

Attacking the Nodes of Terrorist Networks

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Abstract

The use of social network analysis to combat illicit networks is an adept analytical tool in offensive counterterrorism operations. In this article, the principles of social network theory are examined and used to illuminate the bonds formed in and around the al Qaeda network. Two key terms-hubs and nodes-are defined and applied to applicable players within the network. This examination, from an intelligence-gathering perspective, can then be used to determine the players who can be used to lead counterterrorism professionals to the chiefs (“Hubs”) of an organization such as al Qaeda by following lesser, more expendable players (nodes). The two most successful incidents of such operations-the capture of Ramzi Yousef and the raid resulting in the death of Osama bin Laden-are used as detailed examples of practical applications of operations modeled on such principles. The future of al Qaeda is examined, from a perspective of the United States and US counterterrorism efforts.

Key Words: Terrorist Social Networks, Counterterrorism Operations

Introduction

Terrorism is an issue that has caused devastation in the lives and governments of the people of the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan for decades now. The issue is currently devouring the people in every region of the two latter countries. Intelligence operations conducted by the United States in those countries have been crucial to the focus of efforts against radical Islamist terror groups whose interactions there have changed the face of the 21st century.

When a bullet fired from the weapon belonging to a Naval Special Warfare Development Group operator impacted Osama bin Muhammed bin Awad bin Laden’s forehead, it was the culmination of nearly 2 decades’ worth of intelligence gathering. The objectives of those intelligence-gathering efforts varied, but since the 2001 terror attacks against the United States, the most significant objective has been to stop him from committing atrocities in the name of Islamic Salafi jihad. That intelligence eventually was realized because of the dissection of his social network, which was also the core of the international terrorist network Al Qaeda.

The social network theory as applied to terrorist organizations has many aspects that make it alluring to intelligence professionals. The nature of assembling that information also makes the process a time-intensive study for those intelligence

professionals, and requires patience for success. The results yielded prove that these efforts bear fruit when applied in an operational context, though.

This paper's focus is on the operational application of analyzing the social intricacies of a terrorist network. Using what Sageman defines as nodes, operational planners can hope to locate the hubs, or operational and ideological chiefs of terrorist organizations. Al Qaeda has been such an integral part of the international efforts to combat terrorism, and the analysis of that organization to date has been extensive and illuminating. This paper will examine some of the information that has been gathered in the case of two major hubs within al Qaeda's network. The first hub examined will be Ramzi Yousef. The second hub will be Osama bin Laden. Key aspects of operations leading to the raids that resulted in Yousef's capture and bin Laden's death, respectively, will be used to prove that targeting a node to locate a hub within a terrorist social network can be the most effective way to target that organization's structure.

Terrorist Networks

Illicit networks bind the globe like belts of dark operational bodies, braided with one another. Terrorist groups support and are supported by illegal arms dealers, money launderers, and other terrorist groups. In his text, Understanding Terror Networks, Marc Sageman states of social networks in general, "A group of people can be viewed as a network, a collection of nodes connected through links." (Sageman, 2004) A terrorist organization is such a group. It benefits the analyst to view the structure of terrorist organizations in this way. Though some terrorist organizations do have a structure more akin to hierarchy, the interconnectedness and the relatively small social numbers when compared to a government or military command make the analogy applicable in most contexts. The fight to which al Qaeda has prescribed itself is the global Salafi jihad. The network that comprises al Qaeda and its allies is interchangeably called by their name or the global Salafi jihad for the purposes of identification.

Sageman elaborates on the structure of al Qaeda's extended network by showing the links between the individual groups and their key members:

"Some nodes are more popular and are attached to more links, connecting them to more isolated nodes. These more connected nodes dominate the architecture of the global Salafi jihad. [In the case of al Qaeda] The central staff, Core Arab, Maghreb Arab, and South-east Asian are large clusters built around hubs: Osama bin Laden, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Zein al-Abidin Mohamed Hussein...and Abu Bakar Baasyir, respectively."
(Sageman, 2004)

These men are kingpins, masterminds, and figureheads in the world of terrorism. All have led, planned, or directed terrorist operations against the United States or the allies thereof, and all have had success in that arena. All are socially connected to each other, as well.

The social aspect of the global Salafi jihad is a key aspect of its identity, and one that is distinctive in an age of superpowers. “[N]etworks tend to be based on direct personal contacts. As a result, they are often composed of members with similar professional backgrounds, interests, goals, and values. Relations and connections within networks tend to be informal and loosely structured.” (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2008) Though the hierarchy within these networks is looser, there is still leadership, usually identifiable as a hub. In this context, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni’s and Jones’s point about similar backgrounds of the members coincides with evidence that Sageman provides about al Qaeda’s members.

The connections within al Qaeda are but one aspect of the terrorist organization’s identity. The other two most identifiable aspects are their religious ideology and their commitment to violence. (Sageman, 2004) The former aspect entails their interpretation of Islamic doctrine and scripture to construe responsibilities to kill or terrify those who do not share the same religious sentiment. The latter aspect is their tangible directive to carry out attacks that shock and disturb their enemies. All three of these integral aspects go together because of such similarities between each and every al Qaeda member and supporter, and the social facet exists because of similar sentiment concerning those other characteristics. (Sageman, 2004) Every member of al Qaeda wants to destroy the United States. Every member is violent. Every member shares these sentiments with his fellow member. It is a responsibility to do so, and it is also a responsibility to support Muslims of similar disposition, struggling in other parts of the world.

This is one of the reasons why al Qaeda was capable of extending its influence to numerous nations on nearly every continent. Their philosophy was to fight “the far enemy,” (Sageman, 2004) and they were willing to travel to many places to inflict damage on American interests, Israeli security, or the safety of people anywhere that would harm global security. “Osama bin Laden’s doctrine relied on al Qaeda’s ability to support Muslim uprisings throughout the world.” (Katz, 2002) They supported Muslim fighters in Algeria, the Sudan, Somalia, and Egypt in Africa. There, they also orchestrated a successful plot to bomb two American embassies simultaneously in Tanzania and Kenya. (Katz, 2002) In Asia, they supported and conducted operations in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore, (Sageman, 2004) and also established logistical pipelines between themselves and Jemaah Islamiyah. (ICG, 2002) In Europe, they inspired the bombing of a train in Spain. (Hamilos, 2007) In the Middle East, their region of origin, they conducted the majority of their definitive affairs. Between Pakistan and Afghanistan they established a base of operations, which included training jihadists from around the globe, throughout the 1990’s and into the 21st century. (Katz, 2004) There, they also coordinated bombings in Saudi Arabia for allowing Westerners on sacred Arab lands, and established a network of support with Iraqi insurgents after the ousting of Saddam Hussein’s regime. In North America, they established cells in Canada and the United States that would eventually lead to the 11 September 2001 attacks, which in turn led to the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by US-led Coalition forces. (9/11 Commission, 2004)

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The reach of al Qaeda has been attributed largely to globalization. Many would argue that the social reaction to economic and political forces involved with expanding technologies and interconnection of economies around the globe have shaped the organization. “The social origins of terror are rooted...in the values and beliefs associated with the mixed economies of developing countries in a globalizing world.” (Mousseau, 2003) The impact is apparent in the economic resources that al Qaeda wielded in its heyday. “Those on the lowest rung of the economic ladder are the most vulnerable to the negative consequences associated with globalization.” (Mousseau, 2003) Though the idea of poverty directly leading to terrorism is academically vapid, the truth remains that figures like Osama bin Laden, who left his Arabian palace to sleep in caves and kill Soviets, inspire the economically deprived, particularly those of Muslim disposition. The Taliban, though not al Qaeda members, fall into the category of the extended network of al Qaeda. They protected the group’s core members for years, and continue to deliver threats concerning avenging bin Laden’s death. Similarly, groups like Jemaah Islamiyah, who was born of social unrest caused by sentiments of marginalization of South East Asian Muslims in the 1990’s, have developed a link and kinship with al Qaeda which were congealed through economic support. (ICG, 2002)

Bin Laden’s resources were seen by many of his underprivileged followers as those of a selfless ideologue, and he could continue to utilize the money he had to support offensive operations. “Patrons fearing the loss of their privileged status-such as Osama bin Laden-find an antimarket ideology useful to attract followers.” (Mousseau, 2003) This combination of utilizing money to orchestrate terrorist actions, and charismatic abandonment of available comfort is a primary reason why bin Laden became the key hub in the most notorious terrorist network in modernity.

Before bin Laden was recognized as the leader of al Qaeda, one of its operatives was the face of the Salafi jihadist movement in the eyes of the American Government. Ramzi Yousef was a boarder at the notorious Su Casa Guest House, recognized as a bin Laden property, during numerous stays in Islamabad. (Katz, 2002) Yousef was a world traveler, and is widely believed to have trained Bosnian Serbs in former Yugoslavia, and liaised with the Abu Sayef Group in Indonesia. (Katz, 2002) This interaction led to the establishment of a cooperative logistical network, and to aligning and strengthening ideological bonds between Abu Sayef and al Qaeda. (Katz, 2002) Ramzi Yousef was also the key figure in the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. He designed the truck bomb, and purchased explosives with al Qaeda’s funds. (Katz, 2002) Because of his presence in the United States, American authorities were able to identify him and attempt to locate him for years after. However, he continued to plan and execute bombings on airplanes around the globe for years after his successful attack in Manhattan. (Katz, 2002)

The network structure has been effective in many ways for al Qaeda’s purposes. They eluded capture or destruction of the majority of their leadership for the better parts of two decades, while still managing to perpetuate, and for nearly 10 years, escalate their aggressive activities. The battle they have waged against Western society is bigger than just the global Salafi jihad, and has become a phenomenon. Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Calvert Jones describe this phenomenon:

“According to a growing literature, the primary confrontation in world politics is no longer between states but between states and terrorist networks such as al-Qaida, drug smuggling networks such as those in Colombia and Mexico, nuclear smuggling networks in places such as North Korea and Pakistan, and insurgent networks such as those in Iraq.” (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2009)

Scholars on the subject feel that states are disadvantaged when attempting to mitigate the success of such actors because of the fluidity that these networks exhibit. “A fluid structure is said to provide networks with a host of advantages including adaptability, resilience, a capacity for rapid innovation and learning, and wide-scale recruitment.” (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2009) The shapelessness of connected nodes creates challenges to which states must adapt in order to limit their success and influence.

Osama bin Laden was the hub of all hubs within the community of Salafi jihadists. Though one individual, he possessed an extremely important position within the network. “A network node with high degree centrality (strong links with many other nodes) may possess *social power*, easily accessing resources and information from other nodes because of its central position.” (Hafner Burton et al, 2009) This defines bin Laden’s role. He acted as a spiritual adviser and a strategic consultant. One of his most interesting contributions to the movement was that of his wealth and financial resources. When he first engulfed himself in the fight in Afghanistan, he pooled money from numerous wealthy Saudi nationals, to include members of the royal family. (Katz, 2002) He was a medium for wealthy Arabs to donate money to a fight against the United States society they disdained, while still allowing the donors to maintain some anonymity. Similarly, his strong faith and periodic Fatwahs were a means of social and ideological direction for the group.

The most notable actions of al Qaeda were the attacks orchestrated on 11 September 2001, when nearly 3000 Americans were killed in the destruction resulting from suicide plane attacks on the World Trade Center Buildings and the Pentagon Building, as well as a foiled attack that led one plane to crash in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. (9/11 Commission, 2004) The first bombing of the World Trade Center nearly 10 years earlier was also an extremely significant development in terrorism and counterterrorism alike. (Katz, 2002) The counterterrorism principles that led to the undoing of the key figures behind each of these respective attacks will now be examined. The acute effectiveness of these principles will also be demonstrated.

Operations that Attack the Nodes of a Terror Network

Network analysis in international political and social structures is a relatively new academic approach. The first two “waves” of such network analysis theories were begun in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. (Hafner Burton et al, 2009) “Only a third wave of network applications, starting in the late 1990s, has begun to integrate the tools of network analysis and the core problems of international relations.” (Hafner Burton et al,

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2009) Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones state, “networks have important—and often overlooked—structural disadvantages that limit their effectiveness.” (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2008) Many nodes are an example of such a weakness. “The strength of a tie is conceptualized as a combination of the magnitude and frequency of interactions between two nodes.” (Hafner-Burton et al, 2009) Two members of a terrorist organization can exemplify this tie. The more they interact, the more likely they cannot function independently.

Another reason that hubs are integral is their control of key information within that network. The reliance of these networks upon secrecy is necessary for their own operational security and survival. For this reason, they control knowledge such as their own whereabouts, their intended movements, and their future plans by allowing only trusted individuals to learn this insight. “Network power [is defined as] prominence in networks where valued information and scarce resources are transferred from one actor to another...[and] is usually related to one of several competing definitions of centrality.” (Hafner-Burton et al, 2009) Hubs control network power by centralizing information and tightly controlling its release.

Though the operatives in al Qaeda’s network were driven, determined, trainable, and intelligent in most cases, they lacked resources and social connections that the hubs of the network enjoyed. For this reason they were designated as expendable. The heads of the network, such as bin Laden and Khalid Sheik Muhammed (KSM) were not expendable, which is a major reason that after KSM’s apprehension, success of al Qaeda-led attacks on US soil almost evaporated. Sageman states, “Hubs in a social network are vulnerable because communications go through them.” (Sageman, 2004) Though these groups are not hierarchies, some aspects still require presentation to chief figures, particularly when funds or orders need passed to the operative troops.

Operationally, acute analysis of the structure of a network is essential to deciphering its strengths and weaknesses and developing an approach to counter the strengths by attacking the weaknesses. “Network analysis aims to identify patterns of relationships, such as hubs, cliques, or brokers, and to link those relations with outcomes of interest.” (Hafner Burton et al, 2009) Targeting nodes has proven effective at generating intelligence. Some of these nodes were identified by KSM, after he was apprehended during the war in Afghanistan. “Network analysis addresses the associations among nodes rather than the attributes of particular nodes.” (Hafner Burton et al, 2009) Though this is relevant for studying the actions and potential future actions of “dark” networks, such as terrorist groups and other illicit networks, from an operational perspective, individual nodes must be identified within the structure. Those nodes’ relevancy to the structure helps determine operational direction.

At the onset of the operations to apprehend al Qaeda figures in Afghanistan, al Qaeda and their allies used a great deal of modern technology, such as cellular phones. They have severely limited this practice, now, in response to American technology to track use of such forms of communication. Though the adaptations to American technology have occurred, they have limited illicit networks’ ability to carry out

operations like those of the embassy bombings and 11 September attacks. Also, though decentralized networks are more easily capable of making decisions due to their organization into autonomous cells, the more prolific tacticians' and strategists' intelligence is absent from those cells. "Informal organizational memories, dependent on error-prone human recollection, are unlikely to be as reliable as formal ones." (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2008) Evidence of this is the fact that when al Qaeda had a structure more akin to hierarchy, their operations were more successful. In the 1990's, though the organization was compartmentalized into independent cells, those cells reported to Osama bin Laden or his lieutenants for orders and direction. (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2008)

Before discussing the connections that ultimately led to Osama bin Laden's defeat in Abbottabad, attention should be paid to a similar operation in Pakistan, more than a decade prior. Ramzi Yousef (whose real name is Abdul Basit Karim) recruited and trained terrorist apprentices. He planned and executed attacks on the World Trade Center and various airlines around the world. He also played a role in the planning of the 11 September attacks, planned primarily by his uncle, KSM. Ramzi Yousef often recruited Muslims who were zealous enough for their cause to accept martyrdom and explode themselves along with civilians in an act of terrorism. However, if he were unable to convince them of their need to do such things for religious reward alone, he would recruit people by fear. One such recruit, "didn't volunteer, he was *volunteered*." (Katz, 2002) This man, named Ishtiaque Parker, eventually became the node that led American agents to Yousef. (Sageman, 2004) Yousef attempted to terrify Parker into smuggling bombs onto American planes in Manila and Bangkok, but Parker maneuvered out of both attempts by saying that security was too tight at the airports. (Katz, 2002) Eventually, he liaised with Special Agents from the US State Department, who along with the Pakistani intelligence service, apprehended Yousef based upon coordination with Parker. (Katz, 2002) In such a way, a weaker node in the network was employed by US forces to track and apprehend a terrorist mastermind, and one of the first identifiable figureheads in al Qaeda's organization.

Like Yousef, bin Laden was a hub; though one individual, he possessed an extremely important position within the network. "A network node with high degree centrality (strong links with many other nodes) may possess *social power*, easily accessing resources and information from other nodes because of its central position." (Hafner Burton et al, 2009) Ramzi Yousef and bin Laden shared these traits of affability and charisma that generated allure. Both these men, wielding "social power," that translated to operational success for al Qaeda, were ultimately undone by operations that targeted nodes with whom they interacted. It took significantly longer for US forces to apprehend bin Laden than Yousef. Although both men were extremely cautious, bin Laden was quantifiably the more cautious of the two. Unlike Yousef, who would adorn himself with the finest in Western leisurewear, bin Laden preferred traditional Muslim robes. (Katz, 2002) Bin Laden's undoing was not his trust in his ability to inspire fear in his subordinate. On the contrary, a very trusted agent would ultimately lead American forces to bin Laden unwittingly.

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For years after the Battle of Tora Bora, when bin Laden escaped from his Afghan mountain cave into Pakistan, his whereabouts were only speculative. Many of his subordinates and associates were apprehended in that time, including Ramzi Yousef's uncle, KSM. During his incarceration in the US-owned detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, he has been subject to questioning there, and at other sites as he has stated. (ICRC, 2007) The possibility exists that the characteristics of bin Laden's courier arose from this questioning, though US officials have not confirmed this as fact. Regardless of the source, someone detained in Guantanamo Bay who was familiar with both bin Laden and his courier gave intelligence sources significant details about his appearance and name to develop more leads to follow. "US officials have identified [the courier] as Kuwait-born Pakistani, Abu Ahmad al-Kuwaiti, and say he was Bin Laden's 'most trusted' courier." (Kahn, 2011) He was the signatory on the deed for the land on which the Abbottabad house bin Laden was found. (Kahn, 2011) The intelligence American forces had on al-Kuwaiti was corroborated when they intercepted a call he made in August 2010. (Kahn, 2011) Eventually, they followed the caller to a house that seemed designed to hide someone, and after nearly a year of watching the house, the US Executive Branch decided to raid the complex. Inside, they found bin Laden, and shot him.

Both operations resulted in victories for the organizations that spearheaded them. Ramzi Yousef's apprehension was monumental for the Diplomatic Security Service and the US Department of Justice. Osama bin Laden's death was a benchmark operation for the United States Military, the Central Intelligence Agency, Naval Special Warfare, Joint Special Operations Command, and the Obama Presidential Administration. Both were made possible by following clues or following informants (willing or unwitting) and piecing together information to make timely operational decisions. The clues provided by following nodes to hubs were the key intelligence utilized in such operations, and the same must be said of future operations if the US hopes to capitalize on its data for achieving counterterrorism goals.

The Future

The mastermind and political leader of al Qaeda is dead. During his time in command of the organization, it brought about and inspired more destruction of American people and forces than any group since the Vietnam Conflict. Its monumental employment of zealous and intelligent operatives, and its resolve to kill innocent people may never be matched by another illicit network. Since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, al Qaeda has diminished in numbers, leadership, and successful operations. However, they have not been eliminated altogether, and their influence perseveres as is evidenced by bombings like the one in Islamabad.

Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri has taken Osama bin Laden's place as the figurehead of al Qaeda's remnants. ("US Vows," 2011) He has been bin Laden's deputy in charge of operations for years, although his lack of charisma calls doubts to mind about his capabilities to maintain operational consequence. ("US Vows," 2011; Shaik, 2011) Other significant casualties of the American war against al Qaeda's network abound. More

charismatic than Zawahiri was Ilyas Kashmiri, who was reportedly so connected and adored within the organization that he was the only non-Arab allowed in meetings of high-level al Qaeda leaders. (Kahn, 2011) He was targeted on numerous American operations, and finally killed on 4 June 2011 (Moreau and Yousafzi, 2011). Another charismatic figure whose following had grown was the American born Yemen cleric, Hassan al-Awlaki. (Almasmari et al, 2011) Al-Awlaki generated a following with his anti-American, internet-based Salafi sermons, and had involvement with numerous terror attacks. (Almasmari et al, 2011) The death of Al-Awlaki generated international controversy because of the targeting of an American citizen by American forces in Yemen, but his death marks another high value casualty of the international terror network connected to al Qaeda.

The wrath of the United States has taken its toll on al Qaeda. Though their destructive acts cannot be undone, the prevention of such acts in the future is much more possible due to measures taken; particularly in law enforcement, homeland security, offensive military operations, and extremely impressive intelligence work. In its most effective hours, “al Qaeda was...a multinational corporation with offices, or branches, in nearly every country on earth. Osama bin Laden was the corporation’s founder and CEO.” (Katz, 2002) Now, they are all but filing for bankruptcy. Although the organization itself has been damaged, it continues to operate, as does many of its allies. Currently, the Haqqani Network has taken a prominent role in the discussion of terrorist operations in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region. “[T]he group is best understood as a nexus player, tying together a diverse mix of actors central to various conflict networks.” (Rassler and Brown, 2011) They fund and direct operations by Taliban and other tribal militants in the Afghanistan-Pakistan regions, while maintaining ties to members of the Pakistani government. (Rassler and Brown, 2011) Similarly, they have ties to the al Qaeda social realm, which date back decades. (Rassler and Brown, 2011) Like al Qaeda, Dressler feels that leadership of the Haqqani network is susceptible at the hub-level. (Dressler, 2011) Because of this organization’s role as a conduit to other militant organizations, including al Qaeda (Rassler and Brown, 2011), the targeting of Haqqani nodes to reach hubs could have amplified destructive effects on the global Salafi jihad.

The US and its allies must keep al Qaeda and its allies on the ropes with counterterrorism efforts by continuing to target hubs through meticulously following the trails that nodes leave. In intelligence operations geared towards counterterrorism, a simplified approach to targeting the networks key personnel is, “to collect information about the key individuals in the network and the links connecting them.” (Enders and Su, 2007) This is more complicated on the ground than it is in academia. However, future operations must have these principles as their backbone. Every scrap of information can lead to a potential node, and every node will eventually receive orders from a hub.

It must be cautioned that information concerning the identity, location, appearance, or even the name or aliases of such nodes is not abundant. “Even though reachability can be useful for cases in which the counterterrorism authority has detailed knowledge of the network’s structure, in most cases, such information is not available.” (Enders and Su, 2007) In the case of Osama bin Laden, his trusted courier, al Kuwaiti,

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was not known until extensive interrogation of captured associates bore fruit. (Kahn, 2011) In the case of Ramzi Yousef, Parker, who later betrayed him, contacted American authorities out of fear for his own safety, almost completely randomly from the American perspective. (Katz, 2002) Both results are rare and the result of patience and piecing together information from numerous sources, mostly of a reluctant or resistant nature.

The capture of Ramzi Yousef and the killing of Osama bin Laden are successes in the battle against al Qaeda and its allies. They demonstrate the steel resolve of the United States to combat groups who would kill innocents out of ideological ambition, and they demonstrate the resourcefulness and power to enact that resolve. “The rage against the United States as the leading symbol of the West is so deeply embedded in some societies that many will interpret whatever the United States does with malign intent.” (Mousseau, 2003) This sentiment is exactly why Pakistan takes umbrage with the predawn raid on their soil, and why many have accused the US of acting illegally and with excessive force in numerous operations.

However, it is because of the challenge to the US’s safety and sovereignty that the fight must continue, particularly with the field work of intelligence personnel who endanger themselves to find scraps of information that may lead to a Haqqani hideout, or to a person who communicates with al Zawahiri. Continuing to target the hubs will keep al Qaeda from achieving its former successful status, and will prevent attacks from such masterminds in the future by disrupting the leadership and those whose strategies and ideologies direct and bind the social networks.

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