

Terrorism in History

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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT

The central question addressed in this collection is: in what circumstances did terrorism act as a “driver of history,” exerting a major impact on international and national events, and why was it able to do so? To answer this question, this article focuses on three levels of analysis: first, using the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 as a case study, it explores terrorism’s monumental power to change the course of history. The second, which takes as its reference point the case of the Fenian dynamiters’ campaign in Britain during the 1880s, examines terrorism as a tactical weapon that achieves profound changes in governmental organization and policy to counter this menace. Finally, it discusses terrorism as a strategic force, re-calibrating international politics and affairs, and catapulting to prominence (and to an extent, power) hitherto unknown or inconsequential movements, such as the Palestinian fedayeen after the 1967 Six Day War. Each of these offers an important lesson from the past for our understanding of terrorism today, namely, how what may appear to be completely new and novel in the present often has a significantly relevant historical precedent. Indeed, all three cases presaged some later, important development in terrorist tactics or strategy: in the first case, the emergence of state-sponsored terrorism; in the second, attacks on subways (in London) and other mass transit, that also led to the formation of new security forces in response to the threat; and third, the “cult of the insurgent” that has enormous resonance in Iraq, with bin Laden, and in America’s war on terrorism today.

INTRODUCTION

Few subjects have generated more scholarly disdain than terrorism. Professor Sir Michael Howard, the world’s preeminent authority on modern warfare,¹ once described the study of terrorism as a “huge and ill-defined subject [that] has probably been responsible for more incompetent and unnecessary books than any other outside the field of sociology. It attracts phoneyes and amateurs,” he railed nearly 30 years ago, “as a candle attracts moths.”² His view was

not entirely surprising given that most of the treatments of this subject at the time were either anecdotal or, if within the academy, uselessly theoretical. It was thus a field of study to which journalists and political scientists mostly seemed to gravitate – with the resultant effect of producing a corpus of literature that was ranged from the completely descriptive to the abstrusely definitional. The intellectually corrosive impact of these developments can be seen in an academic discourse that remained generally paralyzed for the succeeding three-plus decades over the inability to define terrorism.

Since 9/11, the debates over defining terrorism have been joined – or in some cases, superseded – by the debate over root causes. Meanwhile, throughout the pre-9/11 era, Osama bin Laden was steadily building the *al-Qaeda* movement and preparing to unleash perhaps the greatest, and strategically most consequential, surprise attack in history. Indeed, while much attention has since rightly focused on the intelligence failures that led to the tragic events of 11 September 2001, surprisingly little has been devoted to academic failures. Although these were patently less consequential, they were no less significant: calling into question the relevance of much of the scholarship on terrorism during the years leading up to 9/11. That bin Laden and *al-Qaeda* figured so inconspicuously in this literature is a reflection not just of a failure to anticipate or interpret emerging trends in terrorist violence but of an intellectual myopia that characterized the field.

Among the many criticisms that one can direct at the terrorism studies field, its uni-disciplinary main orientation and domination by political scientists is arguably neither unfair nor inaccurate. The disproportionate influence of enviable methodology, however divorced from actual knowledge of the subject, has most recently been demonstrated by some of the recent research pertaining to suicide terrorism. This work, while impressively solid methodologically, nonetheless blunders toward patently suspect analytical conclusions. One might, therefore, logically lament the dearth of empirically derived studies and in-depth treatments that are the staples of the historian's craft. Not that historians should escape so lightly either. Just as many political scientists eschew or dismiss any kind of policy-relevant work, historians themselves often resist applying their analysis to real-world concerns. It was William Shakespeare, a mere dramatist, after all, who famously wrote "What's past is prologue,"³ and A.J.P. Taylor, among the foremost historians of his day, who emphatically stressed that, "Study of history enables us to understand the past; no more no less. Perhaps even this is too high a claim."⁴

But terrorism is not a subject that can be separated either from history and/or from how it will play out in the future. The stakes are simply too great. The clear transnational dimensions of the threat, its potential existential implications, and the declared intentions and well-documented efforts of some terrorist groups to acquire chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons indisputably pose new and increasingly formidable challenges to inter-

national order, peace, and security, while emphasizing the critical importance of multi-lateral cooperation. In the current situation, given this indisputably critical exigency, and in the context of this collection, one must ask what has been the strategic impact of terrorism. In what circumstances did it act as a “driver of history,” exerting a major impact on national and international events, and why?

To answer this question, my article focuses on three levels of analysis: first, terrorism’s monumental power to change the course of history – using the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 as a case study. The second examines terrorism as a tactical weapon that achieves profound changes in governmental organization and policy to counter this menace – using the case of the Fenian dynamiters’ campaign in Britain during the 1880s to illustrate this point. Finally, I discuss terrorism as a strategic force, re-calibrating international politics and affairs, and catapulting to prominence (and to an extent, power) hitherto unknown or inconsequential movements – such as the Palestinian *fedayeen* after the 1967 Six Day War. Each has an important lesson from the past for our understanding of terrorism today, namely, how what may appear to be completely new and novel often has a significantly relevant historical precedent – thus contesting Taylor’s bold assertion above. Indeed, all these cases presaged some later, important development in terrorist tactics or strategy: the emergence of state-sponsored terrorism in the first case; attacks on subways (in London) and other mass transit in the second case, that also led to the formation of new government organizations in response to the threat; and third, how the “cult of the *fedayeen*” from 40 years ago has enormous resonance in Iraq, with bin Laden, and in America’s war on terrorism today.

Changing the Course of History

The events immediately preceding the First World War in Bosnia – specifically the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 – are, of course, familiar because of their subsequent cataclysmic impact on world affairs. It was in Serbia and Bosnia that similar groups of disaffected nationalists – Bosnian Serb intellectuals, university students, and even schoolchildren, collectively known as *Mlada Bosna* (Young Bosnia) – rose up against continued Habsburg suzerainty. While some historians have dismissed the movement as comprised of “frustrated, poor, dreary and maladjusted”⁵ adolescents (much as many contemporary observers similarly denigrate modern-day terrorists as mindless, obsessive, and maladjusted), it was a member of *Mlada Bosna*, Gavrilo Princip, who is widely credited with having set in motion the chain of events that began with the assassination and culminated in the outbreak of the First World War. Whatever its superficially juvenile characteristics, the group was nonetheless passionately dedicated to the attainment of a federal South Slav political entity (uniting Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs) and resolutely committed to assassination as the vehicle for achieving that aim. Particularly significant was the degree of involvement in, and external support provided to

Mlada Bosna activities by various shadowy Serbian nationalist groups. Principal among these was the pan-Serb secret society, the *Narodna Obrana* (“The People’s Defence” or “National Defence”).

The *Narodna Obrana* had been formed in 1908 originally to promote Serb cultural and national activities. It subsequently assumed a more subversive orientation as the movement became increasingly involved with anti-Austrian activities, including terrorism, mostly in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Although the *Narodna Obrana*’s pan-Serbian exclusionist aims clashed with *Mlada Bosna*’s less parochial South Slav ideals, its leadership was quite happy to manipulate and exploit the Bosnians’ youthful zeal and emotive nationalism for their own purposes. To this end, the *Narodna Obrana* actively recruited, trained, and armed young members from movements such as the *Mlada Bosna*, who were then deployed in various seditious activities against the Habsburgs. As early as 1910, a Hercegovinian youth, trained by a Serb army officer with close ties to the *Obrana* had attempted to kill the governor of Bosnia. But, while the *Obrana* included among its members senior Serbian government officials, it was not an explicitly government-controlled or directly state-supported entity. Whatever hazy government links it had were further and deliberately obscured when a radical faction left the *Narodna Obrana* in 1911 and established the *Ujedinjenje ili Smrt* (The Union of Death or Unification or Death), more popularly known as the *Crna Ruka* (the Black Hand). This more militant and much more clandestine splinter group has been described by one historian as combining:

the more unattractive features of the anarchist cells of earlier years – which had been responsible for quite a number of assassinations in Europe and whose methods had a good deal of influence via the writings of Russian anarchists upon Serbian youth – and of the [American] Ku Klux Klan. There were gory rituals and oaths of loyalty, there were murders of backsliding members . . . identification of members by number, there were distributions of guns and bombs. And there was a steady traffic between Bosnia and Serbia.⁶

This group, which continued to maintain close links with its parent body, was largely composed of serving Serbian military officers. It was led by Lieutenant-Colonel Dragutin Dmitrievich (known by his pseudonym, Apis), himself the chief of the Serbian general staff’s Intelligence Department. With this key additional advantage of direct access to military armaments, intelligence, and training facilities, the Black Hand effectively took charge of all Serb-backed clandestine operations in Bosnia.⁷

Although there were obviously close links between the Serbian military, Black Hand, and *Mlada Bosna*, it would be a mistake to regard the relationship as one of direct control, much less outright manipulation. Clearly, the Serbian government was well aware of the Black Hand’s objectives and violent means the group employed in pursuit of them; indeed, the Serbian Crown Prince

Alexander was one of the group's benefactors. But this does not mean that the Serbian government was necessarily as committed to war with Austria as the Black Hand's leaders were, or that it was prepared to countenance the group's more extreme plans for fomenting cross-border, anti-Habsburg terrorism. There is some evidence to suggest that the Black Hand may have been trying to force Austria's hand against Serbia and thereby plunge both countries into war by actively abetting *Mlada Bosna's* plot to assassinate the archduke. Indeed, according to one revisionist account of the events leading up to the murder, even though the pistol used by Princip had been supplied by the Black Hand from a Serb military armoury in Kragujevac, and even though Princip had been trained by the Black Hand in Serbia before being smuggled back across the border for the assassination, at the eleventh hour Dmitrievich had apparently bowed to intense government pressure and tried to stop the assassination. According to this version, Princip and his fellow conspirators would hear nothing of it and stubbornly went ahead with their plans. Contrary to popular assumption, therefore, the archduke's assassination may not have been specifically ordered or even directly sanctioned by the Serbian government.⁸ However, the obscure links between high government officials and their senior military commanders, and ostensibly independent, transnational terrorist movements, and the tangled web of intrigue, plots, clandestine arms provision and training, intelligence agents, and cross-border sanctuary these relationships inevitably involved, have historical and current relevance. They provide a pertinent historical parallel to the contemporary phenomenon known as 'state-sponsored' terrorism (that is, the active and often clandestine support, encouragement, and assistance provided by a foreign government to a terrorist group).⁹

Terrorism's Tactical Resonance: The Fenian Dynamiters

Although Britain's rule of Ireland already had a centuries-long history of restiveness and rebellion, in the mid-nineteenth century the locus of revolutionary activities had expanded from Ireland to include the United States as well. Among the mass of Irish emigrants that had fled the failure of successive potato crops and resultant famine, were a group of radical nationalists who in 1858 founded a secret society called the Fenian Brotherhood. The Fenians and its Ireland-based offshoot – the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (IRB) – were at once as daring and determined as they were impatient and incompetent. Their motto, "revolution sooner or never,"¹⁰ accurately describes a string of half-baked plots that included plans to kidnap the Prince of Wales,¹¹ invade Canada, and orchestrate a popular uprising in Ireland. So successful were British efforts to penetrate the organization, and so abject was the failure of the Fenians' grand schemes, that the movement fell into disarray within a decade of its founding.¹² But the Fenians' unswerving commitment both to Irish republicanism and the use of violence to attain it,¹³ created a legacy that subsequently inspired a new generation of US-based Irish revolutionaries.

Thus, by 1873 a new organization, calling itself the *Clan na Gael* (United Irishmen), had taken up the Fenians' mantle. Its driving force was a firebrand named Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. Sentenced to life imprisonment for sedition in 1865, O'Donovan Rossa was released only six years later after a commission of inquiry substantiated his claims of mistreatment. The abuse inflicted on imprisoned terrorists like O'Donovan Rossa in the nineteenth century actually bears a disquieting resemblance to the treatment reportedly meted out to some detainees in the war on terrorism today.¹⁴ Not only was O'Donovan Rossa held for over a month with his hands handcuffed behind his back, but he was also "kept naked day and night" in a darkened cell and fed a meager ration of bread and water.¹⁵ Exiled to the United States, O'Donovan Rossa quickly resumed his subversive activities. He was assisted in these endeavours by Patrick Ford, the editor of the *Irish World*, a newspaper that became the main platform for *Clan na Gael* propaganda and incitement. Together, they developed a new strategy for the republican movement. "We are not now advising a general insurrection," Ford explained in a 4 December 1875 column:

On the contrary, we should oppose a general insurrection in Ireland as untimely and ill advised. But we believe in action nonetheless. The Irish cause requires Skirmishers. It requires a little band of heroes who will initiate and keep up without intermission a guerrilla warfare. . . .¹⁶

In words that accurately presaged the advent of a form of transnational terrorism that has become a permanent fixture of our time, Ford also described how these "Skirmishers" would "fly over land and sea like invisible beings – now striking the enemy in Ireland, now in India, now in England itself as occasion may present."¹⁷

O'Donovan Rossa and Ford displayed an uncommon understanding of the terrorist dynamic that went beyond even this early recognition of the media's power to amplify and communicate a violent message. Remarkably, both men grasped that just as money lubricates commerce, a solid financial base is required to sustain an effective terrorism campaign. It was thus not long before advertisements began to appear in the *Irish World* soliciting contributions on behalf of a "skirmisher fund."¹⁸ By March 1877, \$23,350 had been collected, a sum equivalent to nearly half a million dollars in 2005.¹⁹ O'Donovan Rossa appears to have also fully appreciated terrorism's asymmetric virtues with regard to the disproportionate economic losses and damage that could be inflicted on the enemy state and the flood of contributions that a series of successful attacks might engender. "England," he explained in the *Irish World*, "will not know how or where she is to be struck. A successful strike that will do her half a million dollars worth of damage will bring us enough funds to carry on the work. . . ."²⁰

Four years later, the Skirmishers commenced operations. On 14 January 1881, they bombed the Salford Infantry Barracks in Manchester. Their choice of

target reflected yet another now-familiar pattern of contemporary terrorism: attacks on buildings or other inanimate objects designed to commemorate and, thereby draw attention to, some event of historic significance to the perpetrators. In this instance, the Salford Barracks was where three Fenians – the so-called ‘Manchester Martyrs’ – had been hanged in 1867. Up until this point, the Irish terrorists seem to have differed only slightly from their Russian counterparts. Both attacked targets symbolizing their enemy (inanimate objects in the case of the Skirmishers and representatives of the Tsar by the *Narodnaya Volya*).

Both also believed fervently in terrorism’s didactic potential, whether directed toward the landless Irish or Russian peasant.²¹ But two years later, the Irish campaign diverged significantly from the highly discriminate terrorism practiced by *Narodnaya Volya* to something both more sinister and consequential. The principal weapons in the Russians’ campaign were the handgun and the nineteenth-century equivalent of the hand grenade, employed in acts of individual assassination deliberately calculated to avoid death or injury to all but their intended target. By comparison, the Skirmishers had already spilt innocent blood; a seven-year-old boy had been killed and three other people injured in the Salford Barracks blast.²² Still more innocent blood, however, was soon to be shed.

In 1883, the *Clan na Gael* and a re-branded IRB, now known as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, formed a tactical alliance and together embarked on a bombing campaign directed against the London Underground and mainline railway stations both in the United Kingdom’s capital and other cities.²³ The bombers’ intention was not wantonly or deliberately to kill or harm innocent persons but instead to throttle Britain’s economy and dramatically call attention to themselves and their cause.²⁴ However, their choice of both weapon (homemade bombs consisting of gunpowder detonated by primitive time delay fuses) and target (locations in congested urban areas and public transportation) ensured that the effects of their operations could neither be constrained nor controlled. And, while it is true that these bombings claimed the lives of fewer than a dozen passersby or rail passengers, given that some of the explosive devices contained over 20 pounds of commercial dynamite, this was more likely the result of luck and happenstance than any effort on the part of the bombers to limit casualties by timing or placement.²⁵

The “dynamite campaign,” as this spasm of Victorian-era urban terrorism came to be known, lasted until 1887.²⁶ It spread beyond London to Liverpool and Glasgow, before collapsing under the weight of intensified police surveillance, heightened border and port control, the effective use of informants, and unprecedented national and even some international cooperation and liaison among hitherto entirely parochial law enforcement agencies. Indeed, the advances in police investigative, intelligence, and pre-emptive operations necessitated by the bombings led that same year to the formal establishment of Scotland Yard’s famed

Special Branch – the first such police unit dedicated specifically to political crime and counterterrorism.²⁷

More significant for our purposes, however, is the impact that nineteenth century Irish political violence had on terrorism's evolution and development. In retrospect, patterns and *modus operandi* first appeared that would become standard terrorist operating procedures decades later. The Irish groups, for example, were among the first to recognize the importance of establishing a foreign base beyond the reach of their enemy, in order to better sustain and promote a protracted terrorist campaign. They were also ahead of their time in understanding the value of such a sanctuary not only for planning and logistical purposes, but also for the effective dissemination of propaganda and the critical solicitation of operational funds. Their use of time-delayed explosive devices so that the perpetrator could easily effect escape and thereby ensure the terrorist campaign's sustainment, was another important innovation that became a standard feature of twentieth-century terrorism. Finally, terrorist targeting of mass transport – and especially subway systems – along with an almost callous, if not even casual, disregard of innocent life have now become commonplace. The 10 near-simultaneous bombings of commuter trains arriving at Madrid's Atocha rail station in March 2004, which killed 191 persons and wounded hundreds more, is an especially apposite, and tragic, example of contemporary emulation of the 'Irish model.' "At the grand strategic level," Lindsay Clutterbuck cogently notes, the *Clan na Gael's* and IRB's

ideas enabled terrorism to move away from being a phenomenon consisting of a single event, or at best a loosely connected series of events, and to evolve into sustained campaigns underpinned by their own well developed sense of timing and tempo. There was a quantum leap beyond the limited aim of assassinating an individual to achieve their objectives and into operational scenarios where terrorism could persist for years and encompass the deaths of thousands of people.²⁸

Strategic Impact: The "Cult of the Insurgent"

Iraq's insurgents today can take great satisfaction from a job well done.²⁹ They have imposed on that country a reign of terror that shows few signs of abating. They have inflicted a measure of pain and suffering on American military forces that their larger, better trained, organized, and equipped conventional counterparts had failed to achieve. They have frustrated the ambitions of a superpower, and created doubt and uncertainty amongst its leaders and populace where once confidence and certitude predominated. They have fractured Iraq's already fragile unity, sowing discord, and generating profound fears and anxieties that have only deepened existing sectarian divisions. And, even if they are not clearly winning, they don't appear to be losing either: the fundamental metric of a successful insurgency. But perhaps most significantly they have created and effec-

tively fostered a “cult of the insurgent,” whereby their achievements are likely to inspire emulation by other insurgent groups. Indeed, Iraq itself has not only become a fulminate for continued radicalism and violence in that country and elsewhere, but also a real-life training camp for *jihadists* and a laboratory for new insurgent tactics and techniques to be exported elsewhere.

To some extent, we have in fact seen it before – in the transformation of the local conflict between Israel and the Palestinians nearly 40 years ago into the first truly global terrorist phenomenon. In a striking parallel to contemporary developments, a numerically inferior, modestly armed guerrilla movement achieved world-renown in its conflict with the superior conventional military forces of an established nation-state. Its actions in turn set in motion a chain of events that led to the emergence of the modern age of international terrorism. The genesis of this change was Israel’s lightning victory in the 1967 Six Day War, known to Arabs as the “June War” or, more bluntly, as “The Setback.” As Michael Oren wrote in the foreword to his magisterial *Six Days of War*:

The War of Attrition, the Yom Kippur, the Munich massacre and Black September, the Lebanon War, the controversy over Jewish settlements and the future of Jerusalem, the Camp David Accords, the Oslo Accords, the Intifada – all were the result of six intense days in the Middle East in June 1967. . . . In a very real sense, for statesmen and diplomats and soldiers, the war has never ended.³⁰

Indeed, few modern conflicts have been responsible for the kind of geopolitical tectonic shifts wrought by the Six Day War. In less than a week, a technologically and doctrinally advanced, better trained, organized, and equipped Israel Defence Force (IDF) negated the combined might and quickly vanquished the massed armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. The rapidity and totality of the IDF’s victory has never been matched. The closest contemporary equivalent is arguably the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and the near bloodless capitulation of Baghdad less than a month later. In the shame and humiliation that followed Israel’s astonishing triumph, the only credible Arab military force left in the Middle East seemed to be the Palestinian *fedayeen* (commandos; literally, “those who sacrifice themselves”).³¹ For years, their commanders had argued about the futility of conventional military confrontation with Israel and had pressed for Arab support of an intensified guerrilla campaign designed to sap the IDF’s strength, undermine national morale, and erode popular support and trust of Israel’s military and political leaders.³² *Al-Fatah*, the guerrilla organization founded a decade earlier and led by Yassir Arafat, and one of the member-groups of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was an especially enthusiastic proponent of this approach, which until this debacle had mostly fallen on deaf ears.³³ Unsullied by the defeat and humiliation that followed, the *fedayeen*’s arguments began to gain greater credence in the war’s aftermath.³⁴ Writing just a decade after these pivotal developments unfolded, Bard O’Neill reflected how,

The magnitude of defeat suffered by the Arab armies led Palestinian leaders to once again question the feasibility of conventional combat against Israeli forces. The thought of a regular armed confrontation with an enemy whose relative military strength had increased as a result of the war seem ludicrous. Minimally, such a course of action would take many years of preparation, years that the new, more militant *fedayeen* leaders believed they could ill afford to lose. Moreover, the Palestinians, along with many Arabs outside the resistance movement, felt a strong psychological need to redeem their wounded honor and dignity. In a military-psychological setting such as this, the renewed call for an active and immediate armed struggle using unconventional techniques became an increasingly attractive alternative strategy for many Arabs.³⁵

Even more significant was the impact on the Palestinians themselves. Ever since the Arab states' defeat in the First Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49, they had placed their faith in the hands of their neighboring Arab brethren who, they believed, would one day surely re-group to destroy Israel and return the Palestinians to their homes. The 1967 defeat convinced the Palestinians that henceforth they must rely on no one but themselves if they were to ever reclaim their lost country. Thus, the absence of any remaining conventional military option combined with the *fedayeen's* untarnished status to create a new, powerful force in Middle Eastern affairs.³⁶ And, at the vanguard of this process were Arafat and *al-Fatah*.³⁷ In the aftermath of the debacle, Arafat adroitly maneuvered to exploit the *fedayeen's* new-found prestige to re-order the Arab worlds' priorities in the fight against Israel.³⁸ True Arab unity, he declared, could not be achieved until Palestine was liberated, and liberation could only be achieved through irregular warfare and guerrilla attack.³⁹ "This renewed sense of Palestinian self-respect and determined activism," William B. Quandt, one of the era's more astute observers of the Middle East and Palestinian affairs, argued in a seminal 1973 study "contrasted with the low state of morale in other Arab countries after the June defeat and provided a focus of political activity," and attendant support from socialist and capitalist Arab states alike throughout the Middle East.⁴⁰

Indeed, in the dismal post-war period many in the region also looked to Arafat and the *fedayeen* with a revitalized sense of hope. Echoing the Egyptian government's official policy line, Cairo's *al-Ahram* newspaper, for example, confidently stated that from now on the *fedayeen* "shall make the lives of the so-called victorious Israelis hell."⁴¹ Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser welcomed the *fedayeen's* rise to prominence "as one of the most healthy phenomena that came directly after defeat."⁴² And Arafat himself declared in no uncertain terms that "our hand will reach everywhere. Not one Israeli will be able to sleep in peace from now on."⁴³ The immediate result, however, was a series of

mostly inconsequential guerrilla cross-border forays, consisting of the laying of land-mines and salvos of mostly poorly aimed mortar and rocket fire that, while incapable of decisively harming Israel, nonetheless had enormously significant cathartic value both for the Palestinians themselves and for the rest of the Arab world.⁴⁴

What was still lacking, however, was a singularly dramatic turning point: an heroic event that would incontestably elevate the *fedayeen*'s status to new levels of prominence and entrench the power of the insurgent in the popular consciousness of the time. The opportunity soon presented itself in a sharp, but in military terms, otherwise unremarkable engagement that occurred in March 1968 at the Jordanian village of Karameh.

As had occurred with unerring regularity since at least 1953, the level of Palestinian marauding and harassment of Israel had continued to escalate to the point where decisive Israeli military reprisal became inevitable. It was precisely this cycle of raid and retaliation that had culminated both in the 1956 Suez crisis and indeed the 1967 Six Day War as well.⁴⁵ Less than a year later, the process again played itself out in a by now familiar routine but, this time, with a distinctly different outcome. The last straw for Israel in this latest series of provocations was the landmine believed to have been laid by *Fatah* guerrillas on a road in the Negev Desert. A bus carrying Israeli children from Tel Aviv on a school outing had struck the mine, killing two children and wounding 28 more. The IDF, accordingly, was tasked with neutralizing the cross-border guerrilla threat by striking at a known *Fatah* operations center based in Karameh. Journalist Christopher Dobson, who chronicled the rise of Palestinian terrorism during this period, recounted the somewhat unusual preparations surrounding the IDF operation:

The Israelis insist that this was not a punitive raid but was a pre-emptive strike designed to prevent a large-scale campaign of terror planned by *Fatah*. Whatever the reason, they were determined to wipe out Karameh. The operation was, however, out of the usual Israeli context. There was no sudden-damn-the-consequence assault. Instead, the Jordanians were warned beforehand not to interfere, leaflets were dropped to the villagers telling them they would not be harmed and the raiding troops were given strict orders not to harm civilians or to fire at houses unless they were fired on.⁴⁶

Indeed, according to Yezid Sayigh, who has written perhaps the most authoritative study of the Palestinian struggle available in English, both the *fedayeen* who were the targets of the impending Israeli assault and their Jordanian and Iraqi army protectors, deployed in the hills above the village, and watched the IDF preparations in plain view just across the Jordan River. With typical rhetorical flair, Arafat dramatically resisted the entreaties of the local Jordanian commander and his counterpart in the Iraqi Expeditionary Force that earlier had deployed

to the front-lines of the war on the Zionist enemy, to withdraw. Setting the stage for the propaganda triumph that would follow, Arafat reportedly rebuffed them by declaring, “We want to persuade the world that there are those in the Arab nation who will not withdraw and flee. Let us die under the tracks of the tanks and change the course of history in our region.”⁴⁷

In a two-pronged “spoiling operation,” the IDF task force of armor and heliborne paratroops struck at Karamah on 21 March 1968.⁴⁸ The contrasting Palestinian and Israeli accounts are instructive. Although they are at one with respect to the outcome – and the propaganda windfall that the Palestinians reaped – their narratives diverge sharply. Nonetheless, the point that facts are easily embellished and spun, and that propaganda doesn’t necessarily have to be true to be believed is all that really matters here. As Netanel Lorch, the Israeli soldier, diplomat, and author, dryly recounted:

On 21 March 1968 Israel forces forded the Jordan River with the aim of liquidating this terrorist base, the largest operation undertaken by the I.D.F. since the [1967] war. Tanks, parachutists, artillery, engineers and air force participated. The advancing forces crossed the bridges at dawn, and liquidated the forward positions. Artillery moved further east in order to isolate the battle area. The capture of the village itself was the mission of a parachute unit, supported by armor. An additional parachute unit, helicopter borne, blocked the approach and escape routes to and from the village. The capture of the village and the outlying camps was completed around 8 a.m., and detained terrorists were being transferred into Israel. The disengagement, however, took a number of hours until evening fell. Resistance was stronger than had been expected. . . . The blow inflicted on the terrorist base in Karamah forced Arafat to move his base further east to a mountain area, and to disperse his forces further away from the Jordan River. It also served as a further demonstration to the Jordan government that in the absence of effective counter-measures on its part, it might be the victim of the train of events started by the terrorists.⁴⁹

The Palestinian version of events, however, went something like this:

Although the commandos, assisted by Jordanian forces, were outnumbered and suffered heavy casualties, they inflicted severe losses on the Israeli forces and were able to force the invaders to retreat. Pictures in newspapers and on television screens of burnt out Israeli tanks and captured Israeli soldiers gave the commandos a major boost. Just months after Israel defeated the combined forces of Jordan, Syria and Egypt, a few armed commandos were able to inflict damage and ‘defeat’ Israel in battle. Although hardly a military victory, the battle of Karamah was a major psychic victory for

the notion of armed struggle. The ranks of the commandos swelled rapidly, and their popularity became enormous.⁵⁰

By any objective measure, the “Battle of Karamah” was more a rout than an heroic “last stand.” In the terms of casualty metrics, Israel suffered 28 killed and 90 wounded and, contrary to the assertions above, no IDF personnel were captured. Four tanks and five other vehicles were destroyed and an aircraft was brought down by Palestinian ground fire. Jordanian and Palestinian losses were considerably higher. Sixty-one Jordanian soldiers lay dead with 108 more wounded. Thirteen Jordanian tanks were completely destroyed, 20 more were damaged, and 39 other vehicles were disabled. The guerrillas, however, sustained the largest losses. Ninety-two *Fatah* guerrillas had been killed, in addition to 24 other Palestinian fighters belonging either to the Popular Liberation Front group or the Palestine Liberation Army. At least another 100 *fedayeen* were wounded and more than 50 had been taken prisoner: a total, according to one knowledgeable source, that “account[ed] for nearly half [the guerrilla’s] full-time military personnel.”⁵¹ That the surviving *fedayeen* had escaped death, injury, or capture was attributable entirely to the intervention of a Jordanian armored column and accompanying artillery support.⁵²

Nonetheless, once the *Fatah* propaganda machine took over, this otherwise inconsequential engagement and patent defeat was celebrated as an indisputably heroic *fedayeen* triumph over the Zionist enemy. As Sayigh explained,

Israel had achieved its tactical objectives, but the battle of Karama turned overnight into a resounding political and psychological victory in Arab eyes. The Israelis had left behind some of their destroyed armour, and several burnt-out tanks were paraded triumphantly through the streets of Salt and Amman. The image of the invincible IDF was shaken, appropriately, at Karama, Arabic for dignity. The real credit was due to the Jordanian army, yet it was the guerrillas whose reputation soared. Their decision to stand and fight, militarily disastrous, catapulted them into a position of political pre-eminence.⁵³

Christopher Dobson, a British journalist who covered these same events and whose book on this general subject was published only a few years later, observed similarly how:

Immediately, the guerrillas ignoring their losses and the Jordanian intervention, claimed a glorious victory. The news rang round the Arab world and its effect was astonishing. The Arabs had lived on a diet of defeat for so long it had seemed that no Arab force could stand up to the Israeli army, and now, suddenly, they were told that a small band armed only with grenades and assault rifles had defeated a task force of Israeli tanks and planes. That this was not strictly true

did not matter. The Battle of Karameh cannot be measured in strictly military terms. It had demonstrated that the Israelis were not invincible and it became a symbol of hope for the Arabs. . . . Arafat and Fatah became heroes. Recruits . . . weapons . . . money poured in.⁵⁴

Even Israeli analysts concede this significant point. It demonstrated once more how in insurgencies, government military victories can be expeditiously vitiated and re-packaged by effective guerrilla information operations into compelling propaganda, widely believed and fervently embraced, however completely divorced from reality. The battle of Karameh, Lorch explained,

was exploited to the full by Fatah propaganda. For a whole day they had engaged considerable Israel army forces, and they had inflicted considerable casualties. For the first time, an Israel tank was left behind when the Israelis withdrew, a trophy which was publicized throughout the Arab world. In Fatah's struggle for recognition as a military factor to be reckoned with, distorted versions of the battle of Karameh, which made it seem that the Israeli withdrawal was forced by the Arabs, rather than the original battle plan, henceforward played an important point.⁵⁵

Edward Luttwak and Dan Horowitz similarly recounted how,

Fatah claimed that it had succeeded in defeating the Israelis when all Arab armies had failed; on the basis of this fabrication it launched a successful fund-raising and propaganda campaign which portrayed Fatah as the 'wave of the future' and the final arbiter of the Arab-Israeli conflict . . . [this] formed the basis of their prestige in Arab (and non-Arab) eyes.⁵⁶

Arafat himself moved swiftly to capitalize on this propaganda windfall. As *Fatah's* ranks began to swell with both new recruits and financial donations,⁵⁷ he sought to translate the group's growing strength and prestige into the power necessary to wrest control of the entire Palestinian liberation movement for himself and *Fatah*. At the fifth session of the Palestine National Congress held in Cairo in February 1969, he was elected chairman of the PLO's executive committee and immediately sought to consolidate *Fatah's* dominant position by establishing a joint PLO-*Fatah* military command.⁵⁸ Arafat soon also acquired from the rest of the Arab world recognition of the PLO as "the sole representative and legitimate spokesman for the Palestinian people" and himself eventually received what Paul Wilkinson described as the "ultimate accolade of a hero's welcome at the United Nations General Assembly" when he came to New York to address that body in February 1974.⁵⁹

As the Palestinian scholar Jamal R. Nassar explained, "Soon after Karameh, Palestinian political culture became characterized by its admiration of

the commandos. . . . Palestinian literature, art, songs and media made the Fedayeen into legendary heroes.”⁶⁰ Indeed, within six years of Karamah, Arafat had succeeded in overcoming a quarter-century of neglect and obscurity. He had achieved what diplomats and statesmen, lobbyists and humanitarian workers had persistently tried and failed to do: focus world attention on the Palestinian people and their plight. Arafat and his *fedayeen* also provided a powerful example to similarly frustrated ethnic and nationalist groups elsewhere: creating and fostering a cult of the *fedayeen* that was imitated and emulated by national liberation movements, guerrilla organizations, and terrorist groups alike in Latin America, the Middle East, North America, and Europe. Indeed, by the 1980s, some 40 different insurgent and terrorist groups from these areas had come to PLO camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and the Yemen among other places, for training. The Palestinians’ purpose in this tutelary role was not entirely philanthropic. The foreign participants in these courses were reportedly charged between \$5,000 and \$10,000 each for a six-week program of instruction. In addition, many of them were later recruited to participate in joint operations alongside Palestinian terrorists. Thus, according to Israeli defense sources, the PLO in 1981 had active cooperative arrangements with some 22 different terrorist or insurgent organizations that all had sought to emulate the Palestinians’ asymmetric warfare style and attendant “success.”⁶¹

The cult of the insurgent is thus arguably a heady intoxicant: leveling an intrinsically uneven playing field between non-state actor and established nation-state, and inspiring even the mostly lightly armed guerrilla to confront his or her better armed conventional adversary. It creates an environment where guile counts more than fire-power, and where the loosely organized insurgent network can potentially stymie even the most well-oiled and superiorly organized war machine. Indeed, its lessons are well understood by no less a towering figure than Osama bin Laden himself.

The Cult of the Insurgent Today: bin Laden, *al-Qaeda*, and the Insurgency in Iraq

For nearly a decade, bin Laden has also extolled the asymmetric virtues of guerrilla warfare. In his famous *fatwa* of 23 August 1996, titled, “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places: A Message from Usama bin Muhammad bin Laden unto his Muslim Brethren All Over the World Generally, and in the Arab Peninsula Specifically,” bin Laden had argued, how,

it must be obvious to you that, due to the imbalance of power between our armed forces and the enemy forces, a suitable means of fighting must be adopted i.e. using fast moving light forces that work under complete secrecy. In other word to initiate a guerrilla warfare, [we] the sons of the nation, and not the military forces, take part in it.⁶²

Indeed, he has long credited such tactics with the victory that he claims his forces achieved fighting alongside Somali militiamen against US forces in Mogadishu, Somalia, during October 1993. Those events, immortalized in the book and the film *Black Hawk Down*, involved the death of 18 US Army Rangers and Delta Force commandos at the hands of Somali militiamen and – allegedly – *al-Qaeda* fighters.⁶³ In bin Laden's view it was precisely those losses that led to President Clinton's decision to withdraw American military forces from the relief effort in Somalia, and thus proved that the only effective way to counter a superpower is through terrorism and guerrilla warfare. Iraq arguably has provided him and his followers with yet another opportunity.

Before the actual US/coalition invasion of Iraq in March 2003, that country had emerged as an important rallying cry for *al-Qaeda* and the radical *jihadi* movement its purports to lead. The call to arms that *al-Qaeda* issued was not to support Saddam Hussein or his regime but to resist what was and is still perceived as continued US and Western aggression against Islam. This obligates all Muslims everywhere to defend the faith from such aggression and encroachment. In fact, although American officials from President Bush down often describe Iraq as the "central front in the war on terror," the idea of making Iraq the central battlefield of *jihad* was first suggested by *al-Qaeda* itself. In February 2003, a month before the coalition invaded Iraq, *al-Qaeda*'s information department released the fifth and sixth installments of a series of on-line articles, entitled *In the Shadow of the Lances*, that had begun to appear shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Although the previous installments had been written by *al-Qaeda*'s chief spokesman, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, who had been trained as a theologian and Muslim cleric, these two new issues were authored by Saif al-Adel,⁶⁴ the group's chief of military operations. One of its most senior commanders and a warrior by training, he had been an officer in the Egyptian Army's Special Forces and a military trainer at *al-Qaeda*'s al-Farouq camp in Afghanistan.⁶⁵ In these issues, al-Adel imparted practical advice to Iraqis and foreign *jihadists* on how guerrilla warfare tactics could be used against the American and British troops. "Turn the mujahedin military force into small units with good administrative capabilities," he suggested, "since this will spare us big losses. Large units pose management problems," al-Adel further explained. "They occupy large areas which are difficult to conceal from air reconnaissance and air attack."⁶⁶

Al-Qaeda's entreaties to *jihadists* to descend on Iraq and confront the US and coalition military forces only intensified after the fall of Baghdad. For example, a statement posted on the movement's *al neda.com* website on 9 April 2003, which was clearly written after American forces had entered the Iraqi capital, lauded the virtues of guerrilla warfare against conventional military opponents. Under the heading "Guerrilla Warfare Is the most Powerful Weapon Muslims have, and It is The Best Method to Continue the Conflict with the Crusader Enemy," various lessons of history were cited to rally *jihadists* for renewed battle. "With guerilla warfare," it explained,

the Americans were defeated in Vietnam and the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan. This is the method that expelled the direct Crusader colonialism from most of the Muslim lands, with Algeria the most well known. We still see how this method stopped Jewish immigration to Palestine, and caused reverse immigration of Jews from Palestine. The successful attempts of dealing defeat to invaders using guerilla warfare were many, and we will not expound on them. However, these attempts have proven that the most effective method for the materially weak against the strong is guerrilla warfare.⁶⁷

The reference to the Soviets in Afghanistan and the linkage made to the US in Vietnam is significant. *Al-Qaeda* propaganda repeatedly characterizes America's involvement in Iraq as a quagmire that will ultimately bring about its downfall. It was repeated by bin Laden himself in the videotape broadcast on 29 October 2004, just before the US presidential election, when he explained, "So we are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy. Allah willing, and nothing is too great for Allah."⁶⁸ In *al-Qaeda's* historical narrative, clear parallels are drawn between the *mujahideen's* defeat of the Red Army in Afghanistan (which set in motion the alleged chain reaction that led to the demise of the Soviet Union and communism) and the current travails facing the US in Iraq and the inevitability of its defeat there at the hands of contemporary *ihadists*. Indeed, *al-Qaeda* propaganda has long described the US as a "paper tiger,"⁶⁹ on the verge of financial ruin and total collapse, much as the USSR once was, with the power of Islam poised similarly to push America over the precipice.⁷⁰

Bin Laden emphasized this very point in his last publicly known address to his fighters in December 2001, when he declared that, "America is in retreat by the grace of God Almighty and economic attrition is continuing up to today. But it needs further blows. The young men need to seek out the nodes of the American economy and strike the enemy's nodes."⁷¹ And, he repeated it again in the aforementioned videotape released just days before the 2004 American presidential elections. "This is in addition to our having experience in using guerrilla warfare and the war of attrition to fight tyrannical superpowers, as we, alongside the Mujahideen, bled Russia for ten years, until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat. All Praise is due to Allah."⁷² This strategy thus continues to guide and inform *ihadist* target selection and tactics today.

In fact, the clearest explication of *al-Qaeda's* strategy in Iraq has been provided by bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. On the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, he thanked God "for appeasing us with the dilemmas in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Americans are facing a delicate situation in both countries. If they withdraw they will lose everything and if they stay, they will continue to bleed to death."⁷³ On 9/11's third anniversary, he issued a slightly different version of the same statement, now proclaiming that US defeat in Iraq and

Afghanistan “has become just a question of time. . . . The Americans in both countries are between two fires,” Zawahiri explained. “[I]f they continue, they will bleed until death, and if they withdraw, they will lose everything.”⁷⁴

Indeed, what US military commanders optimistically described in late 2003 as the *jihadist* “magnet” or terrorist “flytrap” orchestrated by the US invasion of Iraq is thus viewed very differently by *al-Qaeda*. “Two years after Tora Bora,” al-Zawahiri observed in December 2003, “the American bloodshed [has] started to increase in Iraq and the Americans are unable to defend themselves.”⁷⁵ For *al-Qaeda*, accordingly, Iraq has likely been an effective means to preoccupy American military forces and also distract US attention while *al-Qaeda* and its confederates make new inroads and strike elsewhere. On a personal level, it may have also provided bin Laden and al-Zawahiri with the breathing space that they desperately needed to further obfuscate their trail. But most importantly, Iraq has figured prominently in *al-Qaeda* and *jihadist* plans and propaganda as a means of reinvigorating the *jihadist* cause and sustaining its momentum as well as engaging US forces in battle. It thus perpetuates the image of Islam as being cast perpetually on the defensive with no alternative but to take up arms against American and Western aggressors. In addition, the ongoing violence in Iraq, coupled with the inability of US and coalition and Iraqi security forces to maintain order, the Abu Ghraib revelations, and other disadvantageous developments, have all doubtless contributed to America’s poor standing in the Muslim world. By effectively engaging US military forces in Iraq and inflicting upon them a degree of pain and suffering on a magnitude that Saddam Hussein’s conventional forces were incapable of doing, the cult of the insurgent has also been perpetuated. Potentially, it will inspire imitation and succession elsewhere, much as the cult of the *fedayeen* did almost 40 years ago.

CONCLUSION

In the future America’s adversaries may, therefore, conclude that the only effective means to confront either a superpower or the superior, conventional military forces of an established nation-state is through a campaign reliant on terrorist and insurgent tactics. The attendant implications for US security and how the American military plans and prepares to meet future contingencies and challenges are potentially profound given the possibility that a new era of sub-national conflict and non-state violence may yet be on the horizon: an era even bloodier and more destructive than today.

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Endnotes

1. See his especially incisive critiques of America's war on terrorism and its conflation with weapons of mass destruction proliferation that Sir Michael cautioned would lead inevitably to war with Iraq in "What Friends Are For," *The National Interest* no. 69 (Fall 2002), p. 81; and Michael Howard, "Smoke on the Horizon," *Financial Times* (London), 7 September 2002.
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17. *Ibid.*
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19. See the calculator at <http://minneapolisfed.org/Research/data/us/calc/histor1800.cfm>.
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21. Laqueur, *Terrorism*, p. 113.
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24. Laqueur, *Terrorism*, p. 69.

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47. Quoted in Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, p. 178.
48. Edward Luttwak and Dan Horowitz, *The Israeli Army* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), p. 303.
49. Lorch, *One Long War*, pp. 144-45.
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51. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, p. 178.
52. Dobson, *Black September*, p. 33; and Luttwak and Horowitz, *The Israeli Army*, p. 303.

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54. Dobson, *Black September*, p. 33.
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