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SPECIAL REPORT

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The Diplomacy of Counterterrorism

Lessons Learned, Ignored, and Disputed

About the Report

This report is based upon a meeting of the International Research Group on Political Violence (IRGPV) held at the United States Institute of Peace to discuss national and international methods of countering terrorism. Although the original report was drafted before the September 11 attacks, it has been revised to reflect those attacks and more recent events. Topics discussed included specific lessons learned from past experience, the challenges of building international coalitions, the effectiveness of criminal law approaches in contrast to military responses, the role of rhetoric and public diplomacy, the effectiveness of current policies, and the "new terrorism" and weapons of mass destruction.

The IRGPV is co-sponsored by the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Airey Neave Trust of Great Britain. This report was written by Audrey Kurth Cronin, visiting associate professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University and a participant in the meeting.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.

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Contents

Briefly . . .

Recent *lessons learned* in the diplomacy of counterterrorism included:

- the importance of consistent, long-term incremental steps taken against a phenomenon that will not disappear
- the necessity for a multifaceted policy that includes political, legal, social, diplomatic, economic, and military elements
- the need to develop realistic expectations and avoid a crisis mentality that is ultimately satisfying to terrorists, playing down military analogies that might lead to public expectations of early "victory"
- the dynamic interaction between terrorism and counterterrorism, resulting in policies that over time help shape the location, form, and methods used by terrorists
- the promise of law enforcement techniques as an effective long-term approach to fighting both national and international terrorism, not as a substitute for military action but as a complement
- the increasing dissociation of states from terrorism, and an increasing willingness of states to combine their efforts to defeat or discourage terrorist organizations
- the growing promise of international cooperation against the threat

Points of dispute that spawned lively debate included:

- the effectiveness of a law enforcement approach in situations where there is also a nascent peace process, such as Northern Ireland and Israel
- the appropriate use of military force, which tends to be effective for short-term purposes such as disrupting operations, but problematical at stopping terrorism over time
- the actual threat of attack using chemical, biological, nuclear, or radiological weapons, and the level and type of resources that should be devoted to responding to the (actual or perceived) threat

Finally, counterterrorism trends that are worrisome and *need more attention* included:

- the increasing globalization of the terrorist threat, resulting in shifts to new geographic areas of concern like Central and East Asia, the Balkans, and the Transcaucasus region, and the great freedom of movement by perpetrators

- the resurgence of hostage-taking as a terrorist technique, and the increasing frequency with which both governments and private companies are paying ransoms and making concessions
- the growing tendency of terrorists to use information technology, especially the Internet, to pursue their goals, and the difficulties of countering or tracking that use
- evidence that terrorism as a tactic may more often be resulting in strategic successes

Introduction

The September 11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center drew into sharp focus the need to understand and counter the threat of international terrorism against innocent victims on American soil and elsewhere. As this report is being written, the campaign against the al Qaeda network is gradually unfolding; American and allied policymakers are working around the clock to develop a long-term, innovative, broad-based strategy for counterterrorism that encompasses both traditional and untraditional means. Understanding the past lessons of the diplomacy of counterterrorism has never been more important, as the coalition response is being crafted, refined, and executed, and as we brace for possible further bioterrorism and other counterattacks in the days, months, and perhaps years ahead.

The original version of this report was completed on August 30, 2001, a few days before the initial attacks occurred. It was based upon a meeting of the International Research Group on Political Violence held at the United States Institute of Peace to discuss national and international methods of countering terrorism. The distinguished members of the group represented decades of experience in studying terrorism, understanding its evolution as a tactic, and countering the phenomenon in the United States and elsewhere. Their discussions ranged from American national policy debates to philosophical arguments about optimal means of response to a fungible and almost undefinable phenomenon. Topics discussed included specific lessons learned from past experience, the challenges of building international coalitions, the effectiveness of criminal law approaches in contrast to military responses, the role of rhetoric and public diplomacy, the effectiveness of current policies, and the "new terrorism" and weapons of mass destruction. There was agreement on only a few of the points discussed; but in nearly every case, the quality of the debate was rich and new conclusions emerged from the clash of differing viewpoints.

Many of the conclusions of the group remain valid in the aftermath of the attacks and provide the opportunity to place the events into a broader historical perspective, but some of them have been altered to reflect recent events. Thus, the report that follows is not a direct reflection of the proceedings of the meeting itself, but more a selection of the counterterrorism lessons discussed there, recast in the context of the unfolding post–September 11 international campaign.

The Threat before September 11

Even before September 11, most Americans perceived terrorism as one of the most important threats facing the United States into the 21st century (one poll said 84 percent considered international terrorism a "critical threat" to the United States). Attacks on U.S. soil had already dramatically heightened an unfamiliar sense of vulnerability at home. Twice as many people died in international terrorist attacks in the second half of the nineties than died in the first half, even though the total number of incidents had declined overall. And high-profile incidents in the middle of the

decade, particularly the Oklahoma City bombing, the first World Trade Center incident, and the Tokyo sarin gas attacks, had heightened public awareness of the threat as well as widespread worries about new tactics and targets for future assaults.

In the United States, counterterrorism efforts were already marshaling a growing part of the U.S. budget, climbing from $6 billion (fiscal year 1998) to $9.7 billion (fiscal year 2001)—an increase of almost 40 percent in those three years alone (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, *Annual Report to Congress on Combating Terrorism*, August 2001, p. 100). In the weeks before the attacks, this trend was continuing, with the Bush administration putting forth a budget request of $10.3 billion in August 2001 for the upcoming year (fiscal year 2002). International cooperation against terrorism had also increased, ranging from the United Nations' growing willingness in recent years to condemn terrorist actions, to enhanced bilateral intelligence cooperation, to the groundbreaking International Convention on the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, opened for signature in January 2000. The highly publicized trial of Saudi expatriate Osama bin Laden's associates involved in the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, which killed 224 people (12 U.S.) and injured 4574 (15 U.S.), had dramatically demonstrated the global reach of the al Qaeda organization and the vulnerability of American targets overseas. And the sense of growing uneasiness was not just an American preoccupation, as demonstrated by the highly publicized warnings by Russian premier Vladimir Putin's personal protection force of a threat by al Qaeda to assassinate President Bush before the G-8 summit in July 2001. Before September 11, no single individual had done more than bin Laden to stimulate a growing American domestic effort against terrorism and a widening international movement to meet the threat.

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There was general awareness even before the attacks that the geography of terrorism was changing in the 21st century. While the Middle East continued to be the locus of most terrorist activity, Central and South Asia, the Balkans, and the Transcaucasus were already growing in significance. And the use of technologies such as the Internet had increased the global reach of many organizations, for recruitment purposes as well as coordination of operations. The traditional model of the hierarchical organization dominated by a central headquarters was already considered outdated, having been replaced by transient cells often connected through cyberspace. The breakdown of barriers between countries, from NAFTA to the European Union, had further removed the traditional means to track the movements of known criminals. Globalization was making geography more of a challenge than ever for counterterrorism efforts, but it was also providing more opportunity for improved cross-border and transcontinental cooperation.

Before 1972, you rarely found the word "terrorism" in the political lexicon—it was hijackings, kidnappings, and murders. In the intervening years, describing the phenomenon as one "field" helped lead to an increasing body of research, the development of effective countermeasures to some terrorist tactics, and better communication among governmental and nongovernmental experts in counterterrorism. However, the downside to the growing community of counterterrorism experts has been the tendency to gloss over the varied political contexts that give rise to terrorist acts, exacerbating the temptation to oversimplify the means we must adopt to counter them. Different responses to terrorism can have different results, depending on the characteristics of the group or individual, the local culture, the social and economic conditions, and the motivations of the terrorists. Indeed, one participant observed that it is wrong to address terrorism as an independent variable, outside of culture and society: *terrorism is always a dependent variable.*

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There were other worrisome developments. First, there was a resurgence of hostage-taking—with, for example, high-profile cases of ransom being paid in the Philippines, concession after concession recently made by the Indian government, and an almost constant stream of ransoms being paid in Colombia—leading to a need for new means

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of deterrence and response by both government authorities concerned about their citizens and private companies interested in protecting their employees. Second was the frightening specter of chemical, biological, nuclear, and radiological (CBNR) terrorism attack, particularly in the United States. With arguably increased access to weapons of mass destruction, such as "loose nukes" from the former Soviet Union and potentially lethal (and poorly controlled) biological pathogens, the danger of use of these means was cause for great concern. In a world of growing religious and ideologically motivated terrorism, where terrorist incidents have in recent years aimed toward more casualties per incident with less accountability to traditional constituencies, the temptation to use CBRN weaponry was especially worrisome.

Participants grappled with the growing perception of threat of attack by CBNR weapons, and the appropriate response to the threat (and its perception). The challenge of assessing the likelihood of the use of these weapons was discussed, with some people arguing that the shift from traditional politically motivated terrorists to those motivated by open-ended religious or apocryphal aims was an important reason why these weapons might be tempting to use. More than one person mentioned that assessing the objective level of threat was not as important as the horrible consequences that would ensue if they were used. Depending upon the type of weapon, the death toll could be a matter of tens of thousands, they warned, resulting not only in nearly unimaginable carnage, but also a fundamental challenge to democratic government and civil society. We must, at almost any cost, minimize that possibility. Still others felt that the threat was grossly overstated: the technical challenges of CBNR weapons, combined with the ease with which more traditional conventional weapons can cause mass casualties, made the likelihood of their use very small. The fear that is created by public speculation, and the waste of scarce resources needed elsewhere, were much more dangerous than the threat itself, they argued.

Others countered that the question was not whether CBNR attacks would occur, but *could* they occur. Terrorists have unprecedented capability and access to the means of attack, particularly by biological weapons: it was not the "demand side," but the "supply side" that should be focused upon. In any case, policies that are good for humanity, such as global epidemiological monitoring, should be vigorously pursued, since their benefits would pertain even without an attack. Another participant added that he failed to see how such commonsense, needed innovations as training hospital personnel and preparing local responders would in any case be a waste.

There was no consensus reached on the question of counterterrorist efforts directed against the use of CBNR weapons, with the fault lines ultimately drawn over the question of whether we were overreacting to longstanding evolutionary changes or entering a new, more "terrifying" era of terrorism.

Finally, participants debated whether terrorism could in fact claim strategic successes. After years of study, many experts have argued that in the post-colonial world, while there have been tactical successes, terrorism has nowhere been a strategic success. Some participants argued that this no longer seemed to be true. For example, the case of Northern Ireland might be considered a strategic success, since the Good Friday accords would not have been entered into if not for the fact that the IRA's terrorism had caused a great deal of pain and brought the political situation to a new point. Likewise, Israel's retreat from Lebanon was arguably a dramatic example of the success of terrorism, also leading indirectly to the Middle East peace process.

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Still, there was considerable optimism among experts about the limited extent to which terrorism could be employed as a means to an end over the long run. Internationally, an increasing dissociation of states from terrorism was already apparent, as well as an increasing willingness of states to combine their efforts to defeat or discourage terrorist organizations. Osama bin Laden was already creating an alliance of states against him and against terrorism more generally. In the United States, the Oklahoma City bombing splintered radical anti-federal government organizations by

forcing consideration of the hideous extremes to which some anti-government sentiments could lead. If some terrorist organizations were increasingly achieving forms of strategic success, others were severely undermining their long-term cause by spawning increased counterterrorist activity and widespread revulsion at their methods among constituent groups that they purport to attract or to serve. In this strange world of action and reaction, major terrorist successes, rather than leading to a growing political momentum supportive of a cause, could sow the seeds of fragmentation and organized counter-reaction.

Above all, generalizations about changes in the threat are fraught with pitfalls. Counterterrorist techniques are among the most complex and subtle of tools, since perceptions of the threat to which they respond can be as important as the threat itself.

Counterterrorism Lessons Learned

Decades of experience indicate that the most effective counterterrorist efforts are ultimately stealthy, incremental, pragmatic, and defensive, and they may only marginally affect the terrorists' perceived pay-off. It is extremely difficult to raise the costs of terrorism significantly, since terrorists only need a few successes on the margins to make a political point. The costs of disruption and defense are much greater than the costs of opportunistic attacks. Ultimately, terrorists are spoilers—Americans and their allies cannot be safe everywhere, all the time. And the United States, while the most powerful nation on earth, has not been very effective in recent years at conducting operations against non-government actors or even, in some cases, individual terrorists. In recent years, the threat has evolved much more quickly than have U.S. political and budgetary responses, and we are forced now to learn very quickly and to make up for lost time.

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Counterterrorism is typically an area of frustration because it tends to be reactive. One participant pointed to the shifting landscape of terrorist threats and the cyclical waves of counterterrorist responses, from skyjackings in the 1960s, to the hostage incidents of the late 1960s and 1970s, to the U.S. focus on state sponsors in the 1970s, to the concentration on physical security in the 1980s (after the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut), to the fear of attack with CBNR weapons today. This is a cause for reflection on the dynamic interaction between terrorism and counterterrorism, cause and effect, subsequently leading to cause and effect again. To what extent are the counterterrorist policies that we employ shifting the threat from one form to another, so that even "success" against one type of threat leads to mutation into another form of threat? Even when we are successful, are we merely shifting the threat "down the road" to other venues, pushing perpetrators to develop more innovative methods, and encouraging the tendency to maximize the carnage in each attack? In this regard, one participant mentioned that aviation terrorism had generally been considered an area of success in counterterrorism, with the number of skyjackings and bombings dropping precipitously in the 1990s; the events of September 11 put this observation into painful relief and were a reminder of how dangerous it can be to extrapolate from historical experience and numerical trends.

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There were two other major areas of focus in discussing responses to terrorism: the use of law enforcement techniques, and the effectiveness of military responses. These will be discussed in turn.

First, several participants argued forcefully for primary reliance upon law enforcement as the most effective longer term response to terrorists, asserting that it is the most intellectually consistent means of dealing with terrorists' complex political motivations or fanaticism. Law enforcement, with its focus on the illegal act itself, removes the temptation to try to judge between just and unjust motivations, legitimate and

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illegitimate concessions, worthy and unworthy political causes: there can be no progress toward social justice by *any* definition in an atmosphere of violence and insecurity. Moreover, if authorities establish the perception that these acts may be carried out with impunity, everyone suffers. This is particularly important in situations such as that in Northern Ireland, another participant argued, where officials have been tempted to downplay the criminal justice and security aspects to focus on the politics of moving the process forward. It is crucial that officials not undermine public confidence in the rule of law, for then they are actually undermining the peace process they are trying to promote, because they are not able to ensure the security of the majority of the population. Others argued that the adoption of a peace process, political and socio-economic reforms, and other prophylactic measures are desirable alternatives to the criminal law approach, because they address the root causes of terrorist activity over time. Legal inflexibility prevents the kinds of concessions that are necessary in the short run to negotiate a longer term solution. In response, proponents of the criminal law approach vigorously disagreed: if governments send signals that they are only interested in conciliatory activities, then they are taking actions that are inconsistent with the principles of democracy and very dangerous. Ultimately, national policies and laws are the building blocks to combat terrorism.

The use of military force is rarely successful at stopping terrorism over time, since it tends to drive existing groups even further underground, can lock a government into an unproductive tit-for-tat escalation with terrorists, and can increase international alienation against the United States.

A second lively debate ignited over the use of military force. The use of military force, on the one hand, was seen as the only way to forcibly and dramatically preempt and disrupt plots and to demonstrate that you can attack terrorists' assets with speed and flexibility. Some participants argued that these measures are vitally important not only in the short run, where elaborate operations are physically destroyed, but also in the long run, since terrorists gain a healthy respect for the ability of the United States (in particular) not only to retaliate but also to preempt. Arguably this respect translates to deterrence of future activities and it also reassures the American public that the United States is not helpless in the face of asymmetrical threats. Other participants argued, however, that the record shows that the use of military force is rarely successful at stopping terrorism over time, since it tends to drive existing groups even further underground, can lock a government into an unproductive tit-for-tat escalation with terrorists, and can increase international alienation against the United States. Dramatic cruise missile attacks, for example, can inflame public opinion in some third world countries (and even among some of our allies), affirming the belief that the United States is arrogant, takes too much unilateral action, and has too much sway in the world. The ironic result can be an overall increase in political sympathy for the terrorists or their cause.

In more practical terms, moreover, the use of military force has become more difficult because of evolutions in the threat. Terrorist groups are increasingly amorphous, more likely to use evolving information technologies and to rely less upon traditional organizational structures, thus making it much harder to find targets to attack militarily. Sometimes perpetrators come together temporarily only for the purpose of attacking a target, as was the case in the first World Trade Center bombing. Furthermore, after attacks, terrorist organizations are claiming credit less often than was once the case: it is increasingly difficult to identify the perpetrators and thus to know against whom to retaliate.

Participants emphasized that terrorism is a tactic, a means, not a single perpetrator or an end in itself. This may at first seem a pedestrian observation; however, such thinking cautions against the widespread tendency either: (1) to over-personalize the threat, as, for example, an individual (Osama bin Laden) or ideology/group (religious fundamentalists); or (2) to rely overmuch on military analogies (the "war" against terrorism) that imply the possibility of a victory. Both are attractive tools to publicize the threat and gain support in a democracy, but both must be used with great care because they can ultimately serve the goals of terrorists and undermine efforts to discourage their tactics. Targeting our efforts against an individual leads to the percep-

tion that if that person is killed or captured the threat is over; and using military analogies leads to a belief that the battle or war can be effectively fought with traditional military means alone and a clear-cut victory achieved. These are dangerous illusions that work against effective counterterrorism.

The use of military force is only effective as part of a multifaceted campaign along with social, economic, legal, and political elements. Unfortunately, however, military force is often used because it is the most immediate, demonstrable way to respond to an outrageous event. When a major international incident occurs, a dramatic military response may be fully justified, but short-term fixes must not be permitted to overtake or undermine longer-term strategic interests. The often-drawn contrast to criminal law approaches, moreover, is a false dichotomy. It is hard to maintain a sustained military campaign, and law enforcement is the best way to build a foundation for international cooperation over time. The point is that both methods must be employed, and the belief that effective counterterrorism must reflect primarily one or the other is narrow, counterproductive, and reflective of bureaucratic inflexibility.

Organizational and bureaucratic factors are crucial stumbling blocks in this new environment: so much of the American counterterrorism structure is fragmented into pieces of the whole, designed to respond to a particular element of the "threat" (for example, "domestic" versus "international," "law enforcement" versus "military," "immigration" versus "intelligence") and unequipped to deal with setting broader strategic priorities. The early 20th century philosophies that were the bedrock of our bureaucracy, organized along functional lines and protective of individual turf and missions, must be replaced. An effective response must combine bureaucratic functions in a more flexible way, in the same sense that the terrorist networks that have carried out these attacks are fluid, ad hoc, and dynamic.

Past high-profile U.S. responses have tended to be cathartic, short-lived, and aimed as much at reassuring domestic audiences as at undermining the terrorist threat long-term. Longer term efforts have focused on disruption of terrorist activity, which remains mostly an invisible campaign. This problem is exacerbated in open democratic societies like the United States, where the need to build political support often takes precedence over less visible strategies. Generally, public attention rises as events occur; then there are periods of quiet. One expert spoke about the serious problems America's penchant for publicity presents for other international partners: public proclaiming of international cooperation often hurts it, and opportunistic leaks endanger sources. International partners become wary of sharing information with the United States, which ultimately hampers joint efforts to defeat common threats. And the high-profile target presented by the United States and its assets also deters potential partners from opening themselves by association to new terrorist threats.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the most important theme to emerge from the workshop was the need for balance, breadth, and long-term consistency in our approach to counterterrorism. The most effective measures are those that are developed in the context of a multifaceted policy, with political, legal, social, diplomatic, economic, and military elements. Experience shows that overemphasis on any one element, such as military responses, can lead to an undermining of other elements, such as political/diplomatic ties, social programs, and legal sanctions. Likewise, short-term "fixes" such as cruise missile attacks or high-profile spending initiatives must be balanced with long-term, incremental building of counterterrorism programs that establish depth of knowledge, political and social connections, language capabilities, cultural familiarity, and inter-governmental cooperation. Regardless of the level of domestic political interest over time, there is no short-cut to effective counterterrorism measures—although the political will in the

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United States for a sustained, effective, and broad-based response is unlikely to flag in the foreseeable future. In the aftermath of this national trauma, there is greater hope at least that the lessons of counterterrorism will be studied, expanded, and methodically applied.

Recommendations

- We need to continually shore up our international coalition in order to anticipate, prevent, and deter terrorist attacks, not just react to them. Even if it does not yield immediate dramatic results, cooperation can help to perpetuate an international climate of condemnation of all terrorist actions.
- The United States needs to make clear that it opposes terrorism no matter where it arises. International counterterrorist cooperation should be expanded, not just among traditional developed states, but also with less developed countries and even to some degree with so-called "states of concern."
- The fight against terrorism should be seen as a long-term struggle, not susceptible to a "quick fix": the goal should be to manage expectations, keeping them realistic and avoiding a crisis mentality that is ultimately satisfying to terrorists.
- The United States should work to enhance international and bilateral cooperation with other states, particularly in areas such as intelligence, public diplomacy, antiterrorism measures, control of borders and territory, law enforcement techniques, and counterterrorist training. To the extent that the United States is perceived as responding unilaterally to the threat, it will also increasingly be perceived as a singular target. The United States has impressive military capabilities, but cathartic short-term attacks can boomerang into complex long-term political liabilities, unless they are carefully balanced by the full range of available counterterrorist tools.

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