

Terror and Counter-Terror: Who's Winning the War? —Part I

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Terrorism—both conventional and involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—poses a massive threat to the West in general and to the U.S. in particular. And in many key respects the Western democracies simply do not have the necessary structures in place to combat it effectively. This is especially true of computer terrorism.

But at least the West seems to have woken up to the extent of the threat and is taking steps to counter it. And that brings us to the central question raised in this *Backgrounder*: “Who’s winning the war?” The difficulty in answering that question lies in the nature of the battle against terrorism.

Fighting terrorism is not like conducting a traditional military campaign. During conventional warfare there are several ways of assessing the progress that is being made. For example, intelligence reports will indicate the extent to which the enemy’s forces, in terms of men and materiel, are being degraded. Territorial gains or losses will show how successful a land battle is. But in the struggle against terrorism, criteria like these are irrelevant as a measure of progress. It would be possible to kill or capture 99 members of a 100-strong fanatical terror group and yet still face the prospect of terrible destruction if the final member had access to chemical or biological weapons.

There is another problem. In conventional warfare the objective is straightforward: to disable one’s opponent, or to occupy his territory, to such an extent that he eventually capitulates. The war against terrorism is not so simple. No sooner had left-wing terror groups like the Baader-Meinhof Gang or the Red Brigades been defeated than the world was faced with a different kind of terror (though equally lethal) from groups as different in character as Islamic fundamentalists and animal liberationists.

Increasingly, single-issue groups and disaffected individuals will see the use of terror as a “legitimate” means of imposing their views on the rest of society. And increasingly, too, the rest of society will have to consider what price it is willing to pay to see terrorism defeated. During a conventional war, private individuals are prepared to accept restrictions on their freedoms for a relatively short period in the interests of defeating a common enemy. But what will be their view when they

realize that the battle against terrorism is not a short-term affair but stretches as far into the future as it is possible for anyone to foresee?

Already, the movements of individuals are being tracked by cctv on the streets of virtually every major town or city in the Western world. And, according to a 1998 report called *An Appraisal of Technologies of Political Control* produced by the European Union's Directorate General for Research,

Within Europe, all e-mail, telephone, and fax communications are routinely intercepted by the United States National Security Agency, transferring all target information from the European mainland via the strategic hub of London then by satellite to Fort Meade in Maryland.

The same report states:

The European Union ha[s] secretly agreed to set up an international telephone tapping network via a secret network of committees established under the . . . Maastricht Treaty . . . [n]etwork and service providers in the EU will be obliged to install "tappable" systems and to place under surveillance any person or group when served with an interception order.

Worryingly, the report refers to a U.S./EU project called ECHELON which is

. . . a global surveillance system that stretches around the world to form a targeting system on all of the key Intelsat satellites used to convey most of the world's satellite phone calls, internet, e-mail, faxes, and telexes . . . ECHELON is designed for primarily nonmilitary targets [and] presents a truly global threat over which there are no legal or democratic controls.

All this is just the beginning. As the threat of terrorism grows, citizens in the U.S. (and the West generally) will find themselves facing restrictions on their privacy and freedom that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. In that sense it can be said that the private individual is already losing the war against terrorism.

The remaining pages of this are concerned with official attempts by the U.S. and its Western allies to combat terrorism. Section one looks at statistical trends and considers their significance as an indicator of which way the war is going. Section two examines what the West is doing to counter terrorism. And section three discusses what the final outcome of the war against terrorism is likely to be.

One—Trends in International Terrorism

Americans have special reasons for being concerned about terrorism. On February 2, 1999, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief George J. Tenet said in his testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee:

On terrorism, Mr. Chairman, I must be frank in saying that Americans increasingly are the favored targets. U.S. citizens and facilities suffered more than 35 percent of the total number of international terrorist attacks in 1998. This is up from 30 percent in 1997 and 25 percent in 1996.

The latest annual report by the State Department on international terrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1998*, was issued a few weeks later—in April 1999. Using what are, presumably, more up-to-date figures, the report shows an even worse position. There were 273 international terrorist attacks in 1998, and 111 of these (40.7 percent) were directed against U.S. citizens and facilities.

Nevertheless, the State Department's survey of the number of terrorist attacks that have taken place annually over the past 20 years gives grounds for optimism. In 1979 there were 434 international terrorist attacks. The peak year was 1987 when 666 occurred. In 1998, as we have seen, the number was down to 273.

Within the State Department's overall figures for the 20 years from 1979 to 1998 there have sometimes been quite dramatic differences from year to year. For example, between 1988 and 1989 there was a drop of 38 percent in the number of terrorist attacks, whereas between 1990 and 1992 they rose by over 29 percent. In order to smooth out the State Department's annual figures, and thus reveal the underlying trend, we have calculated five-year moving averages for the series. The result produces a very clear picture. From the five-year period ending 1983 (the first calculable figure) through to that for 1988, the numbers rise inexorably. But from 1989 right through to 1998 their decline is broken only by an almost imperceptible rise of 14 percent in 1995.

This is encouraging news. But a word of warning has to be sounded. Firstly, as the State Department figures demonstrate, the statistics can be very volatile, with changes in the number of attacks sometimes swinging up or down from year to year by as much as 30 percent to 40 percent. Clearly, a year of low terrorist activity (or even a run of several years) is no guarantee that there will not be a sudden upsurge in the following year.

Secondly, the number of attacks is not the sole indicator of how the war against terrorism is progressing. The number of people killed or injured in the attacks is of immense importance. For example, in 1993 the number of terrorist attacks was 431, not an especially high number given that 11 of the previous 14 years had all seen a greater number. Yet in 1993 the number of U.S. citizens injured in attacks was a massive 1,004—against only 60 in 1995 when the total number of terrorist attacks actually rose above the 1993 level to reach 440. There is no correlation between the number of terrorist attacks and the number of dead or injured that result. The severity of each individual attack is of crucial importance. It should not be forgotten that the single attack on the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in 1998 killed 291 people and injured about 5,000. This produced the paradox that 1998 witnessed the lowest number of terrorist attacks in 20 years but a record-high number of casualties, with more than 700 people dead and almost 6,000 wounded. Sadly, there is not much sign here of the war against terrorism being won.

The final point that needs to be borne in mind when considering the trend in international terrorist attacks is that, where terrorism is concerned, there is absolutely no guarantee that the past is a reliable guide to the future. New terrorist groups will come into existence espousing new causes; new forms of attack will be devised, and these will inevitably involve the use of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons.

For the foreseeable future, the war against terrorism will continue. In the next section we examine what the West is doing to try to win that war.

Two—The West's Approach to Counter-Terrorism

In this section we examine what the West is doing to counter terrorism, but we begin by looking at the types of terrorism that it faces.

Sources and Nature of Terrorist Attacks

State-sponsored Terrorism

The U.S. Secretary of State has designated seven governments as being state sponsors of international terrorism: Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria. The level of support given to terrorism varies from country to country, and it also fluctuates from time to time within each country. It ranges from, at the lower end of the scale, providing safe haven for terrorists through to giving them financial, operational, and military support until, at the top end of the scale, it involves the state itself carrying out terrorist attacks.

Terrorist Groups

Some of these are entirely political in nature like the left-wing terrorist organizations that are active in Latin America or the many separatist groups to be found in Asia. Other groups are religious in character, and most of these are Islamic fundamentalist organizations operating in the Middle East but frequently striking at Western (particularly U.S.) interests outside the region.

Criminal Gangs

The borderline between terrorism and the activities of criminals is often blurred. Organized criminal gangs, especially the various Mafia groups that operate in Russia and the Western world, engage in terrorist attacks. And terror groups indulge in criminal activities like drug trafficking and kidnapping in order to raise funds. A particularly worrying aspect of this type of terrorism is presented by the Russian Mafia gangs. There are around 5,000 Mafia groups in Russia, and although official estimates put their membership at around 25,000, independent sources say that the figure is nearer 100,000. Sources in Russia's interior ministry admit that the Mafia controls more than 40,000 businesses, including almost half of Russia's credit and financial institutions. Now, many of these Mafia groups, using terror techniques learned from the KGB, are pushing into western Europe in search of easy pickings. And there have been recent reports that the Russian and Italian Mafias are operating on Wall Street.

Disaffected Groups and Individuals

In recent years there has been an alarming rise in the number of individuals or groups who resort to terrorist attacks in order to try to impose their views on the rest of society or to punish others for not sharing their own opinions. Animal-rights and anti-abortion campaigners now routinely engage in arson, murder, or attempted murder. And in the U.S. there has been an increase in activity by right-wing militia groups. For example, Timothy McVeigh, who

carried out the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing in which 168 people died, had links with the Michigan Militia.

Terrorist Methods

At present, by far the greatest number of terrorist attacks are carried out with conventional weapons such as high-velocity rifles and explosives used in car- or truckbombs and other timed devices. But the 1995 sarin-gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo religious sect, in which 12 people were killed and 6,000 made ill, alerted the world to the dangers of terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD). CIA chief George J. Tenet says:

One of my greatest concerns is the serious prospect that [Osama] bin Laden [the exiled Saudi Arabian multimillionaire backer of Islamic terrorist groups] or another terrorist might use chemical or biological weapons. Bin Laden's organization is just one of about a dozen terrorist groups that have expressed interest in or have sought chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) agents. Bin Laden, for example, has called the acquisition of these weapons a "religious duty" and noted that "how we use them is up to us."

Cyber-warfare

Computer terrorism represents a special threat to the U.S. because it possesses 42 percent of the world's computer power and 60 percent of the resources of the Internet. This is not a theoretical worry. The problem already exists. The CIA's Scientific and Technical Intelligence Committee and the Carnegie-Mellon Computer Response Team say that the U.S. information infrastructure is under a constant barrage of attacks from hackers and that their offensive capabilities far exceed defensive capabilities. The worry is two-fold. First, terrorists could attack military computers (which are increasingly connected with the outside world) and thus prevent the deployment of high tech weapons. Second, civilian computers could be attacked in the same way, crippling the country's banking and financial system and bringing its public utilities almost to a standstill. In this way, computer terrorists (without putting their own lives at risk) could cause more damage to business and investment interests than all the IRA bombs put together. Apart from the threat to the U.S. from externally based computer terrorists, there is growing concern that domestic groups like anti-abortionists and animal-rights campaigners will turn to cyber-warfare in pursuit of their aims.

The UK has recently provided a foretaste of this latter danger. During the Carnival Against Capitalism organized in the City of London during June 1999, the Lord Mayor of London described the anarchists who caused £2 million worth of damage as "terrorists" and said that they had tried to bring down the entire computerized trading system of Liffe, the London futures and options exchange. He said:

They were using a fairly sophisticated way of attacking the Liffe trading system. The people who were doing it knew how to try to render such a sophisticated system inoperable.

Raising the Cost of Terrorism

Before we turn to a consideration of the actions being taken by the West to counter terrorism, an important general point needs to be made. It concerns the cost-benefit analysis that all terrorists and sponsors of terrorism undertake.

As Boaz Ganor, a consultant specializing in counter-terrorism, points out:

Most states engaged in terrorism choose to do so. They take into account the price they will be required to pay for their activity, in exchange for the benefits gained by the attainment of their policy goals For every country, there is a limit to the amount it is willing to pay for its continued involvement in terrorism. The price scale varies from country to country, as does each one's breaking point. Hence, in order for deterrence to be successful, countries contending with terrorism must raise the costs of terrorism involvement to the point where the costs outweigh the benefits, and they must do so according to the specific characteristics of the individual state sponsors Only when the terror sponsor is aware *a priori* of the price to be exacted for its continued involvement in terrorism, and only when it can be persuaded that the international community is determined in its stance, will the deterrent measures succeed.

The same principles apply to individual terrorist organizations. But the way of achieving the necessary results is indirect. For example, fundamentalist Islamic terror groups regard themselves as carrying out God's work on earth. And they will pay any price—even death—in order to achieve their purpose. It is impossible for the West to raise the price of their terrorism to the point where they will no longer regard it as viable. But, as Yigal Carmon, a former Israeli prime minister's advisor for countering terrorism, points out:

. . . there has never been a single Arab terrorist group, engaged in international terrorism, that was not sponsored by at least one Arab state.

As long as terrorist organizations have the support, assistance, and sympathy of other countries, the terrorism phenomenon cannot be eradicated by military means. If Western countries wish to put an end to terrorism, they will have to take joint and decisive action against any country that assists or supports a terrorist organization. In other words, if Islamic fundamentalist terror groups are not deterred by the high price of their terrorism, it will be necessary to make the price too high for their backers. This will lead to the destruction of a considerable part of the terror groups' ability to attack the West and will prevent many future terrorist attacks.

At first glance, Osama bin Laden seems to present a special problem. He is a freelance backer of Islamic terrorism who appears to be beyond the reach of Western anti-terrorism measures. He is not a state sponsor of terrorism, and he is not sponsored by any state. Unless he can be captured, he seems to be invulnerable. But bin Laden has to operate from somewhere. And any state that shelters him should be made to pay a price that it simply cannot bear in the long term.

There is disagreement among experts on terrorism about the degree to which

aggressive action against terror groups is effective. Some argue that the kind of overwhelming attack that Israel, for example, launches against Islamic terror groups simply leads to revenge attacks by the terrorists. But as counter-terrorism consultant Boaz Ganor points out:

The factor that determines the scope of attacks is not the existence or absence of motive—but rather capability. . . . The thirst for vengeance does not affect the capabilities of the terrorist. Over the years, the terrorist organizations have learned to cite vengeance as their motive. . . . But in reality almost all of these attacks . . . would have been perpetrated against Israel in any case, when conditions were favourable. At most, the organization can expedite a long-planned attack by accelerating the final stage of preparation.

Similarly, there is disagreement about the extent to which the U.S. bombing raid on Libya in 1986 resulted in that country changing its attitude towards the sponsorship of terrorism. It is pointed out by those who doubt the immediate effect of the raid that between 1986 and 1988, Libya sponsored a wave of terror through the auspices of Abu Nidal, by the Japanese Red Army, and by other groups. These groups carried out a series of deadly attacks against the U.S. And in December 1988 Libyan agents are believed to have brought down Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie in Scotland. It was only when international sanctions went into force in 1992, in the wake of the Lockerbie investigation, proponents of this argument say, that Libya altered its behaviour with regard to terrorism—to become a passive supporter of it rather than an active one.

But the Libyan case illustrates the point about the need to raise the cost of supporting terrorism to a level where it becomes unacceptably high to the state involved. Clearly, the 1986 bombing alone did not do this; but the addition of sanctions did. Obviously, the West needs to have a whole portfolio of measures that it can take against states that sponsor terrorism—so that if one fails, another (or a series of others) might succeed.

Combating Conventional and Nonconventional Terror

As the extent of the threat posed by terrorist organizations, state-sponsored terrorism, and disaffected individuals has gradually dawned on the West, a series of anti-terror programmes has slowly been introduced. And given that the U.S. is the main target of terror groups, it is inevitable that America has been in the lead in the sphere of counter-terrorism.

The 1993 World Trade Centre bombing in New York and the 1995 devastation of a federal building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people brought home how vulnerable the U.S. is to conventional terrorist attack.

Following the bombing of the World Trade Center, the FBI tripled its counter-terrorism force, and the CIA created a Terrorism Warning Group to deal with the threat at the highest civilian and military level.

Over the years, the U.S. effort has consisted of a mixture of offensive actions (like the bombing of Libya in 1986) and defensive measures (such as improved

security at airports and key buildings).

But, while much has been done to counter conventional terrorism, steps have also been taken to deal with terror attacks using weapons of mass destruction. As long ago as the mid 1970s, the Nuclear Emergency Search Team (Nest) was set up by the U.S. Department of Energy. Some 1,000 specialists were placed on twenty-four hour standby to deal with a terror attack using nuclear weapons.

The potential threat from biochem attack was recognized in the summer of 1996 when the Chemical Biological Incident Response Force (CBIRF) was formed by the U.S. Marines. It has around 375 marines and sailors who can be mobilized within four hours to respond to a threat or an attack.

Up until recently, work in the sphere of biochem terror in the U.S. has concentrated mainly on the military area—protecting troops from attack at home and abroad. But in March 1997, U.S. officials revealed to a House of Representatives National Security Subcommittee plans and equipment that would help American cities deal with biochem terror attacks like the 1995 sarin-gas attack on Tokyo's subway. And in March 1998, U.S. Defence Secretary William Cohen announced that ten new emergency teams were being created to help domestic agencies deal quickly with biochem attacks.

Two months later, President Clinton ordered that vaccines and antibiotics should be stockpiled in order to provide protection for civilians in the event of a biological-weapons attack. Also in May 1998, the Defence Secretary said that some \$130 million would be spent over the following six or seven years vaccinating all 2.4 million members of the U.S. armed forces against anthrax.

Anthrax is a particular worry to the authorities. It is easily available and extremely dangerous. A single gram of anthrax culture contains a trillion spores—sufficient for 100 million fatal doses. And the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment reckons that if 100 kilos of anthrax were to be spread by a crop duster over Washington it could cause 2 million deaths.

In January 1999, President Clinton again stressed the fact that biochem terrorism presented a real threat to the U.S. and that such an attack was “highly likely” within the next few years. He proposed a whole range of further measures, costing \$2.8 billion, to defend the U.S. against chemical and germ warfare and to protect computer networks.

As we have already seen, the U.S. military is particularly vulnerable to cyber-warfare, not least because it routes 95 percent of its communications through commercial cables, towers, and satellites. And it is becoming more and more dependent on commercial off-the-shelf software that might be contaminated with computer malicious codes (CMCs). In 1996, more than 250 U.S. Defence Department computer systems were broken into. Officials estimate that break-ins are at present probably running at twice that level. Clearly, President Clinton's proposals to combat cyber-warfare are not coming a moment too soon.

The Lessons of the Gulf War

So far, we have set out the measures being taken by the U.S. to combat a whole range of terrorist activity in what might be described as normal circumstances. But

the U.S. becomes especially vulnerable to terrorist attacks if it engages in military action which is not to the liking of its many enemies—particularly certain Islamic states and Islamic fundamentalist terror groups.

An Israeli intelligence assessment prepared in April 1991, in the wake of the Gulf War, provides a valuable insight into the steps that the U.S., and the West, can take in future when faced with a similar emergency.

The Israeli report says:

For several months prior to the beginning of the Gulf War, we had monitored a major Iraqi effort to prepare for a terrorist campaign against Western targets. . . . But the record of terrorist activities between January 16, 1991, and March 16, 1991, reached only 173 attacks around the world. Although this is no negligible number it is far less than we had expected, not only in frequency but also in severity.

Not surprisingly, the report points out that the attacks were directed primarily at American targets (82 out of the total of 173). French interests suffered 27 attacks and those of Britain 13.

Israeli intelligence believes that the main reason why the terror campaign largely failed was that Western countries (which now saw themselves as the terrorists' primary targets) abandoned their previously passive and politically tolerant approach and adopted a wide range of unprecedented counter-measures (both defensive and offensive) in order to actively deter terrorists and frustrate their activities.

On the defensive level, these counter-measures included the enhanced protection of public activities and sites, as well as the expanded surveillance and arrest of suspected terrorists of Middle Eastern origin. Corporations and local governments were instructed how to thwart attacks or, if necessary, to deal with them. Screening by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service was tightened, and foreigners whose visas had expired were located. Special measures were taken to find letter bombs, and some public institutions (including the New York Stock Exchange) even refused to accept deliveries of fast food. Extensive examination and investigation procedures were adopted for air, ground, and sea transportation. Access to public places was controlled by strict security measures, the U.S. Super Bowl being just one example.

On the offensive level, Western countries adopted a broad range of measures against the operational centers and the apparatus of Iraqi terror networks in the West, namely the Iraqi diplomatic missions and their affiliates. Thus, most of the Iraqi diplomatic missions in Western countries (and their personnel) were drastically limited, and the remaining personnel (many of whom were known to be engaged in unlawful activities) were put under strict surveillance. Arab nationals affiliated to these missions were detained and interrogated; many of them were expelled or had their movements restricted.

Israeli intelligence concludes:

When the governments of the West are resolute about confronting terrorism and adopt determined policies—as they did . . . against Iraqi diplomatic missions in the West during the Gulf War—they succeed in countering terrorism. Ω

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