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The Enduring Threat of Globalist Terrorism

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We all remember that day 8 years ago when reality seemed to trump even Hollywood's wildest imagination.

A week ago I was in New York, and went to visit ground zero. What really hits you about ground zero is the enormity, the weight, of the emptiness of that space where we had been accustomed to seeing what were once the tallest towers on earth.

September 11 inaugurated an age in which we have come to appreciate our vulnerabilities in this new age of connectedness we know as globalization.

In the past 8 years, terrorists have demonstrated their ability to strike at almost any point on the earth's surface. Computer viruses have wreaked havoc among the new digital infrastructures that have become vital to our daily lives. Financial crises spread with a rapidity and severity not seen before. New super 'flus threaten to create global pandemics.

In these days, when the news is dominated by financial, digital and pandemic contagion, it is all too easy to forget about the threat of globalist terrorism. But the threat has not gone away, and indeed stands to gain a great deal if our attention wanders to other threats.

Terrorism is a perennial threat to our society for five key reasons.

First, it is an inevitable product of modernization and secularization of mainstream society. For as long as the dominant trend in our society is the gradual loss of interest in matters religious, spiritual and transcendental, and the growing commitment to rationalism, science and material well-being, there will always be counter-movements of discomfort and resistance.

There will always be individuals prone to alienation and anomie who seek, on the one hand, a larger, transcendental belief system that provides them with a sense of meaning and location, and on the other hand, who nurture a deep hatred of the society from which they feel so isolated.

There is an emotional form of religiosity which is inherently antagonistic to any element of intellectualism and moderation in religion. Its attraction lies partly in its insistence on faith over logic, and no amount of “backing the moderates” will moderate their demands.

Second, globalization is an enabling of counter-cultures as it is of mainstream activity. The vast increase of cross border flows of goods, money and people provides ample cover for the activities of those intent on harm or exploitation. The communications revolution allows networked groups of terrorists and criminals to connect instantly, cheaply and with unprecedented security. In this world the most dangerous cross-border flows are not weapons, people or drugs but ideas – jihadist propaganda, detonator designs, poisons recipes, operational instructions.

Third, globalization has facilitated a new type of imagined community – that of the alienated, oppressed and outraged – in the ability to inter-relate grievances. Instant worldwide reporting of conflict zones provides far-flung groups with a constant diet of outrage at oppression and injustice, and an ever-present incentive to characterise their own situation as part of a global confrontation between privilege, power and brutality and a generalised underclass. Local violence can be imagined as part of a global struggle, while revenge can be taken far from where the original injustice occurred.

Fourth, we have constructed a culture of celebrity, which produces in individuals a profound discomfort with obscurity and ordinariness. All aspire to Andy Warhol’s “fifteen minutes of fame”, and our culture provides ever expanding outlets for this desire: from facebook to Big Brother to twitter.

For those who feel alienated and marginalised, the urge to rage against obscurity is if anything more pronounced. To go down in the history books of outrage is an impulse that unites characters as diverse as Martin Bryant, Timothy McVeigh and Khaled Sheikh Mohammed.

And fifth, globalization and modernization have made our society more vulnerable than ever to the actions of those who want to take revenge on the system they see as excluding and oppressing them. Daily we are becoming more mutually interdependent, among the different sectors and activities of our society, and on other societies.

In no preceding era have humans themselves produced so few of the things they need to survive. Increasingly we rely on concentrated infrastructures to support human activity: communications networks, transport corridors, energy flows. Economic imperatives are driving redundancy out of these systems – demands for freshness, just-in-time inventories, and instant gratification – mean that more and more human activity depends on the seamless operation of complex but concentrated infrastructures.

These are features that make the terrorism we face today so different from the terrorism we became used to in the 60s, 70s and 80s. To state the difference in a nutshell, the old terrorism saw violence as a means to another end; the new terrorism sees the violence as an end in itself.

To understand the new terrorism, forget about trying to understand the ideology of the perpetrators, or the objectives they claim to be fighting for.

To understand the new terrorism, focus on the *act*.

The *act* is the objective – a nihilistic scream of rage and revenge against a system that is seen to be oppressive and unjust.

The *act* is the supreme validation of the terrorist's feelings of alienation. The brutality of the *act* is a rejection of any common moral realm between attackers and attacked.

The *act* is the ultimate response of those who see themselves and their kind as victims. The objective is to make those they see as part of the oppressive system feel helpless and horrified. The objective is to undermine the authorities' claims that they are taking effective action to protect people from terrorism.

In other words, it is important that we understand the new terrorism as a particular type of political theatre.

As with all political theatre, the terrorist act is designed to affect certain audiences in certain ways.

To simplify somewhat, there are two audiences that the terrorists seek focus on.

The first audience can be called the *intimidated*. The intimidated are the members of our society that terrorists see as part of the oppressive system.

The terrorists' objective is to empower themselves by inverting their own victimology. The randomness and brutality of terrorist attacks is designed to rob ordinary people of the feeling that they are in control of their own destinies. By claiming the ability to visit sudden and unexpected violence on people, terrorists are asserting an ultimate, nihilistic feeling of control.

The second audience can be called the *inspired*. We often forget that terrorists also use their violence to communicate with each other and their sympathisers.

To put it bluntly, terrorists are drawn to celebrity. Every aspiring jihadist wants to be known as a terrorist mastermind; to rank up there with Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, or Noordin Mohammed Top.

It's not just about ego, but crucial to the viability of a terrorist campaign. Without the ability to attract attention, peddle inspiration, and impress fellow travelers with one's commitment and ingenuity, a terrorist campaign will not be able to generate the footsoldiers, finances, and facilitators it needs.

It is by keeping these two audiences, the intimidated and the inspired, in mind, that we can begin to understand the past trend of terrorist attacks and think about the types of terrorist attacks we will face in the future.

In a nutshell, there are three basic elements that determine when, where and how terrorist attacks occur.

The first is circumstance, that complex of factors that juxtaposes terrorists with opportunities, location, finances, materials and personnel.

The second is experience – the CV of the terrorist leader – the mix of technical abilities, previous involvements, and connections that he draws on in planning the attack.

The third is the psychology of the terrorist attack, the particular choice the terrorist makes about the trade-offs between intimidating and inspiring.

My argument today is that elements one and two are short-term in nature, and most specific to each particular terrorist plot. They are the elements most closely focused on by our intelligence agencies – in tracking known extremists, listening for chatter, following money trails, monitoring thefts and purchases of dangerous components.

It is element three that gives us a longer term perspective on when, where and how terrorist attacks will occur in future.

To explain what I mean by the psychology of the terrorist attack, the particular choice the terrorist makes about the trade-offs between intimidating and inspiring, permit me two examples. Both are drawn from people who track terrorism much more closely than I.

Exhibit A was related to me by my friend Bruce Hoffmann, probably the most eminent scholar on terrorism, now at Georgetown University but formerly the Director of the RAND Corporation's Washington office. RAND's Washington office is in a highrise building overlooking the Pentagon, and had a grandstand view of the plane hitting the Pentagon on September 11. Despite the shock of the attacks, Bruce said, almost all staff came in to work on September 12. But after the second of the anthrax attacks that occurred later that month, just under half of RAND's staff stayed away out of fear.

Exhibit B was told to me by the Head of Counter-Terrorism Research in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. She said that one of the exercises they do when they're training new counter-terrorism analysts is to get them to think of as many innovative terrorist attacks as they can that would circumvent security procedures and bring London to a standstill. Apparently it takes only about 15 minutes for the new analysts to come up with a long list of ingenious and potentially devastating plots.

The point of these two anecdotes is to point out just how vulnerable we are to terrorism, and how relatively easy it would be to attack us. In the case of Exhibit A, it took just one person, with access to anthrax spores, to just about paralyse the American capital, and to remain anonymous for years. Exhibit B shows us how simple it is to dream up ways of circumventing security measures to murderous effect.

But if all of these options are out there, why aren't terrorists doing them?

Why weren't the anthrax attacks followed up by major biological and chemical terrorism campaigns in the world's major cities?

Why haven't we seen a rash of innovative attacks aimed at negating security measures and scaring a lot of people?

Is it just that terrorists are more stupid than the average person?

Well, undoubtedly some are, but not all. I think the explanation of why terrorists seem to stick to a reasonably narrow menu of attack types, most of which our security measures are tailored to detect, lies in the psychology and theatre of the terrorist act.

The explanation lies in the trade-off that terrorist planners make between inspiration and intimidation. By the pattern of their attacks, we can see that terrorists want blood and fire, and lots of it in their attacks. Quiet, murderous campaigns such as the anthrax attacks – though devastatingly intimidating – don't make terrorist superstars, lauded across the extremist world, copied by others, and able to attract supporters and finance.

So there is a trade-off made, where the ability to intimidate through mounting sustained, unconventional, unpredictable and indefensible attacks, is foregone in pursuit of terrorist spectaculars – bombings, hijackings, shootings. The latter are more expensive, take greater planning and preparation, and hence are more prone to detection and disruption by authorities – but that's the price of celebrity terrorism.

This brings me to what I see as the emerging trend in modern terrorism, the move away from the one-off, stand alone bombing or co-ordinated bombing, to the drawn-out, reality-TV style terrorist event.

The type of event I'm referring to first appeared in the Moscow theatre siege in 2006, and was repeated at Beslan, and most recently in Mumbai. The recent foiled plot by al-Shabaab to storm Holsworthy Army Barracks is another example. Emerging evidence suggests that had everything gone to plan, the latest Jakarta bombings were another variation on that theme.

The objective of these attacks is to extend out the horror over hours or preferably days. The terrorists capture people and a facility and do battle against the authorities.

Their objective is to cause as much damage as possible, and make sure that every random, pitiless act of violence is captured by the blanket media coverage.

Ultimately these are suicide operations; but in a world where mere bombings are becoming page three news, the objective is to go down in the annals of terrorism folklore.

I would think that we're going to see more of these types of attacks in the years to come. Their counterparts – perhaps their inspiration – are the Columbine or the Virginia Tech massacres.

Once again, the evolution of such attacks is an example of the dynamic relationship between terrorism and the media.

They show that the terrorists' ultimate enemy is psychological resilience and a "normalization" of terrorist violence among the mainstream population.

Our most vulnerable sites are those where large numbers of people congregate, and which can be sealed off and defended from attempts by the authorities to break the siege.

The bad news is that there are innumerable of these sites in our society. An ideal target would be a cruise liner, on which the agony could be prolonged for a much greater period than on a plane.

The good news is that such plots also require substantial planning, financing and casing of targets. The more of this there is, the better the chances that the authorities will detect and disrupt these plots.

But the bad news is that terrorists are increasingly good at making use of “black” networks and transactions, which by their nature are impossible for authorities to monitor.

The other trend that we can observe in the pattern of terrorist attacks concerns who carries them out, where they are planned, and where they occur.

In the years since 2001, the global anti-terrorism campaign has had a dual effect on terrorist networks. On the one hand, it has severely disrupted al Qaeda as a centralised organization, able to plan, train, equip and recruit from a single, hierarchically-coordinated centre.

On the other hand, the global counter-terrorism campaign has inspired and provoked hundreds of al Qaeda imitators. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; the solidarity of the Russians, the Chinese, the Indians and the West; have seemed to confirm al Qaeda’s message about a global campaigns against Islam.

As a result, we have seen no successful attack spectacular like 9/11, but rather a series of smaller, more localised and more amateurish attacks.

As a result, a debate has sprung up among terrorism experts on whether it makes sense to talk about terrorist networks anymore.

The more extreme version, argued by Marc Sageman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, is that we have seen the coming of an age of “leaderless jihad”, where self-starting groups, inspired and informed by the internet, are able to mount localised and unpredictable attacks.

On the other side of the debate, are people such as Bruce Hoffmann, who argue that communications, equipment, and particularly financial networks are still highly important to viable terrorism operations.

The available evidence suggests that Sageman has taken the argument too far. Terrorist attacks in recent years appear to be the combination of localised elements and transnational networking.

Terrorism is inexpensive compared to conventional warfighting, but it is still beyond the means of most alienated loners or groups. The latter may have the will, but rarely do

they have the independent means. Know-how, equipment, direction and financing are most often provided by larger networks.

And a major part of the job of the larger networks is finding the right type of alienated extremist sympathisers with local contacts and knowledge.

A crucial link for counter-terrorism is the recruiter.

A great deal of research has concluded that it is almost impossible to predict who will transition from being an extremist to being a terrorist by developing a psychological profile. Put simply, terrorists seem to range across pretty much all personality types and psychological dispositions.

But common to almost all transitions from extremist to terrorist is the recruiter.

Recruiters are good at finding the right extremist, and nurturing them over the line into a willingness to commit violence, and even violent suicide.

What recruiters provide is a rationale in action for the feelings of alienation and anger of extremists. They provide the narrative for reasserting control, for taking revenge, for making a statement – through the language of violence.

This is why the war in Afghanistan, and the ongoing pressure on Pakistan to crack down on extremist schools and organizations is so important. It's not just to guard against the re-centralisation of al Qaeda; it's also about being able to monitor the trends within transnational extremist organizations.

Withdrawing from the Afghan theatre, and relying on remote intelligence-special forces-UAV actions against terrorists, as has been advocated by analysts such as Andrew Bacevitch, would drastically restrict our ability to collect such intelligence.

The fact is that there will be no end to this threat, any more than there can be an end to transnational crime, pandemic diseases, or the trade in illegal narcotics.

Because we as a globe are not about to retreat from the globalised world in which we live. We gain too much from our interdependence and ease of interaction.

So the reality is that we must always be alert to globalisation's dark sides just as we enjoy its benefits.

With the conveniences of globalisation's benefits, must come the inconveniences that are associated with protecting ourselves against those who would use globalization to attack or exploit our vulnerabilities.

Our task as a society lies in building our resilience against terrorism, while keeping complacency at bay.

That is why conferences such as this are such an important part of the project of protecting our society.

I thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts, and wish you all the best with your discussions over the next two days.