The September 11 attacks directed against the World Trade Center and Pentagon have important implications for international terrorism in a number of respects.

First, they are indicative of a general trend towards growing lethality and sophistication. Increasingly it appears that terrorists no longer want a seat at the negotiating table; rather, they want to blow it up and aim to destroy everyone sitting around it.

Second, the apparent involvement of bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network in the attacks may well provide the new model for international terrorism in the contemporary era: non-territorially based and global; unconstrained; IT proficient; specifically directed against the West and its allies; and intimately linked with a range of other transnational challenges such as people trafficking, drugs smuggling and money laundering.

Third, the scale of destruction wrought by the strikes gives added concern about the possibility of unconventional terrorism involving chemical, biological and even nuclear (CBN) weapons. Although carrying out a true mass CBN attack is probably beyond the means and resources of most groups, including al-Qaeda, this may not necessarily be the case with lesser consequence attacks.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the attacks underscore Afghanistan as one of the principal hubs of international terrorism in the contemporary era. The dimensions of the extremist activity emanating from this part of the world are significant and warrant some further elucidation.

Afghanistan and International Terrorism

Prior to Sept. 11, Afghanistan was known to be home to at least 12 major terrorist and insurgent camps, all of which were in territory controlled by the Taliban. Most of these facilities were located along the Pakistani-Afghan border and provided refuge, indoctrination and various forms of military training.

The main benefactors of the camps have been groups fighting in Kashmir (Lashkar-e-Toiba/LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen/HuM), Central Asia (Islamic Movement for Uzbekistan/IMU) and Iran (Mujahideen-e-Kalq/MEK). However, there are also indications that Chechens from Russia and Uighurs from China have periodically passed through some Taliban-run facilities.

Afghanistan also constituted the operational headquarters of bin Laden's al-Qaeda (the "Base") network. This global, amorphous entity, which is now considered to be one of the foremost propagators of international terrorism, functions both on its own and through a series of terrorist cells and organizations that span at least 35 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. The group is dedicated to destroying the U.S., its allies and so-called "un-Islamic" governments that are viewed as undermining true Muslim ideals and interests.

Al-Qaeda maintains at least four dedicated terrorist camps in Afghanistan and has been linked to several terrorist spectaculars in recent years, including the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and
Terrorism, national security and the new realities

Peter Chalk


Several factors appear to have encouraged Taliban backing for regional extremism and terrorism. Among the more important appear to be:

- Self-interest - many of the groups that the Taliban supported provided fighters to assist the movement in its ongoing war against the Northern Alliance;
- The desire to export an extremist Pan-Islamic ideology;
- Revenge - the Taliban was particularly active in backing militants in Iran, Russia, China and Uzbekistan - all states that were in the forefront of resisting its claim to governance in Afghanistan; and
- Narcotics trafficking - a number of Taliban proxies played an important role in the international trafficking of Afghan heroin, including the IMU, MEK, Chechens and Uighurs.

Bin Laden's motivations for supporting international extremism and terrorism are more narrowly focused, essentially revolving around the desire to promote a self-defined jihad against the U.S. and its allies. For bin Laden, Western hegemony is an evil aberration that has prevented Islam from taking up its rightful position as the world's preeminent religion and culture. Sponsoring attacks against American interests and all those that adhere to its values is regarded as a just and necessary means for overcoming this adverse state of affairs and one that can only end once the full and absolute "liberation" of Muslim interests has been achieved.

Afghan-connected terrorism

The U.S. will be faced with several challenges in confronting the threat posed by contemporary international extremism.

First, Washington will need to engage countries that it has little direct experience of dealing with in terms of counter-terrorism or, indeed, collaborative foreign policy with countries that include Russia, China, Iran and the Central Asian Republics.

Second, the U.S. needs to come to grips with the fact that the policies of many of these governments have directly contributed to the growth of radical Islamic sentiment in South and Central Asia. This is true of China and Russia as well as several former Soviet Republics - particularly Uzbekistan and to a lesser extent Krygzstan.

Third, the U.S. will need to formulate an effective policy for Pakistan, formerly one of the main supporters of the Taliban and a hotbed of Islamic radicalism. The challenge here will be to exert enough pressure on Islamabad to cut links with regional extremism - especially in the context of the Kashmiri conflict - without triggering a fundamentalist backlash and possible civil war in what remains a nuclear-armed country.

Finally, Washington will need to develop a comprehensive policy for a post-Taliban Afghanistan and, more specifically, ensure that an inherently unstable power vortex does not ensue in the country. A prolonged period of institutional and governing uncertainty would not only recreate the type of internal chaos that spawned the radicalism of the past six years; it would also be sure to attract the attention of regional powers and possibly precipitate a highly dangerous grab for territory and influence among several nuclear-armed rivals.
Superior military strategy no guarantee of success

RAND’s Federally Funded Research Development Centers (FFRDCs) work with their sponsors to understand how the security environment is changing, how those changes affect our national interests, and what strategies would be appropriate for protecting those interests and shaping the international environment. A recent example: (Source: RAND Corporation)

Using RAND’s gaming expertise to conduct a series of post-Persian Gulf War games, RAND analysts challenged several fundamental assumptions regarding future war. The games, which were set in a battlefield in 2015, showed the pattern of warfare unfolding as a dialectic of challenge and response, with each side creating challenges for the other and responding to the other's challenges in turn.

This cycle of challenge and response continued until the fifth series, when the U.S. achieved a revolution in military affairs by using networks of highly mobile, readily deployable reconnaissance cavalry units to locate enemy forces. As a result, the games suggested that...

- The U.S. superiority in military technology that brought victory in the Gulf War may not guarantee success in future conflicts, because likely opponents will not try to match capabilities. Rather, they will pursue asymmetric approaches that tend to have shorter and cheaper development cycles, making it difficult for the U.S. to retain its military superiority.
- Since these approaches are unpredictable, the U.S. can maintain its edge only if it stays more than one step ahead on the challenge-response cycle and if it develops flexible capabilities that allow it to shift rapidly to close unanticipated gaps.

About Project Air Force

Project AIR FORCE (PAF) is the product of visionary thinking that led to a RAND-Air Force partnership now approaching its sixth decade. PAF was established in 1946 by General H. H. "Hap" Arnold as a way of retaining for the United States Air Force (USAF) the considerable benefits of civilian scientific thinking that had been demonstrated during World War II. Since its founding, PAF has remained the only Air Force federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) concerned entirely with studies and analyses rather than systems engineering or scientific laboratories. The special FFRDC status facilitates stable USAF support over an extended period of years as well as in-the-family access by the research staff to relevant Air Force information and management personnel.

PAF’s mission is to conduct an integrated program of objective analysis on issues of enduring concern to Air Force leaders. PAF addresses far-reaching and interrelated questions:

- What will be the role of air and space power in the future security environment?
- How should the force be modernized to meet changing operational demands?
- What should be the size and characteristics of the USAF work force, and how can that work force be most effectively recruited, trained, and retained?
- How should sustainment, acquisition and infrastructure be streamlined to control costs?

Source: RAND Corporation
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About RAND

On May 14, 1948, Project RAND—an outgrowth of World War II-separated from the Douglas Aircraft Company of Santa Monica, Calif., and became an independent, nonprofit organization. The new entity was dedicated to furthering and promoting scientific, educational, and charitable purposes for the public welfare and security of the United States.

By the 1960s, RAND (an acronym for research and development) was bringing its trademark mode of empirical, nonpartisan, independent analysis to the study of urgent domestic social and economic problems as well.

At RAND, scientists and engineers, social scientists from many specialties, humanists, and members of the professions all pull together to address the problems and concerns of people around the world and across the street.

-RAND Corporation

New report

The United States may have righteous indignation on its side, and a slight edge in the "battle of the story" in much of the world, but "it will have to think deeply about how to keep that edge" now that U.S. forces have been sent into action in Afghanistan. As the editors note, "The development of the new field of 'information strategy' is needed more than ever."

-RAND report "Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy"