities met four criteria, which are accepted by the academic community as describing terrorist activity: 1) The group's activities included violent acts, 2) which were perpetrated in some type of political context, 3) included a symbolic or psychological effect geared toward influencing a wider audience than the immediate victims, and 4) were aimed against non-combatants or civilians. Based on these standards, the authors compiled a list of 430 political groups that warranted the "terrorist" label. Of these, a total of 232 are not active any more as terrorist groups. To detect exactly what led to the groups abandoning terrorism, the authors used governmental reports, court protocols, online and regular media resources, as well as academic books and articles.

during the 1960s and 1970s succeeded in igniting a revolution. None of the Palestinian groups, secular or religious (Fatah or Hamas), have achieved their ultimate aim of destroying Israel.[9]

Some groups have achieved their tactical goals. In Lebanon, Hizb Allah's precursors managed to persuade France and the United States to withdraw their forces from Beirut following a series of suicide bombings in 1983. About the same might be said in connection with Israel's decision to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000. Although there are a handful of exceptions, the use of terrorism is not a successful means to achieve long-term goals.

Since failure is the most common result for terrorist groups, what are the alternatives their leaders confront once they realize this probability? One option is to abandon the gun for the ballot box. In some cases—such as the IRA and the Muslim Brotherhood—leaders make a "strategic decision" to enter negotiations with their adversaries and enter or re-enter the political arena. Rarer still are groups that manage to escalate their violence from terrorism to full-scale internal warfare. In Vietnam, the Viet Cong managed to transform their insurgency along these lines.

A number of variables measure the impact of internal group dynamics and terrorism's reception by the public. If taken together, the internal fragmentation of terrorist groups and their inability to pass their dreams to a new generation(s) of militants account for a relatively small number of outcomes. The same observation applies in the case of the groups' external environment. The loss of state support, as Libya used to provide, has rarely caused groups to end their careers. When a state ends support for a terrorist group, other sources of funding are pursued, such as private philanthropy and bank robbery. On a few occasions, public disapproval plays a significant role in ending the use of terrorist violence—such as with the Egyptian Islamic Group following

its bloody attack on tourists in Luxor.[10] Nevertheless, at least in the short-run public opinion does not make a major contribution in the abandonment of terrorism. Terrorist groups are often able to insulate themselves from external realities, particularly if they regard themselves as acting in the name of God.

The most common single explanations for the end of terrorist group activity are repression by the authorities (military or police) and the arrest or killing of a group's leaders and top echelon. "Targeted killings," by the Israeli government for example, or the arrest of such key terrorist luminaries as Abimael Guzman in Peru and Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey, have been criticized on the grounds that they only infuriate a group's members and cause them to escalate violence. Yet, there should be a distinction between motivation and capacity. The desire to raise the level of terrorism may increase in these instances, but the ability to do so declines. Terrorist groups are rarely democratic organizations. New leaders may not possess the skills or allure of their predecessors—as followers of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq and Chechen followers of Shamil Basayev discovered. Although arresting a key figure is preferred, it is not always a possible outcome, especially when the individual prefers to die rather than surrender, or where the terrain is inaccessible to conventional law enforcement operations.

Repression certainly has its critics as well. In democracies, critics frequently object to repressive tactics on the grounds that they violate important constitutional safeguards both at home and abroad. Other critics stress the self-defeating nature of repression. Overly indiscriminate acts of repression by the police or military, especially foreign forces, act as recruiting tools for terrorists. This appears to be true in some cases, such as for Palestinian militant groups, but not others, such

as the Tupamaros in Uruguay.[11] In any event, repression is a common way by which terrorist groups come to an end.

Is Al-Qa`ida-led Terrorism Unique Historically?

There are three reasons why al-Qa`ida-led terrorism might differ from previous trends. First, unlike previous waves, the current one is to a large extent driven by religion. Religious beliefs often have the power to elicit powerful emotions usually unavailable to such secular causes as Marxism-Leninism and Maoism. Second, al-Qa`ida and its various components are part of a broad social and political Islamist movement, not an isolated band of fanatics detached physically and emotionally from the rest of society. Third, today's religious terrorists have access to the internet. No previous generation of terrorist groups had this tool available to publicize their perspectives to an attentive public, recruit followers and communicate with adherents on a worldwide basis.

These seem like exceptionally powerful factors. Yet there is another side to consider. Periods of intense religious excitement have come and gone over the centuries. During the 1880s, for example, a mahdi appeared in Sudan whose goals and those of his followers were to eliminate all Western influence from Muslim society.[12] Among East European Jews during the 18th century, Shabbetai Zevi was believed by his thousands of followers to be the messiah to lead the children of Israel back to the "Promised Land."[13] Over the course of its history, the United States has been the locale for multiple "Great Awakenings."[14] In all three instances,

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9 They have, however, achieved some level of political autonomy to the Palestinian population living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; whether these achievements are more a result of international diplomacy and foreign public opinion than terrorism is a matter of debate.

10 On November 17, 1997, members of the Islamic Group killed 62 people, mostly foreign tourists, visiting the ancient site of Luxor in Egypt. The group had hoped to weaken Egypt's economy by scaring away foreign tourists, but they succeeded instead in horrifying the Egyptian public. See Gilles Keppel, *Jihad* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard, 2002), pp. 276-277.

11 Arturo Porzcekanski, *Uruguay's Tupamaros* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973). The Tupamaros were an urban guerrilla group active in the late 1960s and early 1970s that sought to provoke the Uruguayan military into staging a crackdown and thereby disclose the repressive nature of the authorities in Montevideo. The masses would then become committed to the cause of revolution. The Tupamaros succeeded in provoking the military to stage a coup d'etat. The result of the ensuing repression was the end of the Tupamaros. The country's masses remained largely indifferent to these occurrences.

12 Peter M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in Sudan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

13 Avraham Elqayam, "The Horizon of Reason: The Divine Madness of Sabbatai Sevi," *Kabbalah* 9 (2003): pp. 7-61.

14 See, for example, Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectual-*

these periods of religious excitement eventually dissipated.

The fact that al-Qa`ida is embedded in a broad movement does not make it immune to decline and defeat either. Mass protest movements typically have a beginning, middle and end. According to many of their observers, protest movements end when their "opportunity structure" narrows— that is, when the authorities become more effective in dealing with them and when the movements themselves become institutionalized as their leaders transform them into largely conventional political parties or similar organizations.[15] The history of the Palestinian group Fatah could serve as an example, or the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Egypt where they are now represented in their countries' parliaments.

Another powerful factor possibly affecting longevity today is the impact of the internet. On the other hand, both Europe and North America abound with far right, racist and anti-Semitic groups that make extensive use of the internet in the hope of setting off a racial holy war and, in their minds, save the Aryan race from extinction. Yet despite a myriad of websites and chat rooms, no right-wing holy war appears imminent. In the absence of a critical mass of followers, the effect of the internet is distinctly limited and is a tool rather than a cause.

The Future of Al-Qa`ida?

When assessing the future of al-Qa`ida, no single factor seems likely to bring about its demise. It will likely take a combination of the items mentioned above. There are, however, some favorable signs. According to public opinion polls conducted by Pew and Gallup, al-Qa`ida enjoys declining levels of support among sampled respondents in the Middle East and South Asia, in Pakistan especially. Leading clerics have begun to preach that al-Qa`ida's indiscriminate attacks against civilians, Muslims in particular, conflict with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Leadership decapitations appear to

have had some effect, rhetoric aside, in demoralizing key figures. Most of al-Qa`ida's "nodes" in Southeast Asia, for example, have been eliminated.

None of al-Qa`ida's ostensible goals have been achieved. Governments in Cairo, Riyadh and Amman continue to function. Jews and "Crusaders" are still present in the Middle East and elsewhere in the House of Islam. The prospects of al-Qa`ida creating a new caliphate remain in the realm of the fantastic. In short, while the end may not be near, it might not be far off either.

As a result, while no "silver bullet" will bring an end to al-Qa`ida, a combination of external pressure exerted by the relevant authorities and internal decay brought on by organizational woes should reduce the threat to a manageable level.[16] What particular mix of "carrots" and "sticks" is most effective is likely to vary with the different national contexts in which the various al-Qa`ida components operate. As various U.S. political leaders have pointed out, the world is simply not going to move in the direction al-Qa`ida's luminaries wish to take it.

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Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity

January 1, 2010 (DENMARK): A Somali man broke into the home of Kurt Westergaard, the Danish cartoonist whose caricature of the Prophet Muhammad was published by *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. The Somali man, who is a Danish resident, was carrying an axe and a knife, and Danish authorities claim that he was an assassin with links to the Somali insurgent and terrorist group al-Shabab. He was shot and wounded by police before he could reach Westergaard, who was home at the time. – *The Observer, January 3; AFP, January 2; New York Times, January 3*

January 1, 2010 (PAKISTAN): A suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden vehicle amid a crowd of spectators watching a volleyball game in Lakki Marwat District of the North-West Frontier Province. The bombing killed 101 people. – *AFP, January 3*

January 1, 2010 (PAKISTAN): A roadside bomb killed five people, including an anti-Taliban tribal elder, in Bajaur Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The bomb was detonated remotely. – *AFP, January 1*

January 3, 2010 (PAKISTAN): A suspected U.S. unmanned aerial drone killed five alleged militants near Mir Ali in North Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. – *al-Jazira, January 4*

January 6, 2010 (PAKISTAN): U.S. unmanned aerial drones targeted a Taliban training center in North Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, killing at least 13 militants. – *AFP, January 6; Washington Post, January 7*

January 6, 2010 (PAKISTAN): A suicide bomber killed four Pakistani soldiers in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir. – *Dawn, January 6*

January 6, 2010 (RUSSIA): A suicide bomber in a vehicle killed six police officers in Makhachkala, Dagestan. – *New York Times, January 6*

January 7, 2010 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber killed 10 people in Gardez, the capital of Paktia Province. The target of the attack, pro-government militia

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ism in American Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).
15 On the concept and theories of "Political Opportunity Structure," see Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

16 For a useful review of how past terrorist groups ended, see Robert Art, "Conclusion," in Louise Richardson ed., *Democracy and Counterterrorism* (Washington, D.C.: USIP, 2007).