What can we learn

Few brand names today are more recognizable around the world than al-Qaeda. How Osama bin Laden, its founder and leader, achieved this feat sheds important light on the way in which terrorist organizations have evolved their structure in recent times, the new approaches and policies that are needed to counter this threat and even what we might learn from terrorist organizations in terms of organizational resilience and flexibility.

“All men dream, but not equally,” wrote TE Lawrence, the legendary Lawrence of Arabia. “Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.”

Bin Laden is indeed one of the dangerous men that Lawrence described. At a time when the forces of globalization, coupled with economic determinism, seemed to have submerged the role of the individual charismatic leader of men beneath far more powerful, impersonal forces, bin Laden cleverly cast himself as a David against the American Goliath – one man standing up to the world’s sole remaining superpower, able to challenge its might and directly threaten its citizens.

In his own inimitable way, bin Laden has cast this struggle as precisely the clash of civilizations that America and its coalition partners have laboured so hard to negate. “This is a matter of religion and creed; it is not what [George W] Bush and [Tony] Blair maintain, that it is a war against terrorism,” he declared in a videotaped speech broadcast over al-Jazeera television on November 3, 2001. “There is no way to forget the hostility between us and the infidels. It is ideological, so Muslims have to ally themselves with Muslims.”

To bin Laden’s followers, this analysis – and that presented in his seminal August 1996 fatwa, the “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places” – comes across as only more prescient and accurate today given the war against Iraq and the American, British and other coalition forces’ occupation of Iraq.

Nearly eight years ago, bin Laden argued that the “crusader military forces” of the United States and United Kingdom had established a beachhead in Saudi Arabia from which they intended to impose a new imperialism on the Middle East in order to gain control over the region’s oil wealth.

To those already inclined to this view, recent events cannot unreasonably be seen to have provided further evidence of the acuity of bin Laden’s analysis. Given the long established sophistication of bin Laden and al-Qaeda’s propaganda efforts – employing multimedia vehicles (including pre-recorded video and audio tapes, CD-Roms, DVDs and the internet), dramatically choreographed and staged dissemination opportunities, and other mass outreach techniques – this message is now being peddled with increasing fervour for its motivational and recruitment value.

Bin Laden, though, is perhaps best viewed as a terrorist CEO, essentially having applied business administration and modern management techniques learned both at university and in the family’s construction business to the running of a transnational terrorist organization. Bin Laden acquired this knowledge as a student at Saudi Arabia’s prestigious King Abdul-Aziz University, where in 1981 he obtained a degree in economics and public administration.

He then cut his teeth in the family business, harnessing the experience and on-the-job training in management and organization that later enabled him to transform al-Qaeda into the world’s pre-eminent terrorist movement.

Indeed, what bin Laden has done is to implement for al-Qaeda the same type of effective organizational framework or management approach adapted by many corporate executives throughout much of the industrialized world over the past decade. Just as large, multinational business conglomerates moved during the 1990s to more linear, flatter and networked structures, bin Laden did the same with al-Qaeda.

Additionally, bin Laden defined a flexible strategy for the group that functions at multiple levels, using both top-down and bottom-up approaches. On the one hand, bin Laden has functioned like the president or CEO of a large multinational corporation by defining specific goals and aims, issuing orders and ensuring their implementation.

This mostly applies to the al-Qaeda spectaculars – those high-visibility, usually high-value and high-casualty operations like 9/11, the...
from the terrorists?
The post 9/11 al-Qaeda has thus shown itself to be a remarkably nimble, flexible and adaptive entity. It appears almost as the archetypal shark in the water, having to move forward constantly, albeit changing direction slightly, in order to survive.

thousand well-trained and battle-hardened fighters ensures at least a sufficiently deep well of expertise from which to continue to draw.

Moreover, in terms of al-Qaeda’s finances, sufficient monetary reserves are likely to still exist. According to one open source estimate, some $130 million of identifiable al-Qaeda assets to date has been seized or frozen.

Given that bin Laden reputedly amassed a war chest of billions of dollars, ample funds may still be at the disposal of his minions. At one point, for example, bin Laden was reputed to own or control some 80 companies around the world.

In the Sudan alone, he owned that country’s most profitable businesses, including construction, manufacturing, currency trading, import-export and agricultural enterprises.

Not only were many of these managed to the extent that they regularly turned a profit, but assets to date has been seized or frozen. According to one open source estimate, some $130 million of identifiable al-Qaeda

In conclusion, whatever the future holds for bin Laden and al-Qaeda, it is indisputable that they have had a seismic effect on the US and the entire world. Bin Laden is one of few people alive who can claim to have changed fundamentally the course of history.

And, in this respect, the epic battle that he launched is not over yet. Indeed, because of what al-Qaeda sees as America’s global war on Islam, the movement’s sense of commitment and purpose today is arguably greater than ever. And this ineluctably points to a long, long struggle ahead in the war against terrorism.