A FORM OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

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A security guard checks an Indonesian woman's bag at a Jakarta shopping mall in August 2003, following a bombing at Jakarta's Marriott Hotel that killed 13 people and injured almost 149. ©AP Images/Tatan Syuflana

Terrorism is the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear in the attainment of political change. It is thus undeniably a form of psychological warfare.

Although people often are tragically killed and wounded by terrorists in their attacks, terrorism by its nature is designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of their violence. It is meant to instill fear within and thereby intimidate or otherwise affect the behavior of the terrorists' target audience.

This intended audience varies depending on the terrorists' aims, motivations, and objectives. It may include a national government or political party, a rival ethnic or religious group, an entire country and its citizens, or international opinion. The terrorist attack may either have a particular audience segment specifically in mind, or be designed to appeal to multiple audiences.

The publicity generated by a terrorist attack and the attention focused on the perpetrators are designed to create

power for the terrorists, fostering an environment of fear and intimidation amenable to terrorist manipulation. In this respect, terrorism's success is best measured not by the accepted metrics of conventional warfare—number of enemy killed in battle, amount of military assets destroyed, or geographical territory seized—but rather by its ability to attract attention to the terrorists and their cause and by the psychological impact and deleterious effects that terrorists hope to exert over their target audience(s).

Following an October 2005 warning of a terrorist threat reportedly aimed at the New York City subway, a portion of the waiting area at Penn Station is closed by police while they investigate a suspicious package.
©AP Images/John Smock

Terrorists use violence—or, equally important, wield the threat of violence—because they believe that only through brutal mayhem can their cause triumph and long-term political aims be attained. Operations are therefore deliberately planned to shock, impress, and intimidate— ensuring that their acts are sufficiently daring and bloody enough to capture the attention of the media and, in turn, the public and government as well. Thus, rather than being seen as indiscriminate or senseless, terrorism is actually a very deliberate and planned application of violence.

What Terrorists Want

Although the aims and motivations of different types of terrorists—left and right wing, ethno-nationalist and religious, single issue and broadly utopian—may differ, they all want maximum publicity to be generated by their actions and, therefore, through intimidation and subjection, attain their objectives.

A terrorist act is conceived and executed in a manner that simultaneously reflects the terrorist group's particular aims and motivations, fits its resources and capabilities, and takes into account the intended audience. The tactics and targets of various terrorist movements, as well as the weapons they favor, are inevitably shaped by a group's ideology, its

internal organizational dynamics, the personalities of its leadership, and a variety of other internal and external stimuli. For example, 1970s-era left-wing terrorists such as West Germany's Red Army Faction and Italy's Red Brigades selectively kidnapped and assassinated specific persons, whom they blamed for economic exploitation or political repression, in order to attract publicity and promote a Marxist-Leninist revolution. Contemporary terrorists, motivated by a religious imperative, have engaged in more indiscriminate acts of violence against a far wider category of targets, encompassing not merely their declared enemies but anyone who does not share their religious faith, and even persons who are of the same faith but who do not share the terrorists' extreme political views and theological constructs.

Terrorism, therefore, may be seen not only as a violent act deliberately conceived to attract attention but, through the publicity it generates, to communicate a message. In the words of the late Dr. Frederick Hacker, a psychiatrist and noted authority on terrorism, terrorists seek to "frighten and, by frightening, to dominate and control. They want to impress. They play to and for an audience and solicit audience participation."[1]

The death and destruction wrought by terrorism is deliberately designed to inculcate fear and adversely affect normal, daily life by threatening personal safety, thereby tearing at the social fabric of a country by destroying its business and cultural life and the mutual trust upon which society is based. Refusals to visit shopping malls, to attend sporting events, to go to the theater, movies, and concerts, or to travel abroad or within one's own country are common responses to the fear (known as "vicarious victimization") generated by the uncertainty of where and when the next terrorist attack will occur.

Terrorism and the Media

The modern news media, as the principal conduit of information about terrorism, play a vital part in the calculus. Indeed, without media coverage, the terrorists' impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate, actual victims of the attack, rather than reaching the wider target audience. Only by spreading fear and outrage to a much larger audience can terrorists gain the maximum potential leverage they need to effect fundamental political change.

"Terrorism is theatre," Brian Jenkins famously declared in his seminal 1974 paper "International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict," which explains how "terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press."[2] Just as often,

the media respond to these overtures with almost unbridled eagerness, proving unable to ignore what another leading terrorism analyst, J. Bowyer Bell, accurately described as "an event … fashioned specifically for their needs."[3]

In recent years, as a result of the Internet, terrorist media capabilities have evolved to a point where they can now control the entire communication process by determining the content, context, and medium over which their message is projected toward precisely the audience (or multiple audiences) they seek to reach.

The implications of this development are enormous, as they challenge the monopoly long exercised by commercial and state-owned broadcasting outlets over mass communication of the terrorist message. Hence, much like previous information revolutions—such as the invention of the rotary press in the mid-19th century and the advances in television equipment that made the reporting of events in real time possible in the 1960s—the new information revolution has profoundly empowered terrorist groups with the ability to shape and disseminate their own message in their own way, completely bypassing traditional, established media outlets.

In this June 2003 videotape, an Arabic-speaking guerrilla claims al-Qaida responsibility for suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia and Morocco and warns of more attacks to come. ©AP Images/B.K. Bangash

The Role of the Internet

As Tina Brown, the doyenne of postmodern media, astutely observed in 2005, "[T]he conjunction of 21st- century Internet speed and 12th-century fanaticism has turned our world into a tinderbox."[4]

In addition to ubiquity and timeliness, the Internet has other advantages: It can circumvent government censorship; messages can be sent anonymously, quickly, and almost effortlessly; and it is an especially cost-effective means of mass communication.

It also enables terrorists to undertake what Professor Dorothy Denning has termed perception management[5]—portraying themselves and their actions in precisely the light and context they wish, unencumbered from the filter, screening, and spin of established media.

"It is not surprising that networked terrorists have already begun to leverage IT [information technology] for perception management and propaganda to influence public opinion,

recruit new members, and generate funding," two RAND Corporation analysts have noted. "Getting a message out," they continue, "and receiving extensive news media exposure are important components of terrorist strategy, which ultimately seeks to undermine the will of an opponent. In addition to such traditional media as television or print, the Internet now offers terrorist groups an alternative way to reach out to the public, often with much more direct control over the message."[6]

Equally as worrisome is that the Internet, once regarded as an engine for education and enlightenment for the world, has become an essential means for the dissemination of terrorist propaganda, hate, and incitement to violence—purveying the coarsest and most base conspiracy theories with a pervasiveness that is completely divorced from reality. For instance, despite al-Qaida's own repeated claims of responsibility for the September 11, 2001, attacks and even the dissemination of "martyrdom" videotapes made by the hijackers discussing the forthcoming attacks, Web sites associated with the jihadist movement regularly post assertions that the United States or Israel carried out the attacks themselves to justify a war on terrorism that was always intended to be a "war on Islam."

The result is that the most outlandish and far-fetched views are acquiring a veneer of truth and veracity simply because of their unmitigated and unchallenged repetition and circulation throughout the Internet.

A Sanctuary for al-Qaida

Al-Qaida, in fact, is unique among other terrorist groups in all these communications respects. From its founding in the late 1980s and emergence in the early 1990s, al-Qaida's leadership seems to have intuitively grasped the enormous communicative potential of the Internet and sought to harness its power both to further the movement's strategic aims and to facilitate its tactical operations.

The priority that al-Qaida has long accorded to external communications is evidenced by its pre-9/11 organizational structure. One of the original four al-Qaida operational committees was specifically tasked with media and publicity. (The others were responsible for military operations, finance and business, and *fatwa* and Islamic study.)[7]

Egyptian computer experts, who had fought alongside al-Qaida founder and leader Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan against the Soviet Army during the 1980s, were reportedly specifically recruited to create the extensive network of Web sites, e-mail capabilities, and electronic bulletin boards that continues to function today—this despite al-Qaida's expulsion from Afghanistan, the destruction of its operational

base in that country, and the ongoing prosecution of the U.S.-led global war on terrorism.

For al-Qaida, the Internet has become something of a virtual sanctuary, providing an effective, expeditious, and anonymous means to carry on communications with its fighters, followers, sympathizers, and supporters worldwide, while continuing its campaign of psychological warfare. Therefore, despite its weakened state, al-Qaida is still able to generate global fear, alarm, and anxiety.

One cannot, of course, predict what new forms and dimensions terrorism will assume during the rest of the 21st century. It is safe to say, however, that as terrorist communications continue to change and evolve, so will the nature of terrorism itself. In this respect, psychological warfare, long the mainstay of terrorist intentions and capabilities, will not only continue, but will likely be abetted and accelerated by new communications technologies—just as has been the case over the past decade.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Endnotes

(1) Frederick J. Hacker, *Crusaders, Criminals, Crazies: Terror and Terrorism in Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), p. xi.

(2) 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. 16.

(3) J. Bowyer Bell, "Terrorist Scripts and Live-action Spectaculars," *Columbia Journalism Review*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1978): p. 50.

(4) Tina Brown, "Death by Error," *The Washington Post* (19 May 2005).

(5) Dorothy Denning, "Information Warfare and Cyber-terrorism," Women in International Security (WIIS) Seminar, Washington, D.C. (15 December 1999).

(6) Michele Zanini and Sean J.A. Edwards, "The Networking of Terror in the Information Age," in John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (eds.), *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001, MR-1382-OSD), p. 43.

(7) Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qa'ida: Global Network of Terror* (London: Hurst, 2002), p. 57. The director of the media operational committee was known by the *nom de guerre* Abu Reuter—an obvious reference to the famous global news wire service.

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