

Fighting International Terrorism: Beyond September 11th

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Much public rhetoric over the past two and a half months has been devoted to the theme of how much our world changed on September 11th. The phrases have acquired a familiar rhythm: “new era,” “extraordinary times,” “our lives will never be the same.” This “new era” outlook is an understandable and reasonable reaction to the sheer magnitude of what the hijackers of September 11th accomplished, thanks in part to the secondary effect of two skyscrapers collapsing. The quantitative difference in what they accomplished is great enough to justify some qualitative differences in how we deal with terrorism. The approximately 3,000 people killed in the attacks far surpasses—by a factor of nearly ten—any attack that any terrorists had previously perpetrated, in any country, in pursuit of any cause.

But I’m not going to talk primarily about the new and the different. Instead, I want to focus on what has not changed in international terrorism, and to do so for two reasons.

- One, there’s not much I can add, for anyone who’s been reading the saturation coverage in the newspapers, about what’s shockingly new, beyond the statistical fact I just mentioned.
- Two, what is old and continuing will be at least as big a part of international terrorism in the years ahead as what is new and different.

Despite the shock of the September 11th attacks—and every terrorist attack involves some degree of shock; that is intrinsic to terrorism—the attacks were a continuation and manifestation of several patterns that have been evident over the past several years. The aspects of the event that should not have surprised us outnumber those that should have.

Start with who was responsible for the attack. This was not an instance of our having to ask ourselves, “Where did these people come from, and who put them up to this?” Al-Qa’ida has been at the top of terrorist concerns for the US for over three years, since the bombings of the embassies in Africa. Usama Bin Ladin in particular has been an object of special attention and concern for twice as long as that.

That the United States should have been the target of the deadliest terrorist attack in history was also part of a well-established pattern. US interests get hit by terrorists more than those of any other nation—an increasingly marked tendency over the past couple of decades. And Bin Ladin could not have been more open about his intention to hit us as hard as he could. In his manifestos and fatwas and videotapes he has repeatedly declared his aim to punish America

and Americans, and has said that American civilians are just as much his enemy as those who wear a uniform, and just as deserving of dying.

That a terrorist operation should have been designed to kill thousands is part of another larger trend—one toward greater lethality in international terrorism, in which we see fewer major terrorist operations conducted in a measured way for bargaining purposes, with the intended outcome being some specific concession by a government such as release of prisoners, and more operations intended simply to punish a perceived adversary.

That a foreign terrorist organization should reach thousands of miles away from its base to conduct a successful attack within the United States reflected a larger extension of the geographic reach of terrorist groups—a globalization of terrorism, if you will—that has been going on for the past decade and has taken the form of the growth of transnational terrorist infrastructures and of individual terrorist operatives becoming more peripatetic. It has made possible, for example, successful terrorist attacks by Lebanese Hizballah against Jewish and Israeli-connected targets in Argentina. And in the United States, it made possible the first attack against the World Trade Center: the truck bombing there eight years ago. (Note, by the way, how that attack was a precedent even for one of the specific targets hit on September 11th. The terrorists who conducted the bombing in 1993 were, just like the hijackers this year, attempting to topple the Trade Center's twin towers.)

The sophistication and degree of coordination required for the multiple attacks on September 11th, while impressive, were not orders of magnitude beyond what groups had accomplished before. A large number of simultaneous bombings were carried out by anti-Indian terrorists in Bombay in 1993, for example, and in a less lethal way by the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, in offensives against Turkish targets in Europe in the early 1990s. Al-Qa'ida itself accomplished simultaneous attacks in two different countries with its bombings of US embassies in 1998. The number of people involved in planning, supporting, and executing the September 11th attacks was probably more, but not much more, than the number involved in the embassy bombings.

Even the particular method that the terrorists of September used did not come out of the blue, figuratively speaking. Hijacking of commercial aircraft has, of course, been a time-honored method of international terrorism, and was one of the most prominent modus operandi during the first couple of decades of the modern era of international terrorism. It's true that the September 11th operation was the first time that terrorists succeeded in crashing commandeered airliners into well-chosen targets to cause significant casualties on the ground. But even that particular twist is something that earlier terrorists had planned and hoped to do—Algerian extremists who hijacked a French airliner in 1994 intended to do just that in Paris, before French authorities stormed the plane on the ground to end the incident.

So if this much should have been unsurprising, why, you may ask, could we not have anticipated and prevented what happened in September? As an issue of intelligence, the answer is the same one that has applied to many earlier major terrorist incidents: that although we had good strategic intelligence about the groups that threatened us, their objectives and capabilities, and the sorts of methods they might use, we seldom obtain the sort of tactical intelligence—about the date, time, and place of attack—that is specific enough to roll up a plot and prevent a planned attack from occurring. We seldom obtain it because of the inherent difficulty of penetrating or otherwise learning the plans of terrorist groups—that is, the operational cells of groups which actually carry out terrorist attacks, which are small, secretive, suspicious toward outsiders, ruthless toward anyone suspected of betraying them, and highly conscious of operational security. Good strategic intelligence and a lack of tactical intelligence: that was a conclusion of the commission led by General Downing that studied the bombing of Khubar Towers in 1996; it was a conclusion of the panel chaired by Admiral Crowe that looked at the embassy bombings in 1998; and it will be a conclusion of whatever commission or panel examines the events of September 11th.

In one sense, every terrorist attack represents an intelligence failure, since conceivably one could have obtained specific information about the plot, and if one had, one would have foiled the plot. But by that definition, a world without intelligence failures would be a world without terrorism, which would be extraordinary, and historically unprecedented. Using a more sensible definition of intelligence failure—meaning there was information that reasonably could have been collected but wasn't, or that was collected but was misanalyzed or misused—and reflecting on what we know today about September 11th operation, I cannot think of any particular thing that the Intelligence Community should have picked up on but didn't. The hijackers did the simple but effective things needed to keep their plot under wraps, which for the most part meant doing their planning and plotting behind closed doors, and not saying anything to anyone who could not be trusted, or through any means that could be intercepted.

Going beyond issues of intelligence, there were, to be sure, some pieces of information that raise questions about steps that might have been taken to try to prevent something like this from happening. How was it, for example, that at least a couple of the hijackers had terrorist connections (known through previous reporting) but could nonetheless buy a ticket and board a commercial flight in the United States in true name? But the only way to have done something about that would be to move to a system of aviation security in which none of us can buy a seat without in effect undergoing a background check—and that raises all sorts of issues about privacy and civil liberties, not to mention resources. We need to bear those issues in mind as debate proceeds about creation of databases, sharing of data across agency and jurisdictional lines for security purposes, and other measures that, to put it bluntly, would mean moving in the direction of what

police states do. I'm not saying don't take some of those steps; I'm just saying that the broader issues and trade-offs are legitimate questions for public debate.

Our shock and surprise over September 11th was not so much a matter of information gaps but rather of broader patterns of how we've been thinking about, and discussing, terrorism. One of those patterns, which has been recurrent, is the tendency to fall into complacency about terrorism after a passage of time without a major terrorist incident, or complacency about a particular method of attack, if time has gone by without that method being used. Up until September, security against hijacking of commercial aircraft had been a success story here in the United States. Long gone were the days when it seemed like every month someone was diverting a plane to Havana. The system of metal detectors and X-ray machines did seem to work. And we did get complacent, leading to a situation in which security became the responsibility of low-bid contractors and in which it was no big deal to carry a knife on board.

Another harmful tendency has been the preoccupation over the last several years with the more exotic means with which terrorists might attack—particularly chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear means, or CBRN, to use the usual abbreviation—at the expense of attention given to less exotic means of terrorism. This preoccupation has reflected not just the legitimate reasons for attention to this subject, but the quality of being exotic. It's nifty; it's sexy; it makes for good plots for fiction, and it sells books and articles. An effect of this preoccupation has been a tendency to equate the terrorist threat against the United States, and particularly the US homeland, with CBRN threats, and to further equate CBRN terrorism with mass casualty terrorism. And so, Americans were surprised that a terrorist operation was conducted in the United States, inflicting casualties that anyone would agree were “mass,” by terrorists who used nothing more exotic than box cutters and some flight training.

So what is the terrorist threat the United States faces in the years ahead? Everything I've mentioned about September 11th continuing certain patterns from the past implies a continuation into the future. But let me be more specific, starting with the overall magnitude of international terrorist threats against the United States. A comparison of American priorities and attention to counterterrorism prior to September 11th, and after September 11th, would suggest that the terrorist threat to the United States had suddenly, and markedly, become more severe. As a matter of emotion and psychology the response has been understandable, and many of the steps taken in the name of counterterrorism since then are wise and much needed. But has the threat itself actually gone up so far and so fast? In one sense we could say the threat has gone down, in that as of September 10th, the nation was unknowingly facing a well-planned plot that would kill thousands, and as of September 12th, it no longer faced that particular plot because the plot had been carried out and the perpetrators themselves were dead.

The actual terrorist threat we face is never as high as a recent major incident makes it seem, or as low as an absence of major incidents over a period of time makes it seem. The threat facing the United States was probably greater before September 11th than most Americans thought, and may be less since September 11th than many Americans seem to fear now. The occurrence of a terrorist attack should cause us to revise our estimate of the threat upward only for one or more of the following reasons.

One is if the attack tells us something we did not previously know about the capabilities or intentions of a terrorist adversary. But as I already suggested, the enmity of Bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida (and others like them) toward us were already clear, and their geographic reach was well known.

Another possible reason is that other terrorists, unconnected with the perpetrators of the initial event, may seize the moment to mount their own attacks, taking advantage of a climate of heightened fear, and perhaps of the possibility that their own attacks would be blamed on someone else. Whoever did the anthrax letters was probably seizing a moment in this sense. But now, two and a half months after September 11th, we have already passed the principal period of this kind of danger.

A third reason is that a prominent attack may demonstrate possibilities to other terrorists, regarding what can be accomplished regarding certain methods, certain types of targets, or certain places. The September 11th attacks may have some demonstration effect, although as far as major attacks in the US homeland are concerned, the earlier bombing of the World Trade Center, as well as the bombing in Oklahoma City, had already shown the way. The September 11th hijackers demonstrated, of course, a major vulnerability in aviation security and the successful use of commandeered airliners as cruise missiles—and that may put some ideas into other terrorists' heads—but the new high awareness of that particular vulnerability, and the countermeasures being taken to lessen it, will make it harder to use the same technique again.

A fourth reason is that terrorists may stage additional attacks in reprisal for our own actions in responding to the original attack. With our own actions in this case including a major military offensive, which has stirred opposition and resentment in much of the Muslim world, this is a genuine danger. So far, we have not seen major attacks that appear to be this kind of reprisal. But it is still early as far as this kind of danger is concerned. The level of risk will depend heavily on the future course of US military operations, and in particular on whether the use of US armed forces in the name of counterterrorism were to extend beyond Afghanistan.

Which brings us to how the war in Afghanistan fits into the overall US counterterrorist effort. What the US military is doing there goes far beyond any previous US use of military force in a counterterrorist mode. It consists not just of

retaliatory strikes or limited attempts to inflict some damage and send a message, but rather the cleaning out of the world's prime terrorist safe haven and the toppling of the regime that has been in a closer partnership with terrorist groups than has any other. If that effort succeeds, it will make a significant dent in international terrorism. Success will depend not only on sweeping the Taliban off the battlefield but also on assisting the Afghans to erect a stable alternative, a process that will consist of nothing less than—dare I say the word—nation-building.

There is no other place like Afghanistan, where military force can be applied so directly toward a counterterrorist end. For the most part, terrorism does not present good militarily attackable targets. Most of the terrorist preparations that matter occur not in camps in the countryside of some place like Afghanistan but in apartments in places like Beirut or Hamburg or New Jersey or Florida.

The current focus on Afghanistan must also not keep us from remembering just how diverse, geographically and organizationally, international terrorism is. Start with al-Qa'ida alone. Crushing the part of the organization that is inside Afghanistan, including Bin Ladin, would still leave the large part of it, in terms of operatives, resources, and operational plans, that is outside Afghanistan. What we know about the lead time and preparations for the September 11th attacks necessitates the assumption that there are other plans for other attacks against the United States, in the hands of operatives willing to carry them out even if Bin Ladin and all of his senior leadership were removed from the scene.

And the network—or really, the network of networks—of radical Islamists willing to do the United States grievous harm goes beyond the organization we know as al-Qa'ida. It includes other groups, as well as cells and individuals, many of whom forged ties in the camps of Afghanistan but have continued to benefit from their networking there long afterward. Beyond this mostly Sunni set of networks are the Shia extremists, including the likes of Lebanese Hizballah. And beyond the Islamists are many others of diverse persuasion, including those who have done Americans direct harm, such as leftists in Europe or Latin America, and others who have not thus far targeted the United States but have been a significant part of international terrorism, such as separatist Tamils or Kurds.

Our terrorist enemies are not just readily identifiable groups, like al-Qa'ida or Hizballah, or prominent leaders like Bin Ladin. Terrorism is decentralized, even though the networks provide contacts and support. The initiative for terrorist attacks against us can come from the cell level, and from terrorist organizers who may not become known to us until they accomplish their evil deeds. We need look no farther than the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center to see what I'm talking about. That wasn't an al-Qa'ida operation, or the

operation of any named group on our screen. It was the work of several like-minded extremists in the New York area who were mobilized by a clever man named Ramzi Yousef.

From what has been revealed so far about the preparation for the September 11th attacks, it may have been one of the hijackers, Mohammed Atta, who did most of the planning and organizing. Clearly he had significant help from outside his immediate circle of conspirators—evidently al-Qa'ida help—in the form principally of money, and possibly of recruitment of some of the Saudi men who provided muscle for the operation. We don't know yet exactly how much guidance and direction he got. But even if he hadn't had that help, and he hadn't been able to mount as large an operation as took place, and had to rely on fewer compatriots and a smaller amount of money that he scratched together from who knows where, it is quite conceivable that he and a handful of companions could have, say, hijacked one airliner and toppled one of the towers of the World Trade Center, which would have been horrible enough.

There will be more Ramzi Yousefs, and more Mohammed Attas, and much of what we do in counterterrorism will need to be directed at the threat that they pose. Meeting that threat will require the well-coordinated use of all the relevant tools and techniques we have.

Those techniques include, first of all, ones that don't bear the counterterrorist label at all but do bear on the conditions that tend to breed terrorists and support for terrorist groups, including aspects of our foreign policy that deal with long-festering international conflicts that drive aggrieved people to desperate acts, and with social and economic conditions that can make those people even more desperate. There will be always be Bin Ladins and some other terrorists regardless of conditions and grievances, but the conditions do affect the number of people who join them, or support them, or sympathize with them.

The tools also include defenses—security countermeasures surrounding potential terrorist targets. And here the main mistake we need to avoid is preparing for the last terrorist attack rather than the next one. As we shore up aviation security to reduce the chance of another September 11th, we should bear in mind that terrorists vary their tactics and targets to keep the defenders off balance. Al-Qa'ida alone has used truck bombs, maritime attacks, and hijackings, among other techniques. As far as terrorist tactics are concerned, we should not be surprised to be surprised.

Because of this—and because terrorists can attack anything, anywhere, anytime, but we cannot protect everything, everywhere, all the time—we need to place heavy emphasis on offensive counterterrorism: taking the fight to the terrorists to reduce their capabilities. This requires a variety of tools, not just military force but intelligence, covert action, interdiction of finances, criminal law

investigations, and diplomacy. Most of all, it involves the painstaking cell-by-cell disruption, in cooperation with our foreign partners, of terrorist infrastructures worldwide. Some of the biggest successes in the war on terrorism will be scored on this front, even though the great majority of them must remain secret and you will not be able to follow them like a battle map of Afghanistan in the newspaper.

We have been using all of these techniques, for quite some time. There is much continuity, from pre- to post-September 11th, not only in the terrorist threat but in the counterterrorist response to it. Three years ago, following the attacks on the embassies in Africa, we were already talking about being in a “war on terrorism.” That’s important to bear in mind, lest we forget lessons already learned, re-invent wheels, or spin our wheels trying to go up roads we’ve tried before but didn’t take us anywhere.

So if this much is unchanged, what hope is there that we can do any better in the future than we have in the past? That has to do with what really did change, suddenly and markedly, on September 11th, and that is the degree of commitment that the American government and people are giving to counterterrorism. Although there are some solutions to this problem that no amount of popular support and determination can buy, strength of commitment does matter, and not just in the sense of determining where dollars in the federal budget go. It matters in determining the tolerance of the American for various costs and inconveniences that we have to endure for the sake of security. And it matters when the United States calls on other governments to take action, sometimes at risk to themselves, against terrorists in their countries, and those governments must assess how important the request is to us before they decide to act.

Finally, as we wage this “war on terrorism,” we need to realize that not only did it not have a clear beginning (on September 11th or any other date) but also, unlike World War II, or the Cold War, or most other wars we have waged, it will not have a clear end. Secretary Rumsfeld spoke an important truth when he said that if this be a war, it is not one that will end with a surrender on the deck of the Missouri. If history is a guide, even the current enthusiasm for counterterrorism, great though it is because of the enormity of what happened two months ago, will slacken over time. Along with a realization of limits and ambiguities inherent to countering terrorism, we will also need much patience and persistence, into an indefinite future.