# Introduction*

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Informal networks have always existed as factors in international affairs. Since the 1970s, however, the information age has enabled dispersed, often small and isolated groups and individuals to connect, coordinate and act conjointly as never before. During the 1990s, prominent scholars in the United States argued that the greatest advantage in world affairs would fall to whoever succeeded in mastering the networked form since the processes of democratization and devolution which have expanded alongside the communications revolution have greatly multiplied the centres of power operating within societies and across them. While it is perhaps too soon to argue that the networked form will replace the traditional hierarchical form of organization in the course of the twenty-first century, the skills of identifying and manipulating informal networks are undoubtedly central to effective policy implementation.[1]

The informal variant of social networking is probably one of the oldest and most ubiquitous forms of conducting social and business transactions known to humankind. It underpins the ability of societies to trade and develop wealth; it enables societies to structure themselves socially in order to strengthen the society through development of elaborate social ties, and to facilitate the process of complex communications links within government and non-governmental organizations as well as to enable elements within each to evolve means of communication and transaction across institutional and even state boundaries. With growing sophistication, a society tends to formalize its relationships, ultimately eroding the ties of family and generating greater reliance on institutions. However, under the conditions of globalization which have led to a progressive atomization and a sense of anomie within developed societies the emergence of a new forum for generating informal social connections in the shape of the Internet has led to a burgeoning of informal networks, often constructed across vast distances between individuals who never actually meet but who are drawn together in a virtual world of association through often complex webs of shared interests and outlooks defined by contemporary culture.

In more traditional societies of the industrial age, where elites were closely defined and relatively small as a percentage of the overall population of any given country, informal networks were easier to identify. This was so because they were often rooted in societal, educational and religious networks which could be identified and mapped with relative ease. The concept of the 'old boy' network is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this within established forms of governance and is easy to trace owing to its associations with clearly defined public institutions from which such networks draw their identity. In post-industrial societies which are characterized by a much greater diffusion of power and authority away from traditional institutions of government, the quantity and velocity of the interactions between different entities is significantly greater. Informal networks that operate at the nexus of any given range of interests often overlap and intersect, thereby increasing the difficulty of identifying any one particular network from any of the others. They become embedded in existing structures where the presence of formal hierarchies masks their existence. Such relationships exist between and among what one military scholar-practitioner has termed the 'iron triangle' of defence contractors, military establishments and governments, which has burgeoned in the developed world since the Second World War.[2] At a more mundane level, anyone who has been recruited into an established organization has experienced the dual (and sometimes countervailing) influences of the official induction process, which is top-down, and the lateral pull of the informal chains of communication through which information about the organization, its leaders and structures and even its objectives is communicated. Informal networks play a significant role in socializing the new recruit into the established organizational culture, or indeed of distorting their view (deliberately or by default) in accordance with whatever counter-culture is prevalent.[3]

In developed societies informal networks interact with hierarchies and formally organized networks to form a nexus of communications which are a vital mechanism for generating ideas, conducting business transactions and building mostly overt communications channels that provide key enablers in linking sometimes diverse institutions and organizations. The policy think-tanks bridging the practitioner and academic divide provide one notable forum for this form of networking to take place alongside the more formal business of disseminating information and developing ideas.[4]

Turning to those who live outside society, and specifically those who pursue insurgency campaigns, the informal network is often the means by which such networks are built and sustained, since they offer insurgents and terrorists many advantages over the hierarchical models. The

leadership of informal networks tends to be diffuse and poorly defined. Aims and objectives are articulated in only the most general terms and are then focused on teleological goals which can be pursued over an almost indefinite timescale.

The leadership of al-Qaeda is exemplary of this type of approach, articulating overarching goals while leaving both adherents and adversaries to decide on strategy and tactics. While the central core of al-Qaeda is thought to be tightly focused, top-down and intensely hierarchical, its associates organized in individual cells are allowed considerable autonomy over what is planned, even though they are dependent in practice on al-Qaeda's wider network to supply the resources. The result is that even within specific regions, an insurgency can be comprised of a variety of groups with no overarching leadership and united only by a general goal. This phenomenon presently exists in Afghanistan where there are said to be a variety of groups involved in the insurgency, unified only in their demand for an immediate end to foreign troop presence in the country.[5] When pressured by traditionally organized military force, these networks tend to mutate rather than disintegrate, spawning further cells which in time can link up with the hubs that provide support in terms of resources and personnel. The resilience of these networks is testimony to the innate strength of the informal networked form, which is inherently difficult to disrupt precisely because it fails to dissipate in response to leadership decapitation and is not reliant on the existence of a formal structure for survival.[6]

Informal networks are characterized and shaped by the centrality given to personal connections. Trust between members is essential to the workings of an informal network and seems to be dependent less on ideological affinities than on more prosaic but deeply seated social ties arising from a shared sense of kinship or tribal loyalty and the attendant notions of belonging or victimhood and social exclusion that variously accompany such identities. These tribal loyalties provide the focal point for political organization and collective self-defence and can be invoked in an instant by appeal to fundamental emotions arising from eschatological fears and anxieties. In the case of criminal networks, the ever present threat of blackmail consequent on the compromising nature of criminal activity conducted by those who participate provides a further means of reinforcing loyalties where these seem doubtful.[7]

Detection of informal networks by outsiders is habitually difficult, most notably perhaps owing to their tendency to embed themselves within existing structures which not only enhance their potential as centres for the exercise of power, but also conceal their presence from observers. Such networks have proven successful in recent times in generating the impetus

for political change, as in Serbia in the autumn of 2000 where an essentially ad hoc group of students set out to persuade those around them to force Slobodan Milosevic from office.[8] Meanwhile the distributed network of al-Qaeda has been shown to be less than self-sufficient, depending on a range of support networks for access to safe houses, smuggling rings, secured communications and even personnel who can connect individuals to training and other support networks through the interconnected global system.[9] Informal networks are seldom complete entities by themselves, being more often developed in response to social needs (which may be positive or negative) arising from the environment within which they operate and exist and from which they derive both meaning and purpose.

A volume examining the role and significance of informal networks as a form of organization and an expression of contemporary society is timely because of the importance of such networks to the business of countering insurgency, in which the exercise of influence over the hearts and minds of the population is necessarily central. If winning war requires understanding the terrain, winning counter-insurgency requires understanding the human terrain: the population in all its manifestations. The mobilization of informal networks of individuals, some of whom might represent nodes or hubs of influence in a given locality, is one powerful tool in approaches to counter-insurgency that emphasize soft power, giving the tools of influence and persuasion greater priority over those of force and coercion.[10] In order to maximize the potential of civil society networks to offset the challenges of those who live outside society, reliable intelligence is clearly central to the task of both reducing as well as directing the utilization of hard power, and in influencing the population in order to insulate it from the effects of hostile networks while interdicting the efforts of insurgents to recruit supporters.

This volume comprises a series of chapters which taken together provide an overview of the present state of knowledge of informal networks within the generic study of terrorism as a subset of the field of security studies. Many of them have been published elsewhere, either as individual essays or as partworks. The objective here was to bring them together as a collection in order to offer some preliminary answers to the following questions: how do informal networks operate? Which combination of factors draws individuals to form such networks? What are their structures and where are the bridges or gaps that connect to other actors? How do informal networks recruit and what is their power of attraction? What are the foundations of trust in such organizations and how is loyalty sustained? Necessarily, the answers contained here are only partial, but they are sufficient to stimulate and encourage further enquiry.

Part I considers the place of informal networks in the context of the

present debates about strategy and security and the relevance of this area for policy-making. In an age when public sector organizations, both national and multinational, are preoccupied with organizational reform, and reform aimed at achieving flexibility and agility in response to security challenges that are inherently unpredictable, the informal network is a vital actor which provides a dynamic with and across organizations and is often overlooked. It is in many senses curious that this area has not attracted greater attention from scholars in the past. Alexander Evans reminds us in Chapter 1 on the utility of informal networks that this form of organization is one manifestation of how society works. Where government is concerned with the arts of persuasion over coercion as a means of gaining the broadest possible support for an international consensus about societal values and legitimate conduct, not only on the part of states but by segments of states, then the need to understand the network in its informal, self-generated variant becomes an imperative for policy-makers. Indeed it is fundamental to the practice of diplomacy, which is necessarily about patient, long-term cultivation of personal connections and the gathering of information through this process in order wherever possible throughout periods of crisis and upheaval to sustain communication and cooperation through peaceful means without the need to resort to force.

In Chapter 2, Peter Wilson tackles the issue of utility from a different angle, exploring the problems of harnessing the potential power of such networks from the policy-makers' perspective. The informal network is by its very nature difficult to manage, being self-generating, illusive, difficult to quantify and define, and prone to a process of constant evolution. In the present age, when government is preoccupied with strategy (defined in the broadest managerial sense), the tendency is to attempt to resolve the difficulties of handling such networks through their incorporation into grand strategic planning. Peter Wilson questions whether this might not be to miss the point, given that the strength of the informal variant of networking lies in its predisposition to metamorphosis, its adaptability to changing circumstances and evolving agendas. The important point is to understand how such networks can be read and manipulated to serve higher purposes than those of purely self-interest that generally cause them to form in the first place.

Part II seeks to explore the characteristics and role of informal networks through an examination of their evolution and behavioural characteristics in a series of countries and regions. It begins with Adrian Guelke's analysis in Chapter 3 of these organizations in Northern Ireland, in which he explores the symbiotic relationship between the paramilitary networks on both sides of the sectarian divide and the communities that gave rise to them. Necessarily, this relationship rendered the networks sensitive

to the reactions of their constituencies, both strengthening their sense of legitimacy and informing the shape and functioning of their organizations, while constraining their freedom to act. In this they display some similarity with the Egyptian Salafi jihadist organizations discussed in Sageman's initial study of the networked form of terrorist organization.[11] The remainder of Part II examines case studies covering North Africa, the Gulf and Iran, and Southeast Asia.

In Chapter 4 George Joffé examines the form as it appears in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, discussing the way in which networks recruit members, or simply acquire them, not through decision-making so much as through a process of absorption and mutual dependency of groups of people brought together by common interests and shared perceptions. Informal networks, he concludes, depend heavily on patronage extended by tightly knit, compact and predominantly urban networks for which Islam provides an ideological framework. Joffé cautions against an over-ready acceptance of the proposition that such networks should be understood in the context of radical Islam, arguing rather that these networks can be comprehended more accurately as recreations of past insurgencies and criminal networks, as springing therefore from very specific and deeply rooted societal fractures. The implications of this proposition are clear. If such networks are indeed a reflection primarily of cultural anomie, unique to the historical development of each society in question, then this is further testimony to Sageman's own conclusions that it is social factors that take primacy over ideology in recruiting members of informal networks and sustaining them thereafter.[12] More importantly, perhaps, this line of analysis suggests that the means to disruption lie in the contradictions and logical flaws within the narratives that sustain the networks in the first place.

Chapters 5 and 6 by Adam Goodman and Andrew Phillips dealing with Iran and Iraq, respectively, are particularly interesting for shedding light on the contrasting nature of the problems that these two quite different countries have presented to the West in their struggle against the rise of international terror networks. In both cases, and despite the deep differences between the two societies, both Goodman and Phillips argue for the potential these contain in reducing the power and influence of hostile spheres of authority. Indeed, it is the very factionalism of Iranian politics that creates the conditions in which the informal network variant can flourish and in this lies the source of greatest optimism for a society in which business is conducted more outside the system than within it. The liberation of Iraq from the grip of Saddam Hussein's regime as Phillips shows has created similarly fluid if innately less stable circumstances in which patient engagement with informal networks can, in time, create a

new era of stability in which progress can flourish. The obverse of this also applies, however. If informal networks can be manipulated effectively to re-order an unstable society, or to contain rogue elements within that society, then they are equally valuable as a tool of adversaries who can link essentially localized self-generated networks in the service of a strategic purpose.

This is the central theme in Chapter 7 of David Martin Jones's analysis of the evolution of the Jemaah Islamiah network and the way in which it was able to absorb the philosophy of al-Qaeda while simultaneously retaining its own distinctive character. The fissures in the philosophical underpinnings of such movements hold the key to their potential disruption.

Part III is concerned with two questions: (1) the ways in which theoretical constructs can be used to promote understanding of hostile networks through the application of modelling techniques; and (2) how hostile networks can be manipulated and disrupted. Some interesting points emerge. Firstly, that the development of control mechanisms is rarely if ever ahead of the threat these mechanisms are designed to counter. The pace of globalization generates what amounts to a gap between the need to regulate the transit of sensitive materials and the capability to effect such control. In Chapter 8 Bruno Gruselle discusses the way in which supplier and acquisition networks interact in this gap in a cycle of evasion and attempted disruption. Secondly, where formerly informal networks have been poorly understood, often invisible to all bar the most discerning, globalization has raised awareness of this means of operation to the point where networking skills are consciously developed and exercised by almost all technology-literate peoples around the globe. The consequences of this are discussed by Francesc Badia in his discussion of the characteristics of small-world networks (Chapter 9), in which he concludes that the empowerment of this form of organization which has occurred in the context of globalization has both increased such network utility to policy-makers while at the same time making them more intractable, owing to the much greater consciousness of their potential on the part of their members.

Being persuasive and credible is to no avail without legitimacy. The need to hold the balance of the moral argument concerning motivations and purpose is surely the most important element in the exercise of soft power that is at the heart of the operation of informal networks. This is Steve Tatham's point in Chapter 10 which addresses the winning of hearts and minds: the presentation of the argument as a simple matter of being for or against the question is futile because it denies the possibility of choice. People have to be persuaded; they must be appealed to in terms of a common humanity and won over, if whatever order that emerges from

the present era of international crisis and transformation is to deliver peace and prosperity in the longer term. A futher point arises from the discussion by Jessica Stern and Amit Modi in Chapter 11 of terrorism as a definable and distinctive product, an output that emerges in effect from the organizational dynamics of the informal approach to networking. Terrorists are engaged in the business of producing a marketable product, which in itself makes such organizations more resilient to disruption efforts largely through the attractiveness of their product and the flexibility of the structures that produce it.

The contributors to this volume provide very insightful analyses of the relevance and potential of the informal variant of networking as a source of power in international affairs. By their very nature informal networks make the utilization of traditionally organized, rigidly hierarchical responses to security threats difficult to implement, and for this reason they have enabled the insurgents to gain some early advantages over rules-based societies in the present conflict. However the increased awareness within the developed world of the importance of culture and identity as factors in seeking societal stability in the information age has sharpened awareness of this form of organization, which is so central to the success or failure of policy responses that emphasize the exercise of soft power alternatives to the more traditional methods offered by conventional approaches. The chapters contained herein make a valuable contribution to current knowledge of this area of study.

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## NOTES

\*   The analysis, opinions and conclusions expressed or implied in this chapter are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC), the UK Ministry of Defence or any other government agency.
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