Combatting Terrorism

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[Go to Cumulative Article Index.](#)

The bombing of the World Trade Center in New York on 26 February 1993 brought home to Americans the notion that terrorism is not a foreign phenomenon; truly it is "one world" for terror. Overall, the new security environment after the Cold War--which puts us into an inter-war period today-- is characterized by both pluses and minuses regarding terrorism. Just as no good deed seems to go unpunished, so no benign event or trend in world politics goes unbalanced by a significant downside. For example, the evil empire of the former Soviet Union and its client regimes in Eastern Europe no longer provide safe havens, financial support, or training facilities for terrorists. The bad news is that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet empire has liberated many national and ethnic groups to pursue tribal animosities with a new vigor. Also, the arrival of great-power peace in Europe translates into a buyer's market for weaponry of virtually all kinds.

Wishful thinkers in 1991 referred to a New World Order. There are people who like to talk about some notional global community or international society. The facts are, however, that we have no New World Order, there is no global community, and in key respects international society is a do-gooder's daydream. Far from witnessing the end of history in this decade, we are seeing the triumph of history. The Third Balkan War that is still in its growth phase is an illustration of the unhappy trend.

It is appropriate to think afresh about terrorism now that the demise of the Cold War has put great balance-of-power struggles on injured reserve for a few years. But the fall of one evil empire should not be overadvertised for its consequences upon the ways in which societies conduct their security business. The 1990s are providing some possible trends that appear hopeful for international peace and security, but much less has changed about the political world than journalistic snap judgments can lead the incautious to believe. There is a certain irony in the phenomenon of a new US President with no deep foreign policy interests or credentials being obliged to confront unusually difficult foreign policy problems at the very outset of what he had

intended to be a domestically focussed era in high policy. The all but weekly outrages of angry Sikhs, Tamils, Irish republicans, Palestinians, Columbian drug lords, and Bosnian Serbs act as reminders of the range of unsettled conflicts and of the popularity of the resort to violence for causes or interests of all kinds. Whatever else may be happening in this decade, "peace," in any commonsense definition, is plainly not breaking out.

The Problem of Definition

Familiar truths about the nature of terrorism, the highly variable motives of terrorists, and the proper mix of policy and strategy responses to terrorism remain just as valid, or shaky, as they always have been. Above all else, perhaps, it is important to recognize that terrorism is a part of--because it flows from--the persisting human condition, political and psychological. However it is defined, terrorism can be contained, reduced, or defeated in some campaigns, but it cannot comprehensively be prevented at its source or stamped out comprehensively once manifested. It is not like piracy.

Definitions of terrorism abound, some of which are worse than useless because they either confuse the issue with a misplaced attempt at inclusive encyclopedism, or they mix adverse moral judgment with description. A definition of terrorism that is good enough for our purposes here is that it is *violence and the threat of violence exercised for political effect*. The leading problems with this definition are that it covers military force as well as terrorism, and that it would appear to exclude terroristic violence applied for criminal purposes. The truth is that terrorism can be small or large in scale, can be applied by the disaffected or by governments, is a method rather than a philosophy (though the two tend to merge), and is manifested for a list of motives that exceeds a simple binary distinction between the political and the criminal.

There is some modest merit in attempts to clarify the nature of terrorism by identifying its leading characteristics. For example, it is fairly standard to note that terroristic behavior:

- is premeditated and designed to create a climate of fear and anxiety;
- is intended to impress a much wider audience than its immediate victims or witnesses;
- is wont to strike at random as well as at recognizable, symbolically significant targets;
- deliberately fractures social norms for shock value;
- and, overall, endeavors to influence political behavior.

Only the fourth in this short list of characteristics--the pursuit of shock value--is unambiguously distinctive to terrorist, as contrasted with regular military, behavior.

Practical people, particularly busy officials, tend to be understand-ably impatient with scholars whose weaving of fine distinctions seems not to generate useful light on the messy reality of widespread political and criminal violence. Nonetheless, it is important that linguistic

overfamiliarity should not breed an ignorance that leaves us vulnerable to clever argument by people who do not share our values. The meaning and identity of terrorism and terrorists are not self-evident, even though the terms are employed as if they were. Unfortunately, the Dean of the Law School at the University of Damascus, Muhammad Aziz Shukri, is correct when he writes that "terrorism remains a political rubric which continues to be randomly, arbitrarily and selectively used to characterize the undesired acts of one's opponents in the international arena." Shukri observes that "international terrorism is not a crime per se under the norms of public international law. International or transnational terrorism . . . has neither been defined nor penalized under international law."[1] Professor Shukri has his own agenda, of course, but his central point is valid and inescapable.

People do bad things for reasons that seem good to them. Moreover, the belief that the end justifies the means is not confined to any particular extremity of the political spectrum. Many people are inclined to condone threats or acts of violence conducted for causes of which they approve, and to condemn violence for causes of which they disapprove. The whole subject of terrorism and counterterrorism is shot through with moral and political judgments. Legal norms and a system of justice to administer and enforce them can only work where there is a moral and political community with generally shared values. Any bold crusader setting out to slay the dragon of terrorism needs to be reminded of the truth in the cliché that one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter.

That cliché should not paralyze our behavior, however, because we ought not to be overly troubled by a moral relativism. The point is, if one is going to pontificate about the evils of terrorism, one should be prepared for accusations of hypocrisy (they may be true), and should not be surprised when some other countries decline to regard our bad guys as international criminals.

At root, terrorism is a matter of political and moral judgment; it is not a matter of law and the administration of justice. If there is no agreed definition of terrorism or terrorist, progress in international cooperation is certain to be fitful at best. Political difficulties cannot usefully be denied or evaded by the elementary expedient of treating all candidate terrorist activity simply as the commission of criminal acts. The problem is the lack of a sense of political community and an unwillingness to acquiesce in a political outcome that is not favored. To resolve the problem of terrorism in a fundamental way, a true community of political values would need to be forged.

Practically speaking, there will always be groups and individuals unwilling to live quietly with the defeat of their particular cause. Even when a cause largely succeeds, there are always likely to be fanatics who are irreconcilable with a compromise settlement. For example, a necessarily compromise peace settlement between Israel and the representatives of the Arabs of Palestine must leave angry pockets of fanatics on both sides. Terrorism is not ubiquitous and neither is it uncontainable, but the potential for its occurrence is virtually as widespread as is the

manifestation of bitter political antagonisms. Reduce the latter and you will reduce, though not eliminate, the former.

A Strategic Problem

Terrorism should be regarded primarily as a strategic problem, though in some specific cases its political character lends itself to treatment. Terrorism has to be viewed as a strategic problem because terrorists function strategically and can be thwarted strategically. Terrorism can be tackled politically at the root and branch level in some instances, though by and large any political settlement will leave some people dissatisfied. Also, some of the world's political conflicts really have no attainable political solution (Northern Ireland, for example). Virtually regardless of the distinctiveness of group or individual motivation, terrorists try to function strategically: theirs is a familiar means-ends universe of consequences. If their strategy can be beaten, terrorists can be defeated.

While the Cold War was center stage for US security attention, relatively little horsepower was applied to the problem of terrorism by the mainstream of the US strategic studies community. The theories and the advice tended to be about nuclear war plans, nuclear deterrence, or the deterrence and waging of large regional wars. The time is long overdue, then, to bring terrorism into the central flow of security analysis. Terrorism and other challenges in the field somewhat vaguely identified as low-intensity conflict or operations other than war warrant receiving the imaginative but realistic and historically educated attention that mainstream political-military problems long have commanded. Before finalizing policy and strategy to oppose terrorism, however, it is important to recognize certain truisms. Take as a case the anti-drug effort: some policy and strategy cures would be worse than the disease; military notions (war on drugs, war on terrorism, or combatting drug trafficking) can blind their users to the real limits to society's political tolerance, and can frame a problem inaccurately; and unpalatable truths are exactly that (for example, the real problem with drugs in the United States is on the demand side, not the supply side).

There continues to be lively debate about the relevance and utility of military options as an instrument of policy against terrorism. The more notable charges can be framed as follows:

- Military options are counterproductive (i.e. they do not work; they lack utility).
- Military options subvert respect for law (including *our* respect for law) and encourage the flouting of the very principles that civilized societies profess to stand for.
- Military options encourage the escalation of violence in a spiral of futility.
- Innocent bystanders frequently are hurt in counterterrorist operations (terrorists being very elusive targets).
- Counterterrorism often embraces such ethically objectionable tactics as assassination or

kidnapping, and the military pursuit of terrorists runs headlong into problems of sovereignty and contested claims for extraterritorial rights.

What is one to make of charges and objections such as these? Overall, common sense, historical experience, and strategic logic argue for a full-service set of grand-strategy responses to terrorism; that is to say, the complete range of policy instruments should be usable, if not frequently used.

Often we are advised to beware of direct military action as a panacea for terrorism. But we should beware, also, of no-less-indiscriminate objections to military options. The problems with the military instrument are all too obvious. Of course civilian agencies often should take the lead; of course there can be political sensitivities abroad that should be heeded. But US special operations forces have assets not found in police agencies, and it is important that terrorist organizations should anticipate a full spectrum of threats against them. Personal threats can improve strategic reasoning by underlining the possibly dire direct consequences of one's actions. There is no panacea for terrorism, just as terrorism is an almost infinitely varied reality fueled by a smorgasbord of motives. But military action has its place for deterrence and defense.

Terrorists are not strategically irrational--far from it--and neither do many individual terrorists have abnormal psycholo-gies, at least as far as experience has determined to date. With military action in those cases where the intelligence is adequate and the politics are permissive, there is value in our performing both *to deny*, that is, to defeat, and *to punish*, preferably with healthily disproportionate action. Punishment can fit the crime without matching the violence of the crime. Deterrence is neither reliable nor ubiquitous; but there is good reason to try to discourage those who can be discouraged.

When thinking strategically about ways to defeat the strategies of terrorists, it is essential to attempt to empathize (for understanding) with the political and strategic cultures of alien societies and groups. The US strategic studies community writ large, and the US government, has not done very well in this regard. To deter or otherwise defeat a terrorist, one has to act upon or speak to *his* values, not ours. No policy or strategy can work comprehensively and reliably against phenomena as richly diverse as that indicated by the composite and subjective category of "terrorism." Objections to military responses to terrorism are not dissimilar in kind from objections to military responses to other political problems, and they are just as unsatisfactory.

There is no question but that military options can merit the charges cited above. The answer, however, is to develop and control a more finely tailored military instrument, capable of functioning with great flexibility and precision for clearly defined political purposes. The answer is not to take counsel of one's fears and allow the military instrument to be paralyzed into inactivity. Individual terrorists, terrorist organizations, and states sponsoring terrorism all inhabit a characteristically strategic world wherein the anticipation of punishment is severely discouraging. The risk calculus of would-be terrorists is influenced benignly by the understanding

that even if many of their actions cannot be defeated directly, they certainly can be avenged.

This is not to argue for a primacy of military responses to terrorism, nor is it to encourage disrespect for legal due process and for the more humane values of our society. But it is to claim that no counterterrorist policy or grand strategy possibly can be complete if it excludes provision for going after terrorists with all necessary force. The use of force, no matter how careful, always will attract criticism. It is as important for citizens to elect political leaders willing to brave that criticism as it is for them to license political-military counterterrorist capabilities. If politicians are never willing to order military counterterrorist units into action, it will not be surprising if those units lose all potential deterrent value.

The Need for Moral Courage

As well as competence in policy, strategy, and operations, political leaders require a moral courage to match the physical courage required of soldiers. Lack of moral courage in high places is probably our deepest problem in facing terrorism, and indeed in facing much else. This moral and political courage is not only the courage to order bold military action, but also--and often--the courage to be firm in not taking hopeless action. Impossible missions should be recognized as such. In addition, politicians should strive to keep the challenges of terrorism in perspective. While alert to awesome possibilities in the future, the historical record of strategic achievement by terrorists actually is heroically modest, at most, notwithstanding the February 1993 outrage in Manhattan.

The US government should be more careful to align what it says with what it does about international terrorism. Although the punishment of Libya in 1986 for its sponsorship, or at least support, of terrorism appears to have had some salutary effect, Libya was a target from central casting for the easy registration of American frustration. Evidence of the sponsorship of terrorism by the former USSR, East Germany, Syria, and Iran has been at least as impressive as that which served to condemn Colonel Gadhafi. Terrorism, like drugs, is a subject that attracts official hyperbole. In practice, however, it has been US policy to punish only those sponsors of terrorists who are weak and isolated. As with the case of the so-called war on drugs cited earlier, US policy is not quite as serious as a casual observer might believe.

Terrorism will pose a continuing, and probably an increasing, challenge through this deeply unsettled decade. The scale of menace posed by terrorists all but invites neglect by defense analysts who typically focus upon much higher levels of violence. The fact remains, however, that terrorism, though usually threatening only isolated and small-scale violence, poses a full frontal challenge to the implicit contract between citizen and state. The protection of individuals and their property against harm remains the most fundamental obligation of government.

NOTE:

1. Muhammed Aziz Shukri, *International Terrorism: A Legal Critique* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Amana Books, 1991), p. 167.

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