

Bin Ladin Operations Are Expert and Flexible

Bin Ladin's al-Qa'ida organization stresses careful planning, tight security practices, and flexibility throughout all stages of terrorist strikes—sound operational practices that allow it to pose a continuing threat to US interests even in a heightened security environment. Al-Qa'ida cells prepare for an attack well beforehand by conducting thorough surveillance of potential targets.

— [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Group members are expert in conducting different types of attacks and know how to protect their plans from discovery. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] al-Qa'ida's camps in Afghanistan provide training in the construction of improvised bombs of varying sizes from widely available materials. Operatives train for as long as several months in various forms of assassination, kidnapping, the use of rockets, mortars, and other longer-range weapons, as well as crude chemical and biological attacks.

— [REDACTED]

Al-Qa'ida's flexible operational decisionmaking and broad definition of acceptable targets enable the group to adjust plans to changing conditions. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Bin Ladin allows some cells to pick their own timing and targets, minimizing the need to communicate with his headquarters in Afghanistan.

— Nevertheless, [REDACTED] before the East Africa bombings and associated with anti-Israel plotting earlier this year [REDACTED] al-Qa'ida leaders sometimes make these decisions themselves, presumably because such attacks have higher priority.

Despite these strengths, al-Qa'ida operations are vulnerable to short-term delay or disruption. Because operatives often surveil a target until days before an attack, visible changes in security can force the cell to postpone an attack until it develops alternative plans or security returns to normal. Al-Qa'ida's farflung network also makes it subject to garbled communications and travel delays, and its emphasis on compartmentation means the arrest of a key leader could rob a local cell of direction.

— Inexperienced couriers or suicide bombers also make mistakes that expose plot details—such as occurred in 1998 in Nairobi.