The spread of terrorist groups is an urgent threat in our modern world. They live among us, recruiting and preparing for their acts with impunity. Current factors like climate change, failed states, and social inequality all facilitate and contribute to their growth. The terrorism threat is clearly a malignant one. Nevertheless, the first step to meaningful solution of any problems simply requires knowledge and awareness. This case study will examine the most vulnerable part of the life cycle of terrorist organizations, as shown on the right side in my following proposed terrorism timeline:

The terrorist undergrounds examined in this case study prioritize secrecy. Despite their mysterious aura these networks all arrange themselves to two purpose: enabling further illegal activities while resisting vulnerabilities to traitors, leakers, or investigators. There is no secret to being secret.

![Terrorist Group Lifetime Diagram](image)
WHAT IS BEING ORGANIZED

Underground networks are institutionalized clandestine groups, mainly organized into cells: non-interrelated small undercover groups of terrorists embedded in larger communities. Spreading new cells is how the corresponding terrorist leadership (termed TerrorHQ in this paper) would expand their sphere of operation. The scale of cell planning is determined by available resources as well as which populace is targeted in the mission statement. The scope of a cell concerns its employable functions and member size, which also means little to no knowledge of other cells or the upper echelons. Following are some examples of cells:

A cell is like a secret cabal. Cell members live double lives, masquerading as law-abiding citizens overtly and engaging in cell activities covertly. Depending on the group’s mission some may even utilize their overt lives as activists, either directly “proselytizing” others or indirectly by infiltrating the leadership of mass organizations. This front is how anyone not part of the underground perceive them. In addition, as far as Terror HQ is concerned their unit of action, communication, and funding are all on the cell level. When it comes to the member level however, the cell leader can dictate a mission to be done by the whole cell or by only one member. If investment and expectation in members are low, they will be replaceable. The same notions apply to cells.
Terrorist Underground 3

WHY IS IT BEING ORGANIZED

Terrorist undergrounds are both inherently illegal and highly persecuted. The conflicts of interest between local government or the targeted populace versus the terrorist leaders and their sponsors are most often unresolvable, which leads to arrest warrants. Law enforcement will be highly incentivized. As a result underground groups organize into cells instead of hierarchies or networks, minimizing operational transparency and organizational penetrability. If a member is caught, the underground can remain healthy.

HOW MUCH IS IT BEING ORGANIZED

Organizing into cells means following the principle of compartmentalization: each cell must have limited or no knowledge on other cells and higher echelons. Compartmentalization also has three alternative layouts: serial, parallel, or decentralized. Each layout decision is dependent on the surrounding situation and intended purpose.

1. **Serial layout:** This scheme supports division of labor across cells, allowing for some degree of cell level inter-communication. In this layout a product of one cell will be further worked on by the next and so on. For example this arrangement was used by the Belgian resistance in WWII, dividing the tasks of propaganda production, from intel gathering to press printing, to different cells.
2. Parallel layout: In this scheme different cells serve the same function, allowing for replicated action units. Redundancy can mean better survival. Communist networks would utilize this arrangement to gain a better foothold in targeted countries, injecting multiple cells into the leadership of multiple unions and cooperatives. Form simply follows function in this case.

3. Decentralized layout: Decentralized undergrounds subtract the direct link between cell leaders and TerrorHQ, enhancing cell autonomy and TerrorHQ security. The link of communication and funding would now be conveyed through intermediaries: TV broadcasts, radio stations, banks, charities, et cetera. This allows TerrorHQ to further increase the scale of its cells, as showcased by Al Qaeda and its existing cells in some 100 countries.
In addition, cell implementation and maintenance can also be standardized. Although some terrorist groups embrace improvisation, some networks have their objectives and funding fixed in the beginning. Communist insurgency guidelines instructed their cells to penetrate existing organizations (like worker unions and youth leagues,) with replicated guidance on how to do so. Sometimes scraping for funds can mean working with criminals or other adaptation. For well organized undergrounds however, support can come from a financial infrastructure of banks, charities, or companies that can illegally channel the funds.

WHEN IS IT BEING ORGANIZED

As demonstrated above there is variability for some organizing principles to be determined on-the-way-in or on-the-way-out. Initially intended function can play an important role. However, dynamic changes in the environment is also a key factor. Before 1939 each French Communist cells were fifteen to even thirty members strong, only to be shrinked to more secure three-man cells after they were declared illegal that year. The tradeoff between performance and survival is an easy one. In addition, losing key cells in the beginning can mean a weakened foothold in the targeted community. In essence rushing to create new cells would become the new priority. Although purposes can be fixed, failure to adapt can spell fatality.

HOW OR BY WHOM IS IT BEING ORGANIZED

Underground networks are created and directed by the leaders and sponsors. All members may share the same belief but the authority of the system lies with those in TerrorHQ. Since compartmentalization means reducing each cell to lower responsibility and knowledge, it also reduces their feedback capability. By employing a top-down organizing principle, the system also protects the secret identity of those at the upper turf of the underground. As a result on the grander scale these networks can resemble the regional hierarchy layout of organized crime. I propose a comprehensive flowchart in figure 2 to showcase this, with underground cells highlight in red:
WHERE IS IT BEING ORGANIZED

Cells are distributed to targeted regions or populations in the terrorists’ mission statement. A corollary concern would be if the new cell will be created from existing locals or immigrated terrorists, as well as whether it can blend in to the community. A rule of thumb is that locally picked cells have more blendability. A cell is also very location-centric, specialized to embed into one specific neighborhood. Thus, allocating a cell is for the long-term.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Having too many members from the same pool, as well as cell colocation can lead to reduced compartmentalization. When members of different cells know one another, live close together, and carry out cell activities at the same spots, the chance for mass arrest increases. This was showcased in the example of groups of Auschwitz prisoners trying to organize their resistance in their confined camps. Too dense an underground can mean failure.


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