The Global Terrorist Threat

Jeffrey D. Simon

When terrorists attacked the United States on the morning of September 11, 2001, they set in motion a sequence of events that demonstrated unequivocally the power and influence of terrorism. Less than two hours of unimaginable violence by nineteen terrorists led to repercussions felt around the world. Beyond the death and destruction that the terrorists caused — more than 3,000 people were killed in the suicide attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon — they also inflicted a deep psychological wound upon this nation. Sadness was expressed throughout the country for those who had lost their lives, as well as empathy for the families of the victims and rage and anger at those responsible for the violence. There was also the realization that life in America might never be the same again.

Although the United States had experienced major terrorist attacks on its soil in the past, including the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the September 11 attacks were beyond most people's worst nightmare. Hijacked planes crashing into U.S. landmarks and live television coverage of the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsing were images that will likely be etched in every one's mind forever.

TERRIFYING INNOVATION

Yet as shocking as these attacks were, they should not have been surprising. Terrorists continually think up new and more devastating ways to perpetrate their violence. They escalate their violence when they perceive that the public and governments have become desensitized to the "normal" flow of terrorism. By perpetrating a violent act that causes more casualties than previous ones, terrorists are guaranteed widespread publicity for their cause and reaction from various parties. Terrorists also view new types of attacks as ways to penetrate existing security measures. Furthermore, because there had been suicide attacks on the ground in Lebanon in the 1980s and a suicide attack at sea in Yemen in 2000, it was just a matter of time before terrorists used suicide attacks from the air. That it occurred in the United States shattered any remaining illusions that America could avoid on its own soil such terrorist attacks as had plagued many other nations.

Security was raised to unprecedented levels both in the United States and elsewhere after the events of September 11. The economic effect of the attacks was staggering, with losses estimated in the hundreds of *billions* of dollars. Reflecting the anger of the country, President George W. Bush called the attacks "acts of war" and vowed to defeat terrorism wherever it existed in the world. Accordingly, the U.S. launched a military response in Afghanistan that resulted in the collapse of the ruling Taliban regime that had protected the primary suspects in the attacks, Osama bin Laden and his terrorist group, al Qaeda ("The Base"). Hundreds of Taliban and al Qaeda members were killed or captured in the military operation, although the fate of bin Laden remained uncertain as of early 2002.

While viewing terrorism as a "war" can be appealing to government leaders, policymakers, the media, and the public — it implies that with the right mix of policies and actions a nation can "win" the war — the reality is that terrorism can never be completely "defeated." The roots of the violence are diverse, with terrorists found in a wide range of political, religious, and ethnic-nationalist groups. Terrorism can even be just one person with one bomb and one cause. Furthermore, the advantage in any "war" on terrorism unfortunately lies with the terrorists because they need to commit only one spectacular act to reverse all perceptions of counter-terrorist progress.

DISPARATE GROUPS

The disparate nature of terrorism can be seen in the variety of groups active throughout the world and the different causes that propel them into

violence. Al Qaeda, for example, is representative of the emergence of the religious-inspired terrorist groups that have become the predominant form of terrorism in recent years. One of the key differences between religious-inspired terrorists and politically motivated ones is that the religious-inspired terrorists have fewer constraints in their minds about killing large numbers of people. All nonbelievers are viewed as the enemy, and the religious terrorists are less concerned than political terrorists about a possible backlash from their supporters if they kill large numbers of innocent people. The goal of the religious terrorist is transformation of all society to their religious beliefs, and they believe that killing infidels or nonbelievers will result in their being rewarded in the afterlife. Bin Laden and al Qaeda's goal was to drive U.S. and Western influences out of the Middle East and help bring to power radical Islamic regimes around the world. In February 1998, bin Laden and allied groups under the name "World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders" issued a fatwa, which is a Muslim religious order, stating that it was the religious duty of all Muslims to wage war on U.S. citizens, military and civilian, anywhere in the world.

Other religious terrorist groups include Hizballah, a radical Shia Islamic group in Lebanon that has committed numerous anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli attacks; HAMAS (Islamic Resistance Movement) and the Palestine Islamic Jihad, both of which use terrorism in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel in order to undermine Middle East peace negotiations and to establish an Islamic Palestinian state; the Abu Sayyaf Group, which is a radical Islamic separatist group operating in the southern Philippines; Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group), which is based in Egypt and seeks the overthrow of the Egyptian government; and the Armed Islamic Group, which is based in Algeria and seeks to overthrow the secular Algerian regime and replace it with an Islamic state.

Ethnic-nationalist conflicts provide another source for terrorism. Although there can be a religious com-ponent to the violence, it is usually secondary to the political goals of the conflict. In Sri Lanka, for example, the Tamil separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is comprised of minority Hindu Tamils, has combined guerrilla insurgency with terrorist attacks in its battle against the ruling Buddhist Sinhalese majority. The goal of LTTE is to establish an independent Tamil state, not a religious state. Similarly, the Irish Republican Army's campaign of violence was aimed at driving the British out of Northern Ireland and creating a united Ireland, not a Catholic state. There are also several Palestinian terrorist groups, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Abu Nidal Organization, whose goal is to establish an independent, but not an Islamic, Palestinian state.

Although religious terrorism and ethnic-nationalist terrorism have become the major forms of terrorism in recent years, numerous political and ideologically motivated terrorist groups are still active around the world. The political and ideological terrorists do not fight for any religion, territory, or homeland, but rather for a "cause" that could range from Marxist-Leninist revolutionary goals to Neo-Nazi and white supremacist objectives. One of the most mysterious and long-lasting political terrorist groups has been the Greek leftist Revolutionary Organization 17 November, also known as N-17. Formed in 1975 and named for the November 1973 student uprising against the Greek military regime, N-17 is believed to have fewer than twenty members, none of whom have ever been arrested. They have attacked U.S., British, Greek, Turkish, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and European Union targets over the years. Demonstrating the truism that "the more things change, the more they stay the same," just as N-17 posed a threat in the 1970s, so too do they pose a threat in the first decade of the twenty-first century. One of the major concerns for security planners for the 2004 Summer Olympic

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Games in Athens is the prospect of terrorist attacks by N-17.

In the United States, right-wing antigovernment extremists have posed a serious threat in recent years. Before September 11, the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil was the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people. The perpetrators of that attack, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, both had ties to the right-wing American militia movement. McVeigh was executed for his crime while Nichols is serving a life sentence in a federal penitentiary. Political terrorist groups can also be motivated by a single issue, such as the environment, animal rights, abortion, and other issues. The Earth Liberation Front (ELF), the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), and anti-abortion militants, for example, have committed terrorist acts in the United States. ELF and ALF have avoided causing deaths or injuries in their attacks on mink farms, fur retailers, research laboratories, and other targets. The antiabortion terrorists, however, have been responsible for several deaths of abortion-clinic doctors and staff. A single-issue or "special-interest" terrorist group can arise at any time in reaction to a specific government or corporate policy or action.

Added to the mix of different types of terrorists are the "lone operators" who pose a unique problem for law enforcement and intelligence officials. Because they work alone, there are no communications between members of a group to intercept, nor are there any terrorist-group members to arrest and reveal further information about planned operations. In one sense, the lone operator epitomizes the unique nature of terrorism, namely, the ability of a single individual to commit a violent act — or threaten to do so — and cause fear and anxiety throughout a nation. Theodore Kaczynski, who was known as the Unabomber, was a lone operator who committed sixteen bombings during a seventeen-year period beginning in 1978. Three people were killed and twenty-three others injured in the attacks, which included several package bombs being sent to the victims. The Unabomber's attacks led to changes in the way packages are sent through the U.S. postal service and generated fear among the public.

The lone-operator type of terrorist has also been among the most innovative in terms of terrorist tactics, sometimes introducing new forms of violence that the more established terrorist groups eventually emulate. For example, the first midair plane bombing in the United States occurred in 1955 and was the work of a lone operator, and the first hijackings in the United States in the early 1960s were also the work of lone operators. One reason why lone operators are so creative and innovative in their terrorist tactics is that there are no group-decisionmaking processes to deal with and no constituency to be concerned with in terms of a possible negative backlash to an incident. The lone operator is free to think up any type of violent scenario and then act upon it. The wave of anthrax letters that were sent to members of the media, Congress, and other targets after the September 11 attacks were suspected to be the work of a lone operator living in the United States.

FUTURE TRENDS

The emergence of "smarter" and more creative terrorists is a trend that will continue in coming years. Advances in technology, weaponry, and other fields are there for everyone to take advantage of, including the terrorists. Furthermore, information on weapons — including weapons of mass destruction — targets, tactics, and resources necessary for a terrorist operation are readily available on the Internet. The challenge for counterterrorist officials will be to try to stay one step ahead of the terrorists. Perhaps the best description of the difficult task governments face in dealing with terrorism was made by the Irish Republican Army. After a failed attempt to assassinate British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984, the IRA issued the following chilling statement: "Today we were unlucky, but remember, we only have to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always."

Unfortunately, governments and the public cannot always expect to be lucky in the battle against terrorism. That fact was painfully demonstrated on September 11. We are living in an age in which small groups and even criminals or mentally unstable individuals can perpetrate horrendous terrorist acts. Yet it is important to remember that while we will not be able to prevent every single incident from occurring or take away every potential bomb or other weapon from the terrorists, we at least can take away the reaction that they seek, which is panic, fear, and disruption in our lives.

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