



DEFEATING TERRORISM



STRATEGIC ISSUE ANALYSIS

Terrorism Viewed Historically

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Conclusions:

- As a tool of the weak, terrorism rarely succeeds in achieving its political goals. Terrorists rarely have the resources to succeed in a fight against an aroused state, but their reprehensible methods frequently inspire resolve within the target state. Those same methods also separate terrorists from crucial popular support.
- The continuing evolution of terror means that a study of history will be an imperfect predictor, but historical insights suggest:
 - Laws governing domestic and international actions against terrorism must be adapted for comprehensive intelligence collection and for prompt action on that intelligence. Appropriate safeguards of civil liberties must be provided.
 - Terrorists must be separated from their popular support base. Separating them from state support is an important element of this effort, but not necessarily critical.
 - Every effort must be taken to maintain American and coalition will in the war on terrorism. The stronger side can win if will remains strong.

Terrorism has come in many guises through the centuries, reflecting changes in terrorists' conceptions of the best targets and methods to use to achieve their political ends. Until the 20th century, most terrorism was directed against "tyrants" or their agents. This style of terrorism traces its roots at least as far back as Biblical times and was sanctioned by no less than Aristotle and Plutarch. There have been periodic waves of this type of terror, the most historically remarkable being the reign in northern Iran of the *hashishim*—the Assassins—for almost 200 years, from 1047 to 1296. Another upsurge of assassination attempts afflicted Europe between 1860 and 1911. Although just outside of that period, the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in 1914 is one of the best-known examples of terrorism by assassination. Assassins have scored some remarkable successes; however, most terrorist groups of this nature have been suppressed fairly quickly.

The 20th century saw a transformation of terrorism through at least two stages. The first was through the use of terror to support larger revolutionary insurgencies. The earliest success was the overthrow of the Russian government and, following a brutal civil war, establishment of Soviet Communism. The breadth of Russian popular dissatisfaction—and the weakening effects of World War I, coupled with Lenin's German sponsorship—provided nearly ideal conditions. Subsequent communist insurgencies employed terror tactics with varying degrees of success, most frequently against decaying colonial regimes or states only recently decolonized. Although certainly not inspired by communism, Israeli terrorism against the British and Palestinians was used effectively to support their insurgency and was sufficiently successful to hasten the creation of the state of Israel. Israeli success resonated deeply in the better organized and utterly committed minority Jewish population. In both

the Russian revolution and the Israeli insurgency, the objects of terror were normally the civil administrators and the security apparatus, not "the people," whose support was considered crucial.

The second stage in the 20th century transformation of terrorism was the growth of state sponsorship. States which are unable to confront their enemies conventionally have provided every imaginable assistance to terrorist groups in order to weaken their enemies physically or morally. State sponsorship does not necessarily ensure success, but does allow the fight to be prolonged. State-supported terrorism comes in several forms, including unwitting or inconsequential "support," as is the case in many liberal democratic states where laws protecting civil rights also allow a form of refuge for some terrorists; unwilling support, but an inability to take counteraction, as with Colombian drug operatives; toleration arising from common goals vis-à-vis the "enemy," as with Libya or Sudan; and full-blown support, either as a direct instrument of the supporting government or as a happy coincidence of objectives and willingness to pursue them actively together, as is the case of Syria and Iran in support of Hamas and Hezbollah. Syria, for example, has failed miserably in every conventional attempt to destroy Israel, but Syrian—and Iranian—support of Palestinian terrorism has brought some "positive" results, at least from Syria's view. Israel's recent tactic of very selectively "eliminating" Palestinian terrorist leadership has been sufficiently successful that it may have provided at least some motivation for the September 11 attacks. Although the original acts of Palestinian terror have brought some international condemnation upon the perpetrators, Israeli responses have resulted in even worse condemnation for Israel. Formal U.N. reprimands weaken Israel's moral position, which affects its relations with the U.S. Government. Ironically, the attacks have not weakened the Israelis physically; if anything, the attacks have moved the Israelis to new levels of proficiency in eradicating the threat.

Although the Middle East may present some exceptions, terrorism—in whatever guise—rarely achieves its political ends and even then generally only under specific strategic conditions. Terrorism is a tool of the weak; were terrorists strong enough, they would fight conventionally, which holds the promise of quicker results. Because terrorism is pursued by the weak, its infrequent success should be expected. Terrorism's regular failure also stems from the reprehensible methods employed. Those methods can alienate terrorists from popular support and possibly from state support. Terrorism also can arouse the ire of the opposing state, which usually has the resources to crush terrorist movements if it can muster the will.

Terrorists do succeed on occasion, but the record suggests strongly that very specific conditions need to obtain first. Since the target of terrorism—almost by definition—has the greater resources, only weakness of will can normally keep the state from prevailing.

Even with the will and resources, the target state can lose to terrorists if it lacks the ability to collect comprehensive intelligence and to act rapidly and forcefully on that intelligence. The historical record demonstrates that counterterrorist campaigns are most successful when laws are adapted to address terrorist threats. Intelligence capabilities must be expanded first, followed quickly by elimination of any excessive concerns for due process that might impede direct action—capture and prosecution, if possible; killing, if not—against terrorists. In America and in other democratic countries, any such expansion of police powers—and any expansion of military involvement in police matters—must be accompanied by adequate safeguards on civil rights. Terrorists are neither legitimate soldiers nor common criminals, so special provisions are required. The dilemma for liberal democratic states is the need to act against terrorists as a national security risk without destroying the essential rule of law. This dilemma makes democracies simultaneously vulnerable and resilient.

The so-called "Battle of Algiers" is worth particular review. In the early 1950s, Algerians started an insurgency in an effort to remove French colonial rule from that country. Repeated insurgent failures led to adoption of terrorist methods. These enraged the French and resulted in the deployment of the French parachute division to Algeria. In a coordinated civil-military campaign of incredible ferocity, the terrorists were destroyed. Closely coordinated intelligence gathering and rapid response to actionable information were chief among the tools employed. Although the French were successful in stopping terrorism in the short term, the paratroopers relied on brutal excesses of torture and bribery, which eventually caught the attention of the French Republic. This ruined the colonists' political foundation and ultimately cost them the colony.

At some point, the terrorists require a supportive population. That support can be broad-based or can be provided by a committed minority. Increasingly in the late 20th century and beyond, media coverage has been a major factor in either sustaining popular support for terrorists or in separating them from it. As stated previously, state support may not be essential to success of terrorists' efforts, but can help provide a "popular" base through control of state media organs.

These "lessons of history" may not apply directly to Usama bin Laden and his al Qaeda organization. Their form of terrorism may be an evolved form that is fundamentally different from that used in the past. Although completely innocent civilian populations have been targeted previously by Palestinians and by the Irish Republican Army, the scale of the September 11 attacks is unique. Americans have been targeted before, but rarely in America. Further, the goal of the attacks may not be simply to inflict enough pain on Americans that the government is forced, as it was in Beirut and Somalia, to acquiesce to another's aims; it may be an attempt to destroy America.

The attacks stem from a pervasive fear—in the minds of bin Laden and many other Muslims—that American culture is crushing

theirs. In today's geostrategic environment, bin Laden's stated goal of a separate Islamic world leaves him no real choice but to attack the United States with the goal of destroying American influence. The repressive, extremist regime that he seeks to establish is diametrically opposed to the values Americans hold dear and want to see flourish in the world: freedom, democracy, free markets, human rights. If these opposing views of civilization could coexist peacefully, there would perhaps be concern only at the intersections between them. However, globalization means that no nation can completely exclude itself from the influence of another. For some Americans, that idea carries with it a fear of loss of national identity, but for most it represents only a continuation of the assimilative process that defines America. For those of bin Laden's ilk, globalization means that the "evil" influences of the "opulent and arrogant" Western world—particularly from America—can never be kept from "corrupting" the citizens of his Islamic world. Thus, he and his followers must fight the United States, not just to force it to solve the Palestinian question and get it out of the Arabian Peninsula, but to destroy it before U.S. influences irrevocably change Muslim culture. The overwhelming strength of the United States makes it impossible to confront conventionally. As a result, bin Laden turns to terrorism to achieve his political goal—but terrorism is just his current tactic. If he is allowed to continue, he will use any capability he can acquire to press his attack: conventional, unconventional or criminal. It thus behooves the United States to destroy him and his organization and to neutralize any state sponsors before he gains added capabilities.

If bin Laden's terrorism is similar enough to past terrorism, history suggests that he can be defeated by a strong and resolute government that can separate the terrorists from popular support. Because bin Laden's support is international and appears broadly-based, concerted coalition action is crucial.

In order to defeat al Qaeda or other similar terrorist organizations, the following actions are essential:

- Laws governing the collection of information on suspected terrorist organizations must be adapted to the nature and degree of the threat. Such adaptations will infringe upon existing civil rights, but not nearly as heavily as do the death and destruction wrought by the terrorists. In order to maintain a balance between civil rights and necessary law enforcement powers, reasonable judicial oversight must be maintained. Within the United States, some expansions of police powers must be pursued, and effective coordination of counterterrorist intelligence gathering and sharing must become the norm. Legislative and executive actions since September 11 attempt to lay the foundation for all of the above requirements, but the definition of the details remains a challenge. Also, a more realistic approach to foreign counterterrorist requirements must be developed if the United States hopes for greater international cooperation. This must include a relaxation of restrictions on the use of weapons supplied through foreign military sales so that they can be employed against terrorists irrespective of the terrorists' nationality.
- State support must be eliminated, although each type will require specialized approaches. Countries that willingly provide direct support to those who attack the United States should expect to see their regimes replaced, the stated goal in Afghanistan. For other countries providing unwitting or indirect support, concentrated application of international pressure may be enough. The Afghanistan example should make them more receptive to this approach.
- Terrorists must be separated from popular support, a much more difficult matter, especially since the al Qaeda terrorists manifest religious motives widely shared by their fellow Muslims. There must be serious efforts to address the underlying motivations for terrorism without outright

capitulation to their demands. Issues must be addressed without making compromises that neglect Israel's security or fail to protect U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf. These efforts must be accompanied by an information campaign highlighting the repugnance of terrorist methods and their ineffectual or counterproductive effect. The heroic image of the perpetrators must be discredited, preferably by their own religious leaders.

- Finally, American will to fight terrorism must be maintained. This will hinge on several issues. Americans are willing to accept losses if vital interests are involved, tactical success is periodically demonstrated and operational and strategic success is expected eventually. Casualties and tactical failures can be accepted if regular successes by law enforcement and the military are honestly portrayed and widely broadcast. Continuing information operations should be conducted to affirm the justice of U.S. intentions and the reasonableness of military and other actions. The public should not be manipulated, but must believe in the war on terrorism.

American will must be maintained; intrusions on civil liberties must be balanced against the need to gather intelligence and take action against the terrorists; terrorists' popular support base must be reduced, and state support choked off. These are not easy tasks, but a multidimensional, sophisticated approach focusing on the inherent weaknesses of terrorist organizations will lead to their eventual destruction, both domestically and internationally.



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