THE INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM THREAT IS CHANGING

- Who are the international terrorists?
- What are their motives and how do they get their support?
- How can we stop them?

The answers to these questions have changed significantly over the last 25 years. There are dramatically fewer international terrorist incidents than in the mid-eighties. Many of the groups that targeted America's interests, friends, and allies have disappeared. The Soviet bloc, which once provided support to terrorist groups, no longer exists. Countries that once excused terrorism now condemn it. This changed international attitude has led to 12 United Nations conventions targeting terrorist activity and, more importantly, growing, practical international cooperation.

However, if most of the world's countries are firmer in opposing terrorism, some still support terrorists or use terrorism as an element of state policy. Iran is the clearest case. The Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security carry out terrorist activities and give direction and support to other terrorists. The regimes of Syria, Sudan, and Afghanistan provide funding, refuge, training bases, and weapons to terrorists. Libya continues to provide support to some Palestinian terrorist groups and to harass expatriate dissidents, and North Korea may still provide weapons to terrorists. Cuba provides safehaven to a number of terrorists. Other states allow terrorist groups to operate on their soil or provide support which, while falling short of state sponsorship, nonetheless gives terrorists important assistance.

The terrorist threat is also changing in ways that make it more dangerous and difficult to counter.

International terrorism once threatened Americans only when they were outside the country. Today international terrorists attack us on our own soil. Just before the millennium, an alert U.S. Customs Service official

stopped Ahmad Ressam as he attempted to enter the United States from Canada—apparently to conduct a terrorist attack. This fortuitous arrest should not inspire complacency, however. On an average day, over one million people enter the United States legally and thousands more enter illegally. As the World Trade Center bombing demonstrated, we cannot rely solely on existing border controls and procedures to keep foreign terrorists out of the United States.

"Terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead."

Brian Jenkins, 1974

"Today's terrorists don't want a seat at the table, they want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it."

R. James Woolsey, 1994

Terrorist attacks are becoming more lethal. Most terrorist organizations active in the 1970s and 1980s had clear political objectives. They tried to calibrate their attacks to produce just enough bloodshed to get attention for their cause, but not so much as to alienate public support. Groups like the Irish Republican Army and the Palestine Liberation Organization often sought specific political concessions.

Now, a growing percentage of terrorist attacks are designed to kill as many people as possible. In the 1990s a terrorist incident was almost 20 percent more likely to result in death or injury than an incident two decades ago. The World Trade Center bombing in New York killed six and wounded about 1,000, but the terrorists' goal was to topple the twin towers, killing tens of thousands of people. The thwarted attacks against New York City's infrastructure in 1993—which included plans to bomb the Lincoln and Holland tunnels—also were intended to cause mass casualties. In 1995, Philippine authorities uncovered a terrorist plot to bring down 11 U.S. airliners in Asia. The circumstances surrounding the millennium border arrests of foreign nationals suggest that the suspects planned to target a large group assembled for a New Year's celebration. Overseas attacks against the United States in recent years have followed the same trend. The bombs that destroyed the military barracks in Saudi Arabia and two U.S. Embassies in Africa inflicted 6,059 casualties. Those arrested in Jordan in late December had also planned attacks designed to kill large numbers.

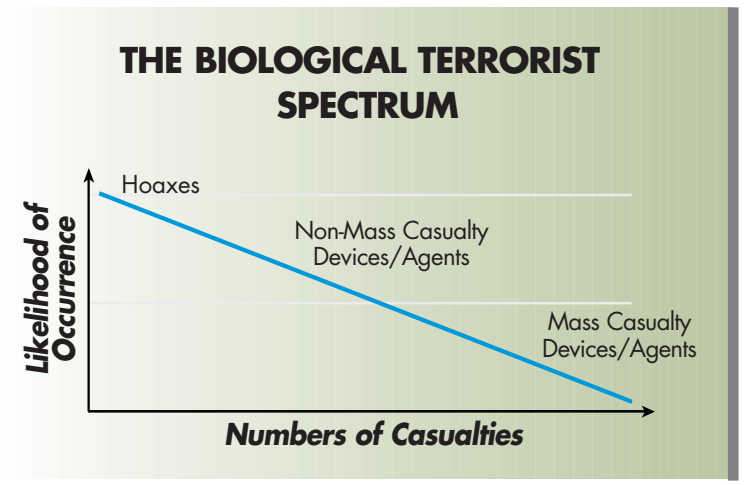
The trend toward higher casualties reflects, in part, the changing motivation of today's terrorists. Religiously motivated terrorist groups, such as Usama bin Ladin's group, al-Qaida, which is believed to have bombed the U.S. Embassies in Africa, represent a growing trend toward hatred of the United States. Other terrorist groups are driven by visions of a post-apocalyptic future or by ethnic hatred. Such groups may lack a concrete political goal other than to punish their enemies by killing as many of them as possible, seemingly without concern about alienating sympathizers. Increasingly, attacks are less likely to be followed by claims of responsibility or lists of political demands.

The shift in terrorist motives has contributed to a change in the way some international terrorist groups are structured. Because groups based on ideological or religious motives may lack a specific political or nationalistic agenda, they have less need for a hierarchical structure. Instead, they can rely on loose affiliations with like-minded groups from a variety of countries to support their common cause against the United States.

Al-Qaida is the best-known transnational terrorist organization. In addition to pursuing its own terrorist campaign, it calls on numerous militant groups that share some of its ideological beliefs to support its violent campaign against the United States. But neither al-Qaida's extremist politico-religious beliefs nor its leader, Usama bin Ladin, is unique. If al-Qaida and Usama bin Ladin were to disappear tomorrow, the United States would still face potential terrorist threats from a growing number of groups opposed to perceived American hegemony. Moreover, new terrorist threats can suddenly emerge from isolated conspiracies or obscure cults with no previous history of violence.

These more loosely affiliated, transnational terrorist networks are difficult to predict, track, and penetrate. They rely on a variety of sources for funding and logistical support, including self-financing criminal activities such as kidnapping, narcotics, and petty crimes. Their networks of support include both front organizations and legitimate business and nongovernment organizations. They use the Internet as an effective communications channel.

Guns and conventional explosives have so far remained the weapons of choice for most terrorists. Such weapons can cause many casualties and are relatively easy to acquire and use. But some terrorist groups now show interest in acquiring the capability to use chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) materials. It is difficult to predict the likelihood of a CBRN attack, but most experts agree that today's terrorists are seeking the ability to use such agents in order to cause mass casualties.

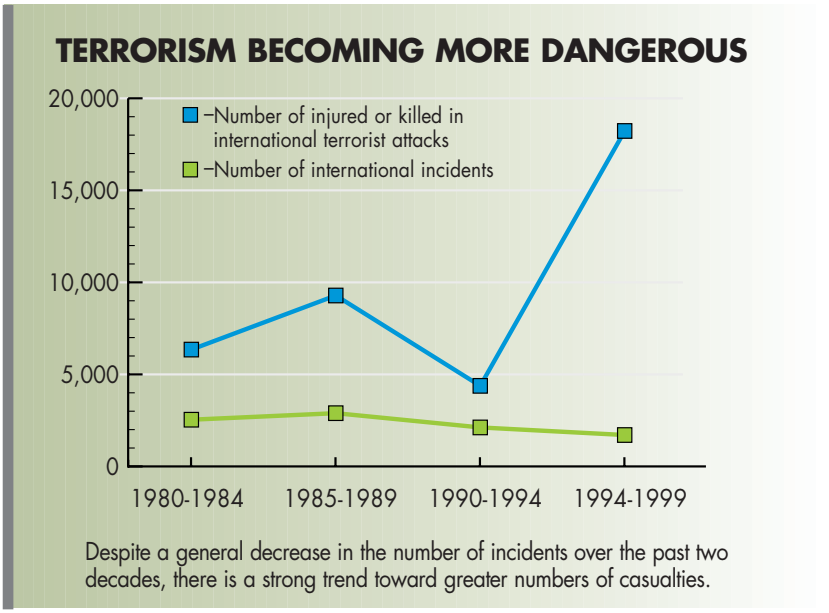


Still, these kinds of weapons and materials confront a non-state sponsored terrorist group with significant technical challenges. While lethal chemicals are easy to come by, getting large quantities and weaponizing them for mass casualties is difficult, and only nation states have succeeded in doing so. Biological agents can be acquired in nature or from medical supply houses, but important aspects of handling and dispersion are daunting. To date, only nation states have demonstrated the capability to build radiological and nuclear weapons.

The 1995 release of a chemical agent in the Tokyo subway by the apocalyptic Aum Shinrikyo group demonstrated the difficulties that terrorists face in attempting to use CBRN weapons to produce mass casualties. The group used scores of highly skilled technicians and spent tens of millions of dollars developing a chemical attack that killed fewer people than conventional explosives could have. The same group failed totally in a separate attempt to launch an anthrax attack in Tokyo.

However, if the terrorists' goal is to challenge significantly Americans' sense of safety and confidence, even a small CBRN attack could be successful.

Moreover, terrorists could acquire more deadly CBRN capabilities from a state. Five of the seven nations the United States identifies as state sponsors of terrorism have programs to develop weapons of mass destruction. A state that knowingly provides agents of mass destruction or technology to a terrorist group should worry about losing control of the terrorists' activities and, if the weapons could be traced back to that state, the near certainty of massive retaliation. However, it is always difficult and sometimes dangerous to attempt to predict the actions of a state. Moreover, a state in chaos, or elements within such a state, might run these risks, especially if the United States were engaged in military conflict with that state or if the United States were distracted by a major conflict in another area of the world.



The Commission was particularly concerned about the persistent lack of adequate security and safeguards for the nuclear material in the former Soviet Union (FSU). A Center for Strategic International Studies panel chaired by former Senator Sam Nunn concluded that, despite a decade of effort, the risk of "loose nukes" is greater than ever. Another ominous warning was given in 1995 when Chechen rebels, many of whom fight side-by-side with Islamic terrorists from bin Ladin's camps sympathetic to the Chechen cause, placed radioactive material in a Moscow park.

Cyber attacks are often considered in the same context with CBRN. Respectable experts have published sobering scenarios about the potential impact of a successful cyber attack on the United States. Already, hackers and criminals have exploited some of our vulnerabilities.

Certainly, terrorists are making extensive use of the new information technologies, and a conventional terrorist attack along with a coordinated cyber attack could exponentially compound the damage. While the Commission considers cyber security a matter of grave importance, it also notes that the measures needed to protect the United States from cyber attack by terrorists are largely identical to those necessary to protect us from such an attack by a hostile foreign country, criminals, or vandals.

Not all terrorists are the same, but the groups most dangerous to the United States share some characteristics not seen 10 or 20 years ago:

- They operate in the United States as well as abroad.
- Their funding and logistical networks cross borders, are less dependent on state sponsors, and are harder to disrupt with economic sanctions.
- They make use of widely available technologies to communicate quickly and securely.
- Their objectives are more deadly.

This changing nature of the terrorist threat raises the stakes in getting American counterterrorist policies and practices right.