

Vulnerabilities of Terror Groups

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A year ago, many around the world were watching the new film “Munich.” The drama begins with the sad story of the Olympic Games massacre by Palestinians, becoming all the more sad with the German failure to respond professionally and competently. This year, we might well mark a very different event. This October will see the 30th anniversary of the German success in re-taking a Lufthansa aircraft hijacked by Palestinian terrorists. Commandos of the special border police unit GSG-9, created after the Munich disaster, followed the hijackers to Mogadishu, Somalia, stormed the airliner, destroyed the four-man terrorist cell, and saved every hostage. It was a brilliant victory. And no one knew that more personally than the jailed leaders of the Baader-Meinhof gang, or Red Army Faction (RAF). In Stammheim Prison they waited, expecting their freedom from a bargain over the hijacked German airliner. When news came of GSG-9’s tactical success, the strategic effect was profound. Three of the RAF leaders committed suicide. A famed radical of that era, Daniel Cohen-Bendit, identified the GSG-9 raid as “the moral and political end” of the Red Army Faction. Global terrorism suffered a serious strategic defeat in practical and psychological terms.

Terrorists have many vulnerabilities. That bears remembering during the present difficult slogging match in which key top leaders of Taliban and Al Qaeda remain at large after a five-year hunt. But it is true, and world events are showing it to be true. After a half-century, the Basques of ETA have hit a profound low. After a quarter-century of limited successes, and no arrests, the Greeks of the Revolutionary November 17th Organization are suddenly all in jail. Indeed, books of contemporary history have many names of groups now forgotten. Study of past successes, and the weaknesses of the enemy of today, gives many reasons for optimism, and many indicators of how our government, security forces, and allies, can do better in the Global War on Terrorism.

Six particular vulnerabilities of terrorist groups are highlighted here. They apply to terror groups of many sizes, and diverse ideological bents, including religious-minded terrorists, and perhaps also broad-based insurgencies. Indeed, Western experience in defeating insurgents—militants who normally use terror as well as political mobilization—is extensive, and offers many indicators of how we can do better now.

NUMBER ONE:

Operational requirements expose terrorists to scrutiny.

An American problem before 9-11-01 was relative inattention to the movements and operations of terrorists, abroad and in our midst. We were ignorant of the inner workings of some Middle Eastern groups—in part due to our woeful inadequacy in the languages

and culture of the region. We had all but abandoned Afghanistan, and veteran CIA operative Reuel Marc Gerech wrote just before 9-11-01 that we probably had not a single case officer deployed there to “run” agents and study at first hand the infrastructure of camps training international terrorists. Here at home, interest in civil liberties had led the U.S. to erect its own “wall” obstructing the view of terrorist operatives within. Subsequently the government would learn of activities by Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and even the Taliban on U.S. soil. But with a will to look, and political insistence on developing actionable intelligence, the U.S. and its allies can do much more to rein in the infrastructures and leaders that make terrorism work.

Germany defeated the Baader-Meinhof group not just with the GSG-9 but with a comprehensive law enforcement approach. It featured great intelligence and superb police effort. A new office for criminal investigation based in Wiesbaden employed scores, and then hundreds, and then thousands of data specialists, running unprecedented computer profiling efforts. These let the police reach beyond speculation to fill in the scanty sketches of the violent underground. Voluminous evidence was gradually assembled about who they were and how they lived, moved, and conducted operations. That knowledge led directly to many arrests—which is why top leaders were in jail when the Mogadishu action occurred in 1977. Thereafter, Germany’s patient and continuous pursuit of the RAF remnants led to effective cessation of violence by 1992, when the terrorists published a public confession of political failure. The relatively new German republic had dealt maturely with its ghosts of the pre-1945 era. It paid and trained its intelligence and police people well; it gathered the required comprehensive information; it did not over-use force; it never gave up the lawful and principled defense of democratic institutions. This forgotten campaign is a parallel for where the democracies should want to be today in their world-wide contest against terrorists.

Recommendations: For us, the lesson is in continued devotion to intelligence. In the counterterrorism world, nothing beats “HUMINT,” direct human sources on the ground. That means mastery of foreign languages—with the same devotion Israeli intelligence officers give to the problem. More widely, “we the people” and our Congress must support and fund the relevant services: the U.S. Marshals who catch fugitives; immigration authorities who watch for illegal entrants; the Federal Bureau of Investigation which directs the domestic fight against terrorism; and the military and CIA assets which are active abroad.

The same devotion to other forms of intelligence work, such as covert action, is as important. In recent years, American, Russian, and Israeli teams have all targeted and killed certain known terrorist leaders with missiles. These incidents are remarkable testaments to what the sciences of electronics and physics can do in a lethal low-intensity contest. Today our useful arsenal includes a true prize: the unmanned aerial vehicle. Global Hawk, 44 feet long, can flourish at high altitudes, even with cloud cover, fly 8,000 miles, and linger on station for 24 hours producing pinpoint picture intelligence. Predator, working at medium and lower altitudes, may be armed with deadly missiles—as one Al Qaeda boss in Yemen has already learned. There are other, more conventional air assets that allow tactical strikes which also deserve funding and support. Had such

weapons been used before by bolder leaders, they would have damaged Al Qaeda, and perhaps even disrupted plotting for 9-11. Today we're playing catch-up, as with the precision air strike in December in Afghanistan that killed a Taliban leader named Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Osmani by obliterating his vehicle.

Nor should signals intelligence be neglected. The ability to read cell phone transmissions was what allowed Russia to assassinate Chechen independence leader Dzhokhar Dudayev on April 21, 1996, southwest of Grozny. SIGINT by reconnaissance aircraft was one key; another was the duo of fighter planes firing missiles that honed in on the commander's personal telephone. Though a former Soviet Air Force general, Dudayev neglected what a sophisticated air force can achieve. The U.S. is rumored to have been of help in this Russian operation. Certainly in an earlier case, in 1986, it was United States assets that intercepted a precious message from the Libyan People's Bureau in East Berlin. This signals intelligence allowed one of the only U.S. counterterror strikes ever attempted to that time, that against Libya. Ronald Reagan was able to (a) know the La Belle Disco bombing had foreign government support, and (b) use that knowledge publicly with political effect as he unleashed naval and air force planes to bomb terrorist-sponsoring installations in Libya. The "puzzle palace" of the National Security Agency deserved its due for that raid's success.

Sun Tzu suggested that a commander who is willing to spend gold on intelligence may learn about his enemy intimately, and will not be defeated; but the parsimonious commander who thinks he is saving gold in fact squanders the lives of his soldiers and citizens, due to ignorance of enemies and their intentions. The U.S. might have saved hundreds of American lives had we set out twenty-five years ago to learn about, and corrupt, or hunt down, Imad Mughniyah, chief of Hizbollah intelligence. Only hunting him half-seriously, we have had to absorb his continued depredations. When this terrorist brazenly appeared in mid-January 2006 in Damascus alongside visiting Iranian President Ahmadinejad, we were reminded of the difference between merely keeping files on a terror group principal versus aggressive development of counterterrorist intelligence with an aim of actually defeating a principal target.

NUMBER TWO:

Terror groups have leaders, who may be captured or killed.

Terrorist groups vary, and the particular leaders of them may be less or more important than another "center of gravity" such as ideology, or a prime state sponsor. But leaders *always* matter.

The United States carries on in pursuit of Taliban's Mullah Omar, and the top two Al Qaeda leaders, precisely because no matter how "flat" terrorist organizations are, they have directors, not just the operators like Mullah Osmani or Khaled Sheik Mohammed. Terrorism is most often a product of decisions by its directors. Terrorism, and especially international terrorism, is a calculated process managed by deliberative human beings, on whose authority political assessments are made, clandestine bank accounts are debited,

intelligence assets are detailed, training camps are run, bombs are acquired or made, and rogue members are disciplined. The congressional commission on 9-11 found that planning was undertaken for those attacks in late 1998 or early 1999. Happily, we know of many other attacks in England, France, the U.S., and Australia which, however long-planned, were pre-empted or abandoned. Decisions, for or against action, speak to the existence and authority of a hierarchy.

Can underground leaders be caught or killed? Some are wily enough to evade governments for decades. Ho Chi Minh and top Viet Minh escaped many would-be captors, beginning with “Operation Lea” by France in late 1947. Later, in the southern Indochinese theater, the Vietnamese Communist directorate “COSVN”—often encamped on the border of Cambodia—also escaped a remarkable array of U.S. efforts to locate and defeat it. But other anti-state leaders, equally wily, have been found. After a quarter-century of arrogant pronouncements and clever guerrilla and terror attacks, the Kurdish Worker’s Party chief Abdullah Ocalan was found in hiding in Africa and whisked back to Turkish jail. Abimael Guzman, the political head of Peru’s Shining Path, was tracked down by good police work in a Lima suburb in September 1992. In both these cases, the immense political significance of the top leader was important. Just as the two organizations drew strength from the single-minded, lead-without-rivals style of the top man, that strength became a vulnerability of grave proportions when the principals were captured. Both organizations virtually collapsed, never recovering much strength.

Recommendations: First, the White House is doing well to avoid suggesting that Al Qaeda will collapse if Osama Bin Laden is captured or killed. But the organization—however international, however flat relative to older terrorist groups—is an organization. Presently it retains many of its powers; without Al Zawahiri and Bin Laden, it would be far less coordinated, and far less capable of organizing and effecting a massive attack. So the pursuit of the leaders is vital. Second, too much has been made of fears of a “martyr” effect, should terrorist leaders be killed or captured. Terrorism is about power, and the forceful end of Bin Laden’s career *must* damage the organization’s powers. At a minimum, morale would flag, and operations would slow. So again, aggressive pursuit of Al Qaeda’s top leaders must continue. The recent announcement of the CIA’s decision to disband the special Bin Laden unit is a mistake—unless it is connected to managing an impossible clash of personalities within our intelligence community. The present war may not end if Al Zawahiri and Bin Laden are killed, but certainly we know it will never end if they remain at liberty.

NUMBER THREE:

Power struggles are natural and common in terror groups; these can and should be exploited...or created.

When and if we devote the resources necessary to peer inside terrorist organizations, or even penetrate them with agents, we will be able to see the fierce rivalries that often characterize these groups. Power struggles are natural to them. Terrorists are not only warring with the outside society or existing government; they are rivals of other similar

“substate” groups, and they are rivals of others within their own group. Consider how widely different are the policy ends of many of the different insurgent groups in Iraq; their result is political incoherence. Terror groups may also differ over strategy, as when Al Qaeda’s Al Zawahiri censured the Jordanian Zarqawi for deliberately trying to provoke religious civil war in Iraq. Moreover, terrorists are prone to low motives and human hatreds which drive ugly differences within groups. Fear of infiltrators intensifies such divisions. A result, too rarely mentioned in writing on terrorism, is the internecine purge....which is of tremendous advantage to the counterterrorist side. In the 1970s, such a purge wrecked the small Marxist “Japanese Red Army.” In the 1980s, internecine mayhem swept through the FARC in Colombia and the NPA in the Philippines and Abu Nidal’s organization in the Middle East. Nidal’s “Black June” never recovered.

Recommendations: Counterterrorists can and should accentuate the natural and often hot differences between terrorists. Political strategies by government, such as overt, offensive “information operations,” can open up the differences between the underground groups. There are ways to take advantage of the trigger-happy nature of the gunmen themselves. Covert psychological operations by the U.S. and/or its allies can undermine Hamas, with its charter passages calling for wiping away Israel, by precise clandestine support of its violent rivalry with the secular Palestinians enrolled in Fatah, the old Arafat organization. Exploitable differences exist between Shia and Sunni terrorist groups, world-wide, and then between such violent leaders and their moderate sectarian counterparts. Against Al Qaeda, a promising line of work would be driving wedges and distrust between the ethnic Arab terror leaders and the Asian and other non-Arab Al Qaeda activists. Issues such as pay, access to training, and prestige are relevant levers for such efforts.

NUMBER FOUR:

Terror organizations are human, and terrorists can be forced to the point of exhaustion.

Asked once how it is that terror groups decline, or die away, the famed British military historian Michael Howard answered with one word: “fatigue.” Some terrorist groups last only a year or two beyond their founding. There is no natural “life span” for a terror or insurgent organization; too many variables make it meaningless to invest hope in averaging the actual ages of modern history’s diverse groups. But two things seem apparent. First, effective government response is a prime determinate of how long terrorists last. And second, many groups plan for protracted struggle and are capable of it. So, counterterrorism/counterinsurgency is frequently a process of attrition, not decisive battle. Counterterrorism can sometimes take years; counterinsurgency nearly always does. With sufficient will-power and persistence, states usually outlast the terrorists, who become sick, wounded, killed, or just worn down.

In the Philippines, a political revolutionary force was powerful in the 1940s—the Hukbalahap, or Huks. They were defeated, slowly but decisively, by a gifted Secretary of Defense and former World War Two guerrilla named Ramon Magsaysay. America

provided him with modest help from intelligence figures and military supplies. Luis Taruc, the dedicated Marxist in command of the Huks, was gradually worn down by the successful grand strategy approach to the insurgency which the Filipinos waged under Magsaysay's leadership. Government results came with years of hard effort—at policing, finding the right forms of small-unit military operations, obstructing Huk food and supply systems, purging governmental corruption, and proving that democracy could actually work.

Today we may well be observing the same fate for another group of Filipino terrorists—the Abu Sayyaf, ally to Al Qaeda. After they shocked the region with high-profile, mass kidnappings for ransom of foreign tourists and aid workers, and a fuller view of their Bin Laden connections emerged, Manila began pursuit of the group with deadly seriousness. As the U.S. helped with advisors, logistics, and high-tech surveillance assets, Filipino armed forces relentlessly pursued the enemy on the ground through several of the islands of the southern Philippines. The attrition process killed a leader of Abu Sayyaf and wore many followers to a frazzle. This was proven when several small groups defected, literally on the government's promise of being fed by the Army. Food is far harder to obtain in jungles than most city-dwellers realize. Since last September, it appears that two more successor leaders have been killed in turn. Abu Sayyaf may not be knocked out, but it is slumped against the ropes.

Recommendations: Historically, will-power and persistence and patience have been characteristics of successful counterterrorism, frequently, and of successful counterinsurgency, almost always. Not just the White House but all national political leaders must let that fact inform their decisions and public rhetoric. In the present international struggle with Al Qaeda, there is every reason to be pleased about the capture or killing of over two-thirds of the leaders since 2001. There is also every reason to carry on with pursuit of the replacements, and the remaining top executives. Terrorists sometimes imagine themselves to be god-like, but they can in fact be worn down and worn out. That was the fate of the world-wide Anarchist movement of a century ago that had killed six heads of state before World War One. Fatigue was a leading element in the defeat of the Western European terrorists of Communist inclinations just a few decades ago. Both these earlier movements shared certain characteristics with Al Qaeda: they were internationalist, ideological, dedicated, and lethal. But both lost, and so will Al Qaeda.

NUMBER FIVE:

Terrorism is morally and legally indefensible. That is an advantage no state should lose sight of, or neglect in its public diplomacy.

One of the best achievements of the Ronald Reagan administration was its vocal and intelligent criticism of terrorism. Secretary of State George Shultz, that department's legal advisor Abraham Sofaer, Deputy Assistant Attorney General Victoria Toensing, and of course the President himself were articulate opponents of terrorism. Unembarrassed "moralists," they used public speeches and other opportunities to explain why terrorism

was an empty and brutal alternative to legitimate political effort, why the international system and global community must cooperate against terrorism, and how the periodic use of force is appropriate and defensible.

Such arguments are made infrequently, or inadequately, today. Yet they are in line with democratic principles. They are in line with traditional international law, especially the essential principles forbidding states to export violence, or allow armed parties to freely use state territory for illegal international operations. Even trends in Security Council actions and sanctions make the United Nations a limited but useful ally in some aspects of counterterrorism. Regional and bilateral allies are very much available, as always. Indeed, the very fact that terrorists range about and kill transnationally means that they create enemies abroad, who naturally may become allies in counterterrorist efforts. This is why a Colombia will extradite a narcoterrorist for trial here in U.S. federal courts, despite the evident dangers and the inevitable political fall-out. This is why the French—unbeknownst to many Americans—are a superb partner in our efforts to identify and arrest international Muslim militants; they know the sting of these terrorists as well as we do. Similarly Jordan: once Jordanian citizen Abu Musab al Zarqawi moved beyond his vicious operations in Iraq and began bombing targets in Amman, Jordanians came to hate him, and helped us track and kill Zarqawi. For such reasons of self-interest and mutual interest have some Iraqis in Al Anbar province been literally fighting with Al Qaeda outsiders. Terrorism creates enemies, not just victims.

Recommendations: Expand public diplomacy. The little desk at the National Security Council which is for “Global Outreach” is hardly ever heard from and does not seem very active. And the miniscule office Karen Hughes heads over at the Department of State is a mere suggestion of the effort needed to reach out to audiences world-wide. Creating Al Hurra television, “The Free One,” which beams from Springfield, Virginia to the Muslim and Arab worlds, was a fine idea, but it does not go far enough. It may be wise to bring back the United States Information Agency, which did much in the Cold War to reach over governments’ heads to touch the public.

More important than mere “air time” are the arguments and initiatives to be offered. The U.S. government has not shown the imagination and aggressiveness it should in crafting lines of public argument against terrorism. For example, we apparently do not even keep count, let alone publicize, the thousands of Arab and Muslim victims of today’s Muslim terrorists. Second, important spokesmen such as Stephen Hadley, Condoleezza Rice, and Karen Hughes rarely mention the obscenity of Al Qaeda’s murders of third-country nationals: 87 countries lost citizens in the 9-11 attacks on New York City; 5,000 Kenyans were wounded by the August 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy. Third, has any U.S. official publicly criticized Osama Bin Laden for his pretense and arrogance at publishing *fatwas*? Such essential documents are only supposed to be created by highly-trained and venerable authorities on Islam. Our public diplomacy has been anemic, lacking both content and volume. What we do now is not enough. It is necessary but not sufficient to keep saying “we are not at war with Islam.” It is alright to hope that moderate Muslims will make arguments against Muslim terrorists, but hope is not a strategy.

If U.S. authorities must move quickly, so should our writers and academic experts on terrorism—who have proliferated. They publish calls ‘for a grand strategy against terrorism that is less military,’ but how many of them have contributed seriously to the moral and public diplomacy sides of such a good grand strategy? The think tanks and the commentators need not criticize government any less, but some of them could contribute a little more. As Winston Churchill observed, one must not be impartial as between the arsonist and the fire brigade.

NUMBER SIX:

States still sponsor terrorists, and military power is still required to check such behavior.

The hopes of some that the end of Warsaw Pact terrorism would begin a whole new era have given way to new realities. The Taliban in power in Afghanistan was a frightful thing to watch—from an Afghan or an American point of view. Hafez al Asad, an overt state supporter of terrorists, has been succeeded by a son, and the new Syrian government is being investigated by the United Nations for a murder campaign in Lebanon, where it may have killed a half-dozen important nationalists who dared to criticize Damascus. Iran regards its own quarter-century record of aid to international terror as a success; at least, Tehran’s actions indicate that view. Terrorism is still a weapon of states. That old fact is unaffected by the new rise of sub-state actors on the world stage.

Victimized states are, as ever, required to defend their citizens from terrorist attacks. Economic and diplomatic sanctions and embargoes can have some effect, and they have. But at times, more forceful action is required to cause capitals to back off of state sponsorship of international terrorists. Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya have all stopped exporting terror recently due to strong counterterror measures, including outright invasions by outsiders in two cases.

The proper defense of our state, and the state system more generally, lies in sophisticated defenses and offenses. These include capacity for combat, and the equipment necessary to threatening terrorism-sponsoring states (presently North Korea, Syria, Iran, the Sudan and Cuba). The existence of state-sponsored terrorism is one of many reasons why large, capable, conventional, modernized military forces are essential to United States’ interests. A decade and a half ago, scholar Martin Van Creveld began an argument that the *intifada* in Palestine and similar movements had created a new era in warfare. He said the state is waning dramatically, while the non-state movement is the future of warfare. David would have his sling; Goliath’s armor would be avoidable, or vulnerable, or too heavy a burden. At his most radical, Van Creveld advised the abandonment of large and expensive weapons systems. This advice has proven much more bold than true. A modernized, flexible, and effective military is not one without weapons systems; it is one with better weapons systems, managed by highly educated and trained officers, aided by excellent systems of intelligence that allow the state to dominate the terrorists.

Recommendations: Congress and the American people have a duty to support the development and procurement of weapons that will replace and improve upon those worn out in Iraqi and Afghan theaters. Weaponry—the conventional as well as the most new—will usually remain required for campaigns against those using terrorism against us in the future. Aerial reconnaissance and tactical strike capabilities, from sea, land, and air, are highly relevant in the shadow war with global terrorists. Where there are terrorist training camps, we must be able to threaten, and if necessary use, refined military capabilities to destroy them. Where such encampments have state protection, we must be able to reduce to rubble the local air defenses and other obstacles to armed strikes. Where we have jobs for Special Forces—which are invaluable in counterterrorism and were shamefully unused before 9-11—we must be able to deliver them to the zone via stealthy and swift means. If we should deal strongly with a strong state enemy—such as Iran, today’s leading sponsor of international terrorists—we must do so with powerful military forces, not just accurate slings for stones.

The Global War on Terror is going much better than the coalition’s campaign in Iraq. The destruction of Al Qaeda’s physical bases, the remarkable efforts in intelligence and in policing, the cooperation of our many allies, and terrorist groups’ inherent vulnerabilities have all contributed to an improved picture. Paul Haven of the Associated Press observed that 2006 closed without a major terrorist attack in the West by Muslim militants—the first time such an annual review has been possible since 9-11-01. Much remains to be done. But we are winning.

Dr. Christopher C. Harmon has been publishing on terrorism issues since 1982. He holds the Kim T. Adamson Chair of Insurgency and Terrorism at Marine Corps University, Quantico, VA, but the views above are his alone. The author thanks Dave Rababy and Laura Harmon for reviewing this manuscript.