BOMBS AND NETWORKS:
NEW TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONAL TOOLS
AND WESTERN INTELLIGENCE

An unusually large number of unexplained bombings and explosions have recently occurred in a very short period of time. Is it credible to say that so many similar events in so many different places in so many different situations happened coincidentally? Our observations suggest that terrorist organizations are increasingly interlinking their operations through advanced communications and that these links are bringing together organizations other than those traditionally associated with terrorism. Additional observations suggest that, for the moment, Western intelligence has broken into at least one part of that system of communications.

Changes that software like Freenet and Gnutella have brought to Internet communications, however, could alter the operation field considerably. If interlinked terrorist organizations deploy this much more complex software – which can be downloaded for free from the Internet – intelligence services could face problems they have not learned to solve.

'Netwar'

In the past decade or so, the world's terrorist organizations have undergone a restructuring. Much like their corporate counterparts, the most effective organizations have globalized their operations and created networks of relationships that replace hierarchical structures with nodules of authority, resulting in a process that seems leaderless yet organized.

The Middle East offers a good example of what is taking place. Some groups, such as the Abu Nidal Organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Palestine Liberation Organization and others have remained much as they have always been: centralized, top-down groups with clarified ideologies, focused objectives and regional operations. However, newer organizations, such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Algeria's Armed Islamic Group, the Egyptian Islamic Group and the so-called Arab Afgans have developed in a different way: decentralized authority, dispersed operations and "all-channel networks" of relationships, which means that communications and decisions are multi-directional and all parts have equal say and responsibility in the overall operation. As a result of the spreading network approach, the Arab Afghans, for instance, have participated in

actions in Bangladesh, Bosnia, Chechnya, India (Kashmir), Pakistan, Tajikistan, Somalia and Kosovo, far afield in operations from the more localized and older organizations they are displacing. (*Current History*, 4/00)

These newer organizations are fighting a "netwar," in which networks of relations replace force concentrated in one area as the core asset source of strength. Effectiveness results from flexibility, adaptability and either headless or multi-headed decision-making processes. This has been a major problem for Western military leaders because networked organizations operate more elusively (and thus more effectively) in the modern world than do traditional *force majeure* military organizations.
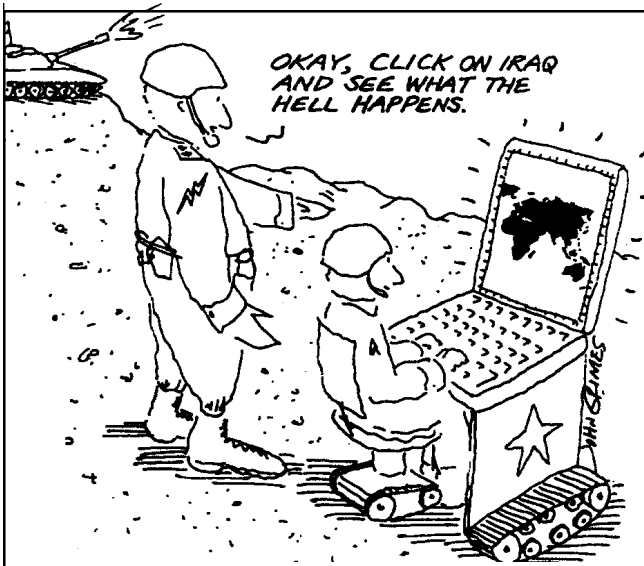
The problems Western military operations are having dealing with these new terrorist organizations appear similar to the problems that large corporations – such as those in the recording industry – are having with unwanted invasions of their intellectual property. Freenet and Gnutella, two software systems that allow users to trade music and movies without leaving a trace of how that transfer took place and who initiated it (and without paying copyright fees), are analagous to the systems employed by the new interlinked terrorist groups. Newly interlinked terrorist organizations have deployed advanced communications systems, including satellite telephones, Internet links and other new technologies, creating some secure systems (or

at least secure ways to exploit these technologies). These advanced communications have kept the decentralized organization connected.

Recently, events that point toward wider communications among these organizations, indeed, even including organizations not associated with terrorism, have caught our attention. These events have led us to wonder whether conceptualizing such restructured organizations in terms of ideologies or religions, such as Islamic or Irish Catholic/Protestant, or in terms of cultures, such as Basque, might be obsolete. Are we entering an era of globalized alliances in terrorism, much as we have in capitalism, in which alliances transcend historical definitions and transgress boundaries of political conflict?

Bombs Away

In the recent past, several long-standing conflicts have enjoyed a moment of quiet, as peace talks everywhere seemed to be breaking through historical barriers. Cease-fire agreements were holding in Ireland, the Middle East, the Basque area of Spain and the Kashmir region of India. News from these sections of the world seemed to be details of peace talks more often than of body counts. But late in July, the calm disappeared.

July 30 – A **bomb** exploded near the train station in Dusseldorf, Germany, killing nine immigrants. (*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 8/3/00)

August 7 – Fifty-five pounds of **explosives** detonated (presumably prematurely) in Bilbao, Spain, killing four members of the Basque separatist group. (*ABC News*, 8/9/00)

August 7 – Police discovered a car **bomb** outside the home of a Jewish family in Bamberg, Germany. (*International Herald Tribune*, 8/8/00)

August 8 – A car **bomb** in Zumaia, Spain, killed Basque business federation leader, Jose Maria Korta. (*ABC News*, 8/9/00)

August 8 – An unexplained **explosion** occurred in a railway station in northeast China, killing four and injuring at least ten. (*ABC News*, 8/9/00)

August 8 – A car **bomb** exploded in Moscow, killing seven. (*ABC News*, 8/9/00)

August 9 – Police discovered **explosives** and detonating devices in the Moscow railway station. (*ABC News*, 8/9/00)

August 10 – A **bomb** exploded in the Kashmir section of India, killing 12 and wounding 20. (*ABC News*, 8/11/00)

August 10 – A truck filled with 500 pounds of **explosives** broke through an Irish police roadblock in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Bomb experts later detonated the material. (*ABC News*, 8/11/00)

August 10 – Irish police discovered and exploded a pipe **bomb** in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. (*BBC News*, 8/11/00)

August 11 – A car **bomb** exploded in a shopping mall in Cape Town, South Africa, injuring two people. (*ABC News*, 8/11/00)

August 12 – A petrol **bomb** attack on a home north of Belfast destroyed property and left police searching for a motive. (*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 8/17/00)

August 20 – A **bomb** killed two Civil Guard agents in Sallent de Gallego, Spain. (*International Herald Tribune*, 8/21/00)

August 23 – Four **bombs** exploded, two each in San Sebastian and Irun, Spain. (*Yahoo! News*, 8/24/00)

"Is this the movie of the week or the news of the day?"

Two Intriguing Inferences

All of these events, whether in the middle of ongoing struggles or part of some new offensive, clustered for the most part around the end of July and the first of 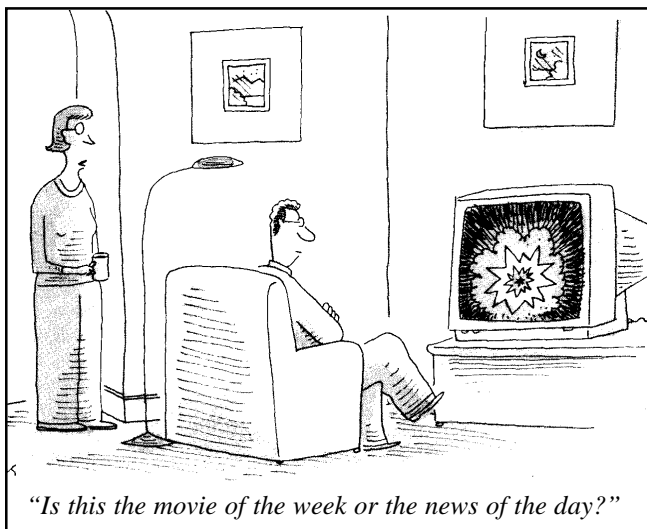August. Can so many bombings in such a short period be coincidental? Is it possible that so many groups with such diverse objectives could just happen to resort to similar tactics within such a narrow time frame? Is it credible to think that so many conflicts in so many different places came to the same crisis point at exactly the same time? Our observations suggest that some level of orchestration preceded several, if not all, of these actions, which leads to:

The First Inference – Seemingly different and disparate rebel groups are in contact with each other – that is, they have a network of communications that transcends issues, crosses ideologies and conflates end purposes. In short, they are "globalized" and increasingly interconnected.

Why would groups with different objectives and operational tactics take the time to act together? The timing of these attacks suggests an answer: escalation. Traditional war strategy called for bombing runs to "soften the field" prior to a wider assault, and these seemingly disparate new terrorist networks also could have been setting the stage for bigger events. Such a context puts the following events in a different light:

❖ The U.S. Congressional Research Service revealed that operatives of Osama bin Laden, nominal head of the Arab Afghans and the alleged mastermind of the U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa, are in Jordan and Lebanon and that they have made contact with Hamas fighters. Based on this intelligence, the service warned the public of possible attacks intended to destabilize and undermine regional peace talks. Shortly thereafter, Israel revealed that it had arrested 23 suspects who, officials claimed, intended to bomb several locations. A subsequent bungled Israeli raid to arrest Mahmoud Abu Hanoud, a suspected Hamas terrorist, seemed consistent with recent intelligence linking Hamas to the Arab Afghans as well as the newer information that substantial attacks were imminent. (*USA Today*, 8/22/00; *International Herald Tribune*, 8/28/00)

❖ Police in Sydney revealed that New Zealand authorities had uncovered a plot to bomb a nuclear reactor outside the international city during the upcoming Olympic games. New Zealand investigators

gathered information about the bombing in the headquarters of **a local organized-crime ring that evidently has links to the Arab Afghans**. (*International Herald Tribune*, 8/28/00)

❖ Central Asian battles between governments and Islamic rebels have started to intensify. During the same week that the bombs were exploding everywhere, Islamic rebels slipped into Uzbekistan and advanced deep into the country. Also, rebels began massing along the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, prompting the leaders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to discuss a coordinated reaction and to seek assistance from Russia and China, both of which also suffered bombings during the recent spate of attacks. Together, the five countries comprise the Shanghai Five, a group organized, in part, to share information and resources to fight internal rebellions, often organized by international, interlinked terrorist groups. (*Financial Times,* 8/17/00)

❖ During U.S. President Bill Clinton's August trip to Colombia, rebels bombed three banks, and police arrested three men who had bomb materials in their apartment, six blocks from one of the president's planned stops. (*New York Times*, 8/31/00)

Does it sound reasonable that the U.S. government just noted the many different bombings and concluded that Osama bin Laden would be doing

something? Is it standard practice for Londonderry police to have a roadblock on that road just when the explosive-laden truck came through? Is it probable that New Zealand police uncovered the bombing plot because of ongoing vigilance about Olympics that are to be staged in Australia? More to the point, is it possible that officials knew in advance that these bombings were going to happen?

Over the past several months, the public has gotten just a glimpse of the massive electronic surveillance systems that Western nations have at their disposal (*e.g.,* Echelon, Carnivore). While American intelligence services have not always demonstrated astute understanding of all world events (*e.g.,* atomic bomb detonations in India), the curiously effective deterrence that some governments exhibited during the recent series of bombings leads to:

The Second Inference – Western governments have cracked, at least partially, the communication systems these different groups maintain, and they are selectively sharing and utilizing that information. But this inference comes with a caveat. Given the nature of networks and the advances in software, these governmental intercepts could only have come from one portion of the network, leaving much information unknown. Also, by using this information to stop potential attacks, intelligence services have revealed to these networked organizations that their systems have been breached. Given the adaptability of these systems, the organizations have by now altered their systems and are no doubt hacking into Western intelligence systems.

Evolution, Yes, But Who's Evolving Faster?

When U.S. President Bill Clinton agreed to let the military launch rockets into Afghanistan and Sudan in response to the 1998 bombings of American embassies in east Africa, the anachronism of Western military methods against the newly structured terrorist organizations became clear. Not only did the missiles not hit their intended target in Afghanistan (Osama bin Laden's headquarters), but the rocket attack on a supposed military site in Sudan resulted in an

international scolding of American behavior. This fiasco clarified the need for change, especially within the intelligence community. Not only had their intelligence systems failed to intercept plans for the embassy bombings, the response proved ineffective, even counterproductive.
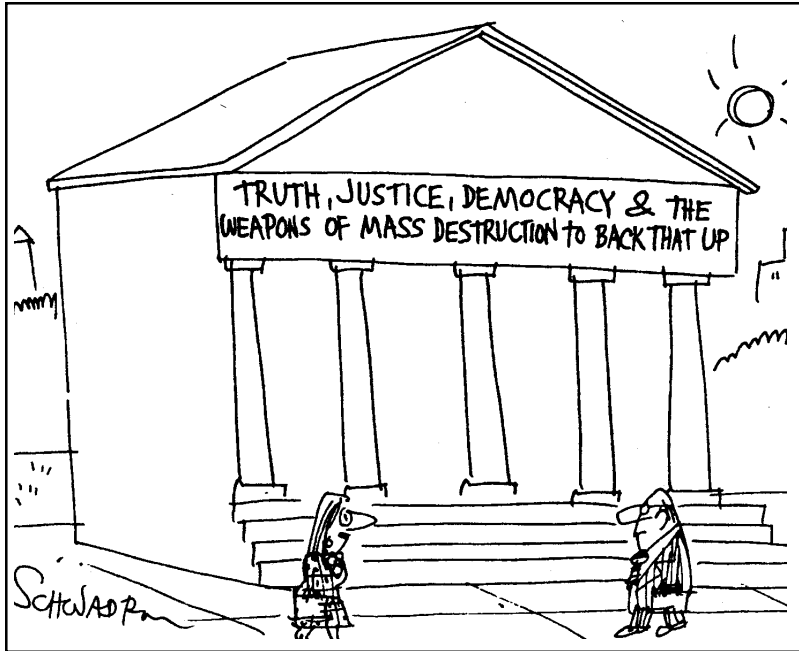
The new networked organizations have evolved well beyond traditional categories used to monitor them. For example, the Arab Afghans have stretched their network to an organized crime syndicate in New Zealand. Evidently, that same "Middle East" terrorist group has some connection to a band of Philippine kidnappers, who recently used their lucrative kidnap-for-ransom practice to grab an American and demand the release from prison of the World Trade Center bombers, whose connections pass through Egypt and on to Afghanistan. Moreover, U.S. officials recently disrupted an American cigarette smuggling racket that was sending ill-gotten profits to members of a group interlinked with those same Arab Afghans.

Terrorist organizations are no longer limited in region, ideology or scope, and consequently they offer unique challenges to Western intelligence services that have traditionally organized their operations around information "silos" monitoring one section of the globe (although the "terrorism" category often includes the entire world of operations).

Netwars give rise to operations that are quite different from traditional military operations, and they require new types of responses. When faced with organized terrorism, Western intelligence has typically sought to "decapitate" terrorist organizations (*e.g.,* French tactics in the Algerian revolution). But now, the all-channel networks no longer have a clear central control or a single all-powerful leader. In addition, electronic (and personal) communications systems facilitate this dispersal of authority and add an eerie efficiency to distant operatives. In fact, the dispersed system depends heavily on communications, and, evidently, Western intelligence organizations have changed methods since the African embassy bombings and have been able to break into some segment of the terrorists' communications systems. How and when to use that intelligence and with whom to share it are now significant diplomatic and security issues. Of course, the headless nature of the new interlinked organizations and their distributed authority principles keep knowledge of what one segment is doing from being applicable elsewhere. Still, the bombing interceptions suggest that some information is better than no information.

Software like Freenet and Gnutella, should it enter into this situation, could create a different magnitude of problem for intelligence services. Users of these software programs do not leave a trace of where they are located or with whom they are communicating. The unusual way they transmit messages makes intercepting messages more difficult. Whatever systems of communication are in use now could become much more of a problem when these organizations deploy this type of software, which, of course, is available for free on the Internet.

Thus, the issue becomes: Who is evolving faster – networked terrorist organizations and their communications systems or Western intelligence services? Bombs and networks are forcing bigger and faster changes in intelligence realities.