

## TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM AFTER SEPTEMBER 11TH

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*The enormity and sheer scale of the simultaneous suicide terrorist attacks on September 11 eclipses anything previously seen — either individually or in aggregate, says Bruce Hoffman, vice president and director of the RAND Washington office. “It calls, unquestionably, for a proportionate response of unparalleled determination and focus such as we see today in our actions both in the United States and abroad, as well as one that utilizes the full range of formidable tools at our disposal — diplomatic, military, and economic.”*

### THE 9/11 ATTACKS IN CONTEXT

Until September 11th, a total of no more than perhaps 1,000 Americans had been killed by terrorists either in this country or abroad since 1968 — the year credited with marking the advent of the modern era of international terrorism when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked an El Al flight on July 23. To put the events of that tragic day further in context, until the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, no terrorist operation had killed more than 500 persons at one time.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the metric, the enormity and sheer scale of the simultaneous suicide attacks of that day eclipse anything we have previously seen — either individually or in aggregate. Accordingly, for that reason alone, September 11th argues for nothing less than a re-configuration of both our thinking about terrorism and how we both prepare and organize to counter it. Such a change is amply justified by the unique constellation of operational capabilities evident in that day’s tragic attacks: showing a level of planning, professionalism and tradecraft rarely seen among the vast majority of terrorists and terrorist movements we have known.<sup>2</sup> Among the most significant characteristics of the operation were its:

- ambitious scope and dimensions;
- consummate coordination and synchronization;
- professionalism and tradecraft that kept so large an operation so secret; and
- the unswerving dedication and determination of the 19 aircraft hijackers who willingly and wantonly killed themselves, the passengers and crews of the four

aircraft they commandeered and the thousands of persons working in or visiting both the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The significance of the September 11th incidents from a terrorist operational perspective is that simultaneous attacks — using far more prosaic and arguably conventional means of attack (such as car bombs, for example) — are relatively uncommon. For reasons not well understood, terrorists typically have not undertaken such coordinated operations. This was doubtless less of a choice than a reflection of the logistical and other organizational hurdles that most terrorist groups are not able to overcome. Indeed, this was one reason why we were so galvanized by the synchronized attacks on the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam three years ago. The orchestration of that operation, coupled with its unusually high death and casualty tolls, stood out in a way that, until September 11th, few other terrorist actions had: bringing bin Laden as much renown as infamy in many quarters.

<sup>1</sup>. Approximately 440 persons perished in a 1979 fire deliberately set by terrorists at a movie theater in Abadan, Iran.

<sup>2</sup>. Nor is this a particularly “American-centric” view in reaction to the stunning and tragic events of two months ago. For example, an old friend and colleague, who is one of Israel’s leading counterterrorist experts, and who has long experience in military, the government and academe was totally shocked by the September 11th attacks — specifically, their coordination, daring and lethality — remarking: “Never could I have imagined that terrorists could or would do that” (telephone conversation, 17 September 2001). I am also reminded of a conversation with a senior, highly decorated Sri Lankan Armed Forces brigade commander and military intelligence operative who once explained in great detail the “difficulties of pulling off even a successful, significant terrorist attack” (discussion, Batticola, Sri Lanka, December 1997)—not least the four orchestrated suicide aircraft hijackings and crashes that occurred on September 11th.

During the 1990s, perhaps only one other (presumably unrelated) terrorist incident evidenced those same characteristics of coordination and high lethality: the series of attacks that occurred in Bombay in March 1993, where a dozen or so simultaneous car bombings rocked the city, killing nearly 300 persons and wounding more than 700 others.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, apart from the attacks on the same morning in October 1983 of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and a nearby French paratroop headquarters, and the IRA's near-simultaneous assassination of Lord Mounbatten and remote-control mine attack on British troops in Warrenpoint, Northern Ireland, in 1979, it is hard to recall many other significant incidents reflecting such operational expertise, coordination and synchronization.

#### **WHERE WE WENT WRONG IN FAILING TO PREDICT THE 9/11 ATTACKS**

Accordingly, we were perhaps lulled into believing that mass, simultaneous attacks in general, and those of such devastating potential as we saw in New York and Washington on September 11th, were likely beyond most capabilities of most terrorists — including those directly connected to or associated with Osama bin Laden. The tragic events of that September day demonstrate how profoundly misplaced such assumptions were. In this respect, we perhaps overestimated the significance of our past successes (e.g., in largely foiling most of bin Laden's terrorist operations during the period between the August 1998 embassy bombings and the November 2000 attack on the USS Cole) and the terrorists' own incompetence and propensity for mistakes (e.g., Ahmad Ressam's bungled attempt to enter the United States from Canada in December 1999). Indeed, both more impressive and disturbing is the fact that there was likely considerable overlap in the planning for these attacks and the one last November against the USS Cole in Aden: thus suggesting a multi-track operational and organizational capability to coordinate major, multiple attacks at one time.

Attention was also arguably focused too exclusively either on the low-end threat posed by car and truck bombs against buildings or the more exotic high-end threats, involving biological or chemical weapons or cyber-attacks. The implicit assumptions of much of our planning scenarios on mass casualty attacks were

that they would involve germ or chemical agents or result from widespread electronic attacks on critical infrastructure and that any conventional or less extensive incident could be addressed simply by planning for the most catastrophic threat. This left a painfully vulnerable gap in our anti-terrorism defenses where a traditional and long-proven tactic — like airline hijacking — was neglected in favor of other, less conventional threats, and the consequences of using an aircraft as a suicide weapon seem to have been almost completely discounted.

In retrospect, it arguably was not the 1995 sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway and nine attempts to use bio-weapons by Aum that should have been the dominant influence on our counterterrorist thinking, but a 1986 hijacking of a Pan Am flight in Karachi, where the terrorists' intentions were reported to have been to crash it into the center of Tel Aviv, and the 1994 hijacking in Algiers of an Air France passenger plane by terrorists belonging to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), who similarly planned to crash the fuel-laden aircraft with its passengers into the heart of Paris. The lesson, accordingly, is not that we need to be unrealistically omniscient, but rather that we need to be able to respond across a broad technological spectrum of potential adversarial attacks.

We also had long consoled ourselves — and had only recently begun to question and debate the notion — that terrorists were more interested in publicity than killing and therefore had neither the need nor interest in annihilating large numbers of people. For decades, there was widespread acceptance of the observation made famous by Brian Jenkins in 1975 that, "Terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead."<sup>4</sup> Even despite the events of the mid-1980s — when a series of high-profile and particularly lethal suicide car and truck-bombings were directed against American diplomatic and military targets in the Middle East (in one instance resulting in the deaths of 241 Marines) — many analysts saw no need to revise these arguments. In 1985, Jenkins, one of the most perspicacious and acute observers of this phenomenon, again noted that,

<sup>3</sup> Celia W. Dugger, "Victims of '93 Bombay Terror Wary of U.S. Motives," *New York Times*, 24 September 2001

<sup>4</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, "International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict" in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf (eds.), *International Terrorism and World Security* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p. 15.

“simply killing a lot of people has seldom been one terrorist objective . . . Terrorists operate on the principle of the minimum force necessary. They find it unnecessary to kill many, as long as killing a few suffices for their purposes.”<sup>5</sup> The events of September 11th prove such notions now to be wishful thinking, if not dangerously anachronistic. On that day, bin Laden arguably wiped the slate clean of the conventional wisdom on terrorists and terrorism and, by doing so, ushered in a new era of conflict, more bloody and destructive than before.

Finally, bin Laden himself has re-written the history of both terrorism and probably of the post-Cold War era — which he arguably single-handedly ended on September 11th. At a time when the forces of globalization, coupled with economic determinism, seemed to have submerged the role of the individual charismatic leader of men beneath far more powerful, impersonal forces, bin Laden has cleverly cast himself (admittedly and inadvertently with our assistance) as a David against the American Goliath: one man standing up to the world’s sole remaining superpower and able to challenge its might and directly threaten its citizens. To his followers, bin Laden has proven to be the fabled right man in the right place at the right time: possessing the vision, financial resources, organizational skills, and flair for self-promotion to meld together the disparate strands of Islamic fervor, Muslim piety, and general enmity toward the West into a formidable global force.

#### **WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE**

The concept of proportionality has long governed American counterterrorist policy. Its American proponents argued, and our many allies throughout the world expected, that the American military response would be commensurate with the terrorist attack that provoked it. Thus, in 1986, when the Qadhafi regime was implicated in the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque frequented by American soldiers, the United States retaliated with airstrikes directed against Libyan military targets in Tripoli and Benghazi —

<sup>5</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, P-7119, July 1985), p. 6.

including Muammar Qadhafi’s living quarters — in an attempt to eliminate the Libyan leader himself. Similarly, in 1998, when bin Laden was identified as the architect of the massive truck bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the U.S. launched nearly 100 cruise missiles against his training camps in Afghanistan — also in hopes of killing him — as well as against a pharmaceutical factory allegedly linked to bin Laden and believed to be manufacturing chemical weapons in the Sudan. Two Americans had lost their lives in the discotheque bombing and twelve in Nairobi. In the latter case, the response may have been insufficient. But our situation today leaves no room for quibbling.

As previously noted, the enormity and sheer scale of the simultaneous suicide attacks on September 11 eclipses anything we have previously seen — either individually or in aggregate. It calls, unquestionably, for a proportionate response of unparalleled determination and focus such as we see today in our actions both in the United States and abroad, as well as one that utilizes the full range of formidable tools at our disposal — diplomatic, military, and economic. While much attention is currently focused on the military options being exercised in South Asia, they are only one instrument that the United States can bring to bear in the struggle against terrorism. Our efforts need to be fully coordinated, sustained, and prolonged. They will require commitment, political will, and patience. They must have realistic goals and not unduly raise or create false expectations. And, finally, they must avoid cosmetic or “feel-good” physical security measures that contribute only tangentially, if at all, to the enhancement of national as well as international security.

In conclusion, it must be appreciated that the struggle against terrorism is never-ending. By the same token, our search for solutions and new approaches must be equally continuous and unyielding, proportional to the threat posed by our adversaries in both innovation and determination. ●

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