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Terrorism, the Media, and the Government: Perspectives, Trends, and Options for Policymakers

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ABSTRACT

This report article examines competing perspectives on the desired role for the media when covering terrorist incidents, and who wants what from the media: what the terrorist wants, what the government wants, and what the media wants when covering a terrorist event. It then addresses three trends that impact on the relationship between terrorism and the media and concludes with options for consideration. It is intended for Members and staff who cover terrorism and will be updated as events warrant.

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Summary

Terrorists, governments, and the media see the function, roles and responsibilities of the media when covering terrorist events from differing and often competing perspectives. Such perspectives drive behavior during terrorist incidents-- often resulting in both tactical and strategic gains to the terrorist operation and the overall terrorist cause. The challenge to both the governmental and press communities is to understand the dynamics of terrorist enterprise and to develop policy options designed to serve the interests of government, the media, and the society.

Terrorists must have publicity in some form if they are to gain attention, inspire fear and respect, and secure favorable understanding of their cause, if not their act. Governments need public understanding, cooperation, restraint, and loyalty in efforts to limit terrorist harm to society and in efforts to punish or apprehend those responsible for terrorist acts. Journalists and the media in general pursue the freedom to cover events and issues without restraint, especially governmental restraint.

Three new trends appear to be emerging which impact on the relationship between the media, the terrorist, and government. These include: (1) anonymous terrorism; (2) more violent terrorist incidents; and (3) terrorist attacks on media personnel and institutions.

A number of options, none without costs and risks, exist for enhancing the effectiveness of government media-oriented responses to terrorism and for preventing the media from furthering terrorist goals as a byproduct of vigorous and free reporting. These include: (1) financing joint media/government training exercises; (2) establishing a government terrorism information response center; (3) promoting use of media pools; (4) promoting voluntary press coverage guidelines; and (5) monitoring terrorism against the media.

The media and the government have common interests in seeing that the media are not manipulated into promoting the cause of terrorism or its methods. But policymakers do not want to see terrorism, or anti-terrorism, eroding freedom of the press--one of the pillars of democratic societies. This appears to be a dilemma that cannot be completely reconciled--one with which societies will continually have to struggle. The challenge for policymakers is to explore mechanisms enhancing media/government cooperation to accommodate the citizen and media need for honest coverage while limiting the gains uninhibited coverage may provide terrorists or their cause. Communication between the government and the media here is an important element in any strategy to prevent terrorist causes and strategies from prevailing and to preserve democracy.

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Terrorism, the Media, and the Government: Perspectives, Trends, and Options for Policymakers

Introduction

This paper responds to a range of inquiries received by CRS on the nature of the relationship of terrorist initiatives, publicity, and governments. The media are known to be powerful forces in confrontations between terrorists and governments. Media influence on public opinion may impact not only the actions of governments but also on those of groups engaged in terrorist acts. From the terrorist perspective, media coverage is an important measure of the success of a terrorist act or campaign. And in hostage-type incidents, where the media may provide the only independent means a terrorist has of knowing the chain of events set in motion, coverage can complicate rescue efforts. Governments can use the media in an effort to arouse world opinion against the country or group using terrorist tactics. Public diplomacy and the media can also be used to mobilize public opinion in other countries to pressure governments to take, or reject, action against terrorism.[1]

Margaret Thatcher's metaphor that publicity is the oxygen of terrorism underlines the point that public perception is a major terrorist target and the media are central in shaping and moving it. For terrorism, the role of the media is critical.

This report examines competing perspectives on the desired role for the media when covering terrorist incidents: what the terrorist wants, what the government wants, and what the media wants when covering a terrorist event. These are classic perspectives drawn from the experiences of this century. It then addresses three recent trends that impact on the relationship between terrorism and the media and concludes with options for congressional consideration.

Competing Perspectives of the Role of the Media When Covering Terrorist Events

Terrorists, governments, and the media see the function, roles and responsibilities of the media, when covering terrorist events, from differing and often opposing perspectives. Such perceptions drive respective behaviors during terrorist incidents--often resulting in tactical and strategic gains, or losses, to the terrorist

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[1]An example would be to mobilize the tourist industry to pressure governments into participating in sanctions against a terrorist state.

operation and the overall terrorist cause. The challenge to the governmental and press community is to understand the dynamics of terrorist enterprise and to develop policy options to serve government, media and societal interests.

What Terrorists Want from Media

- Terrorists need **publicity**, usually free publicity that a group could normally not afford or buy. Any publicity surrounding a terrorist act alerts the world that a problem exists that cannot be ignored and must be addressed. From a terrorist perspective, an unedited interview with a major figure is a treasured prize, such as the May 1997 CNN interview with Saudi dissident, terrorist recruiter and financier Usama Bin Ladin. For news networks, access to a terrorist is a hot story and is usually treated as such.

- They seek **favorable understanding of their cause**, if not their act. One may not agree with their act but this does not preclude being sympathetic to their plight and their cause. Terrorists believe the public "needs help" in understanding that their cause is just and terrorist violence is the only course of action available to them against the superior evil forces of state and establishment. Good relationships with the press are important here and they are often cultivated and nurtured over a period of years.

- Terrorist organizations may also seek to court, or place, sympathetic **personnel in press positions**--particularly in wire services--and in some instances may even seek to control smaller news organizations through funding.

- **Legitimacy**. Terrorist causes want the press to give **legitimacy to what is often portrayed as ideological or personality feuds or divisions between armed groups and political wings.** For the military tactician, war is the continuation of politics by other means; for the sophisticated terrorist, *politics* is the continuation of terror by other means. IRA and Hamas are examples of groups having "political" and "military" components. Musa Abu Marzuq, for example, who was in charge of the political wing of Hamas is believed to have approved specific bombings and assassinations.[2] Likewise, the "dual hat" relationship of Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein--the purported political wing of the IRA--to other IRA activities is subject to speculation. Distinctions are often designed to help people join the ranks, or financially contribute to the terrorist organization.

- They also want the press to notice and give **legitimacy to the findings and viewpoints of specially created non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and study centers** that may serve as covers for terrorist fundraising, recruitment, and travel by terrorists into the target country. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad-funded and controlled World and Islam Studies Enterprise is but

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[2] See: Islamic Terrorism from Midwest to Mideast by Steven Emerson, Christian Science Monitor, August 28, 1995.

one known example. The Hamas-funded Islamic Association for Palestine (IAP) in Richardson, Texas, is another of many.[3]

- **In hostage situations--terrorists need to have details on identity**, number and value of hostages, as well as details about pending **rescue attempts**, and details on the public exposure of their operation.   Particularly where state sponsors are involved, they want details about any plans for military retaliation.

- Terrorist organizations seek media coverage that **causes damage to their enemy**. This is particularly noticeable when the perpetrators of the act and the rationale for their act remain unclear. They want the media to amplify panic, to spread fear, to facilitate economic loss (like scaring away investment and tourism), to make populations loose faith in their governments' ability to protect them, and to trigger government and popular overreaction to specific incidents and the overall threat of terrorism.

What Government Leaders Want from the Media

Governments seek understanding, cooperation, restraint, and loyalty from the media in efforts to limit terrorist harm to society and in efforts to punish or apprehend those responsible for terrorist acts, specifically[4]:

- They want coverage **to advance their agenda and not that of the terrorist**. From their perspective, the media should support government courses of action when operations are under way and disseminate government provided information when requested. This includes understanding of policy objectives, or at least a balanced presentation, e.g., why governments may seek to mediate, yet not give in to terrorist demands.

- An important goal is **to separate the terrorist from the media**--to deny the terrorist a platform unless to do so is likely to contribute to his imminent defeat.[5]

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[3]See: Terrorism and the Middle East Peace Process: The Origins and Activities of Hamas in the United States, testimony by international terrorism consultant, Steven Emerson, before the Senate Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia, March 19, 1996, p. 11. The IAP also publishes al-Zaitonah, one of the largest indigenous Arabic-language publications in the United States.

[4]Note that in April 1994, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held hearings on the impact of television on U.S. foreign policy. Scholarly and media viewpoints were presented on what, if anything, the media might do to avoid inadvertently "skewing" U.S. foreign policy one way or another and setting media foreign policy agendas. Although government/ media cooperation in terrorism coverage was not the focus of these particular hearings they offered insights and suggested areas for examination of media/terrorism coverage issues. See: Impact of Television on U.S. Foreign Policy, April 26, 1994, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 103rd Congress, 2nd Session, GPO, Washington, 1994, 53 p.

[5]In the case of the anonymous "Unabomber", it was publication of a manifesto in the New York Times and Washington Post that triggered the leads and actions by the suspect's family,

- Another goal is **to have the media present terrorists as criminals** and avoid glamorizing them; to foster the viewpoint that kidnapping a prominent person, blowing up a building, or hijacking an airplane is a criminal act regardless of the terrorists' cause.

- In hostage situations, governments often prefer to exclude the media and others from the immediate area, but they want the news organizations **to provide information to authorities** when reporters have access to the hostage site.

- They seek publicity **to help diffuse the tension of a situation**, not contribute to it. Keeping the public reasonably calm is an important policy objective.

- It is generally advantageous if the media, especially television, **avoids "weeping mother" emotional stories on relatives of victims**, as such coverage builds public pressure on governments to make concessions.

- During incidents, they wish **to control terrorist access to outside data**--to restrict information on hostages that may result in their selection for harm; government strongly desires the media **not to reveal planned or current anti-terrorist actions** or provide the terrorists with data that helps them.

- After incidents, they want the media **not to** reveal government secrets or **detail techniques on how successful operations were performed**--and not to publicize successful or thwarted terrorist technological achievements and operational methods so that copycat terrorists do not emulate or adapt them.[6]

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[5](...continued)
which resulted in an arrest.

[6]Publication of details on the arrest in Pakistan and return to the United States of CIA shooting suspect, Mir Amal Kansi, has raised concern in the foreign policy, law enforcement, and intelligence communities that nations may be reluctant to cooperate with the United States under similar circumstances in the future. This sequence of events is one recent illustration underscoring the issue of media coverage of events relating to terrorism, the potential negative consequences of some reporting, and the need to explore mechanisms to enhance media/government cooperation in efforts to accommodate the media's need for coverage while limiting the gains such coverage may provide terrorists or their cause.

Kansi was arrested on June 17, 1997 with the help of Pakistani authorities and rendered to the United States. State Department Spokesman Nicholas Burns, in his June 18 daily briefing, remarked to journalists that "the secret of our success is that we are disciplined, and that we are not going to spill our guts in public and say exactly how all this came about; because perhaps we'll want to do the same thing to some other terrorist in the future....Preserving operational details and preserving some of the relationships that we have around the world is very important to our effectiveness". This policy of silence was reportedly ordered by President Clinton so as not to break faith with foreign governments that assisted.

Several days later, after extensive reporting detailing and praising CIA cooperation, FBI

- They want the media **to be careful about disinformation** from terrorist allies, sympathizers, or others who gain from its broadcast and publication. Many groups have many motives for disseminating inaccurate or false data, including, for example, speculation as to how a plane may have been blown up, or who may be responsible.

- They want the media **to boost the image of government agencies**. Agencies may carefully control leaks to the press giving scoops to newsmen who depict the agency favorably and avoid criticism of its actions.

- They would like **journalists to inform them** when presented with well grounded reasons to believe a terrorist act may be in the making or that particular individuals may be involved in terrorist activity.

- In extreme cases, where circumstances permit, vital national security interests may be at stake, and chances of success high, they may seek **cooperation of the media in disseminating a ruse** that would contribute to neutralizing the immediate threat posed by terrorists. In common criminal investigations involving heinous crimes, such media cooperation is not uncommon--when media members may hold back on publication of evidence found at a crime scene or assist law enforcement officials by publishing misleading information or a non-promising lead to assist authorities in apprehending a suspect by, for example, lulling him or her into a false sense of security.

What the Media Want When Covering Terrorist Incidents or Issues

Journalists generally want the freedom to cover an issue without external restraint--whether it comes media owners, advertisers, editors, or from the government.

- Media want **to be the first with the story**. The scoop is golden, "old news is no news." Pressure to transmit real time news instantly in today's competitive hi-tech communication environment is at an all-time high.

- The media want **to make the story as timely and dramatic as possible**, often with interviews, if possible. During the June 1985 TWA Flight 847 hijack crisis, ABC aired extensive interviews with both hijackers and hostages. (A photo was even staged of a pistol aimed at the pilot's head.[7])

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[6](...continued)

planning and how the FBI finally got its man, several of Pakistan's leading newspapers published editorials demanding that their government explain why Pakistani law was waived to allow the suspect to be whisked away from his to his homeland. See: "Spiriting Off of Fugitive by U.S. Irks Pakistanis" by John F. Burns, New York Times, June 23, 1997, p. A9.

[7]On June 13, 1985, two Hizballah affiliated Shi'a gunmen hijacked TWA flight 847 en route from Athens to Rome and murdered U.S. Navy diver Robert Stethem after the plane left Algiers and touched down in Beirut for the second time. The hijackers terminated negotiations

- Most media members want **to be professional and accurate** and not to give credence to disinformation, however newsworthy it may seem. This may not be easily done at times, especially when systematic efforts to mislead them are undertaken by interested parties.

- They want **to protect their ability to operate as securely and freely as possible** in the society. In many instances, this concern goes beyond protecting their legal right to publish relatively unrestrained; it includes personal physical security. They want protection from threat, harassment, or violent assault during operations, and protection from subsequent murder by terrorists in retaliation providing unfavorable coverage (the latter occurring more often abroad than in the United States.)

- They want **to protect society's right to know**, and construe this liberally to include popular and dramatic coverage, e.g., airing emotional reactions of victims, family members, witnesses, and "people on the street," as well as information withheld by law enforcement, security, and other organs of government.

- Media members often have no objection **to playing a constructive role in solving specific terrorist situations** if this can be done without excessive cost in terms of story loss or compromise of values.

New Trends Impacting on Terrorism and the Media

A series of recent terrorist acts indicates the emergence of trends that impact on the relationship between the media, the terrorist, and government. These include: (1) a trend toward anonymity in terrorism; (2) a trend towards more violent terrorist incidents; and (3) a trend towards attacks on media personnel and institutions.

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with the Red Cross and forced the pilot to fly to Beirut after a wire service report that the Delta Force had flown to the region and other erroneous media reports that the Delta Force was headed to Algeria. All but the three crew members were taken from the plane and held by Amal and Hizballah until released. ABC's coverage of the event drew strong criticism from the U.S. Department of State. Pentagon spokesman Michael Burch on June 19, 1985, accused the American news media of providing information on U.S. military and diplomatic moves that might prove useful to the hijackers: "For the price of a 25-cent newspaper or a 19 inch television, a group of hijackers who only represent the back of a pew of some mosque have a very elaborate intelligence network." Media representatives countered with the response that coverage served to protect rather than endanger the lives of the hostages--that the hijackers would have no benefit from killing the goose (hostages) that lays the golden egg (ongoing publicity).

Anonymous Terrorism

Today we see instances of anonymous terrorism where no one claims responsibility and no demands are made. The World Trade Center bombing is but one example. This allows the media a larger role in speculation, and generally removes most basis for charges that they are amplifying a terrorist's demands or agenda. Reportage is inevitable; especially if it includes unbridled speculation, false threats or hoaxes, coverage can advance terrorists' agendas, such as spreading panic, hurting tourism, and provoking strong government reactions leading to unpopular measures, including restrictions on individual liberties.

More Violent Terrorism

In the context of advanced information and technology, a trend suggesting more violent terrorism cannot be ignored. The Department of State's *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1996* notes that while worldwide instances of terrorist acts have dropped sharply in the last decade, the death toll from acts is rising and the trend continues "toward more ruthless attacks on mass civilian targets and the use of more powerful bombs. The threat of terrorist use of materials of mass destruction is an issue of growing concern...".[8] If, and as, terrorism becomes more violent, perceptions that the press is to some degree responsible for facilitating terrorism or amplifying its effects could well grow. Increasingly threatened societies may be prone to take fewer risks in light of mass casualty consequences and may trust the media less and less to police itself.

Attacks on Media Personnel and Institutions

Attacks on journalists who are outspoken on issues of concern to the terrorists seem to be on the rise. Recent attacks occurred in Algeria, Mexico, Russia, Chechnya, and London, but there have been cases as well in Washington, D.C. at the National Press Building and at the United Nations in New York. One private watchdog group estimates that forty-five journalists were killed in 1995 as a consequence of their work.[9]

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[8]U.S. Department of State, Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1996, April 1997, p. iii.

[9]According to the New York based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) more than 300 journalists have been murdered since 1986 as a consequence of their work and in 1995 alone 45 were killed. See website address http://www.CPJ.ORG/. See also the World Press Freedom Review published by the International Press Institute (IPI) in Vienna, Austria. Concern over a surge in killings of, and assaults against, journalists was also expressed at the opening of the Inter-American Press Association's annual meeting in Mexico City on October 20, 1997. See: West's Leading Press Group Decries Attacks on Journalists by Eloy O. Aguilar, A.P. dispatch of October 20, 1997.

Options for Consideration

A number of options might be considered to improve government/media interaction when responding to or covering terrorist incidents. These include: (1) financing joint media/government training exercises; (2) establishing a government terrorism information response center; (3) promoting use of media pools for hostage-centered terrorist events; (4) establishing and promoting voluntary press coverage guidelines; and (5) monitoring terrorism against the media.[10]

Financing Joint Government/Media Training Exercises

Effective public relations usually precedes a story--rather than reacts to it. Nations can beneficially employ broad public affairs strategies to combat terrorist-driven initiatives, and the media can play an important role within the framework of such a strategy. Training exercises are vital: exercises such as those conducted by George Washington University and the Technology Institute in Holon, Israel, which bring together government officials and media representatives to simulate government response and media coverage of mock terrorist incidents. Promoting and funding of similar programs on a broad scale internationally is an option for consideration.

Establishing a Government Terrorist Information Response Center

One option Congress might consider would be establishment of a standing government terrorist information response center (TIRC). Such a center, by agreement with the media, could have on call (through communication links) a rapid reaction terrorism reporting pool composed of senior network, wire-service, and print media representatives. Network coverage of incidents would then be coordinated by the network representative in the center. Such a center could be headed by a government spokesperson (the Terrorism Information Coordinator, TIC) who could seek to promptly seize the information and contexting initiative from the particular terrorist group.

Too often, when incidents happen in the United States there is a vacuum of news other than the incident itself, and by the time the government agencies agree on and fine tune what can be said and what positions are to be taken, the government information initiative is lost.

Promoting Use of Media Pools

Another option that has been mentioned specifically for coverage of hostage type events, would be use of a media pool where all agree on the news for release at the

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[10]Another issue for consideration beyond the scope of government and media policymaking is the degree to which a public interest group might be useful in advocating hostage rights and protection with the media, and in raising awareness of the issue of balancing the public's right to know against the rights of hostages and the public to have their safety respected by the media.

same time. A model would need to be established. However, media agreement would not be easily secured.

Promoting Voluntary Press Coverage Guidelines

Another option would be establishment by the media of a loose code of voluntary behavior or guidelines that editors and reporters could access for guidance.[11] Congress could urge the President to call a special media summit, national or perhaps international in scope under the anti-terrorism committed G-8 industrialized nations summit rubric, for senior network and print media executives to develop voluntary guidelines on terrorism reporting. Another option might be to conduct such a national meeting under the auspices of a new government agency.

Areas for discussion might be drawn from the practices of some important media members and include guidelines on:

- Limiting information on hostages which could harm them: e.g., number, nationality, official positions, how wealthy they may be, or important relatives they have;

- Limiting information on military, or police, movements during rescue operations;

- Limiting or agreeing not to air live unedited interviews with terrorists;

- Checking sources of information carefully when the pressure is high to report information that may not be accurate--as well as limiting unfounded speculation;

- Toning down information that may cause widespread panic or amplify events which aid the terrorist by stirring emotions sufficiently to exert irrational pressure on decisionmakers.

Even if specific guidelines were not adopted, such a summit would increase understanding in the public policy and press policy communities of the needs of their respective institutions.

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[11]Notably, there have been attempts by media members to impose rules when covering terrorist incidents. Standards established by the Chicago Sun-Times and Daily News include paraphrasing terrorist demands to avoid unbridled propaganda; banning participation of reporters in negotiations with terrorists; coordinating coverage through supervising editors who are in contact with police authorities; providing thoughtful, restrained, and credible coverage of stories; and allowing only senior supervisory editors to determine what, if any, information should be withheld or deferred. Such standards are far from uniformly accepted. See: Terrorism, the Future, and U.S. Foreign Policy, by Raphael F. Perl, CRS Issue Brief 95112, updated regularly.

Tracking Terrorism Against the Media

Finally, a trend toward terrorist attacks against media personnel and institutions may be emerging. This issue was addressed by President Clinton in a meeting with members of the press in Argentina during a state visit there October 17, 1997, when the President expressed concern over the issue of violence and harassment of the press in Argentina and suggested that the Organization of American States (OAS) create a special unit to ensure press freedom similar to the press ombudsman created by the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)[12]. Notwithstanding, comprehensive and readily available government statistics are lacking. One way to approach this problem would be for government reports on terrorism, such as the U.S. Department of State's *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, to include annual statistics showing the number of journalists killed or injured yearly in terrorist attacks and the annual number of terrorist incidents against media personnel or media institutions.

Conclusion

The media and the government have common interests in seeing that the media are not manipulated into promoting the cause of terrorism or its methods. On the other hand, neither the media or policymakers want to see terrorism, or counter terrorism, eroding constitutional freedoms including that of the press--one of the pillars of democratic societies. This appears to be a dilemma that cannot be completely reconciled--one with which U.S. society will continually have to struggle. Communication between the government and the media is an important element in any strategy designed to prevent the cause of terrorism from prevailing and in preserving democracy. By their nature, democracies with substantial individual freedoms and limitations on police powers offer terrorists operational advantages. But terrorists and such democracies are not stable elements in combination. If terrorism sustains itself or flourishes, freedoms shrink, and in societies run by ideological authoritarians, thugs, or radical religious extremists, a free press is one of the first institutions to go.

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[12]See: Clinton Suggests OAS Tackle Press Freedom Issue, by Lawrence McQuillan, Reuters dispatch of October 17, 1997.