

Shaping the Obama Administration's Counterterrorism Strategy

The United States' counterterrorism policy has one thing going for it: seven years after the fact, we have yet to experience another September 11. What policies or programs deserve credit is unclear, though, and by every other measure, our counterterrorism strategy has been sorely lacking. From the never-ending war in Iraq to the never-ending wait to get through airport security, change is needed in our approach. On the eve of a new administration, change was the topic of discussion at a special two-day conference "Shaping the Obama Administration's Counterterrorism Strategy" on January 12 and 13.

JIM HARPER, Cato Institute:

Terrorism represents a dual threat. The obvious threat is that it puts the victim state at risk of direct attacks. The other, more subtle, threat is that it puts the victim state at risk of overreaction in response.

Overreaction multiplies the cost of terrorist acts, and that increases the effectiveness of terrorism and thus its attractiveness as a tool.

Not too long ago, a reporter cited to me the costs of the September 11 attacks as being in the hundreds of billions of dollars, and it occurred to me that that reporter had never separated the direct costs of the attacks from the costs we incurred in spending afterwards. We spent hundreds of billions of dollars in reaction to the attacks, while the direct costs of the attacks might be about \$10 billion.

That's not to say those hundreds of billions of dollars of expenditures were wrong, but it is to point out that the spending we take on in response to terrorism is within our control—it was then and it is now.

Let's take a look at the motivations of terrorists. To summarize and perhaps oversimplify, some terrorists have geopolitical aims; some have grievances that they want to avenge; and some are just alienated people who want to be a part of something bigger

than themselves. We want to behave in ways that don't gratify any of those terrorists.

Overreaction to terrorism rewards terrorists in three ways. The first and most obvious is when we waste our own blood and treasure. This rewards terrorists with geopolitical aims and grievances. We do their work for them when we weaken ourselves and raise the costs of our own policies.

Overreaction also gives terrorist groups sympathy and recruiting gains. The fact is that terrorists live and move in communities. The people in these communities may or may not support them, or they might be sitting on the fence. But, of course, when these communities suffer a stray bomb, when their doors are kicked in, or when they see images of violence or rights violations that, rightly or wrongly, portray the United States as an evil-doing country, they're drawn to support of terrorists.

The final product of overreaction is giving terrorists ideological gains. Terrorists regard themselves as being involved in an ideological struggle with incumbent governments and ideologies. Now, their ideologies are ridiculous, and their prescriptions are ridiculous. But these groups are convinced that their plans are desirable and viable, and they are trying to convince oth-

ers of that. When they do battle against the United States and the West, they don't have much ability to build their own legitimacy or credibility, but what they can do is tear our credibility and legitimacy down. The way they do that is through terror attacks that induce overreaction and misdirection.

When a victim state comes loose from its ideological moorings of tolerance and freedom and individual rights, when it treats terrorists wrongly according to its own standards, this confirms a terrorist narrative that their ideology is a competitor to the ideologies of Western countries and the United States.

Our actions have sometimes been used to confirm the stories that terrorists tell—that the United States hates Muslims, that the United States is a wicked world power that abuses people, that the United States wants to occupy Muslim lands. None of those things are true, and they don't even seem plausible to most of us. But the question is whether they might look true to terrorists, to people who are physically and ideologically close to terrorists, and, of course, to potential terrorist recruits. Overreaction and misdirection can make the United States look like an evil power, and that hands ideological gains to terrorists.

To recap, terrorism puts the victim state on the horns of a dilemma. It's at risk of direct attacks, but it's also at risk of overreaction in response. Overreaction tends to waste our blood and treasure, it draws sympathy gains to terrorists, and when we come loose from our ideological moorings and abuse rights, we confirm the ideological narrative that motivates terrorists.

JOHN MUELLER, Ohio State University:

The probability of being harmed by a terrorist is extraordinarily small. At present rates, the chance anyone living outside a war zone will be killed by an international terrorist comes in at about 1 in 75,000—

that's not per year, but over an 80-year period. The chance of dying in an automobile accident over the same interval, by contrast, is about 1 in 80. That assumes another September 11 every several years; if there are no terrorist attacks of that magnitude, the chance of death by terror slumps to about 1 in 130,000. You have a similar chance of being struck by an asteroid.

One might also instructively tally up the number of people killed by al-Qaeda and its clones, lookalikes, and wannabes outside war zones since September 11. That comes to perhaps 200 or 300 per year.

Which is 200 to 300 too many, but it hardly suggests that the country is under an existential threat—or even under something that deserves to be called a “threat” at all.

Perhaps pointing out these underwhelming figures won't reduce the public's fear, given some of the heuristics and biases the public uses and has. But given all the yammering about terrorism we've endured for eight years, these figures need to be out there in the public consciousness somewhere. Unfortunately, neither Republicans nor Democrats bring them up, nor do they show up in the press.

That's unfortunate, because the war in Iraq—the three-trillion-dollar war in Iraq that was made politically possible by 9/11—has cost the lives of 100,000 people, and considerably more American lives than September 11.

MILTON LEITENBERG, University of Maryland:

If you look at annual U.S. mortality statistics, cancer kills about 600,000 Americans per year, tobacco about 440,000 Americans, and obesity another 400,000. Approximately 1.7 million Americans develop infections in hospitals each year, and 100,000 of them die each year. If you add those four figures together, you have about 1.5 million people dying from various diseases in the U.S. in a single year. Compare that to bioterrorism. In the 20th century, bioterrorism has killed five people in the United States. In the 21st century, so far, no one.

ROBERT PAPE, University of Chicago:

Today I'm going to talk to you about suicide terrorism, which in many ways is

the “lung cancer” of terrorism. It's the most deadly form of the phenomenon, and as I'm going to argue today, also is associated with a specific set of risk factors that's quite important to take into account.

Over the past three decades, suicide terrorism has been rising around the world,



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but there is great confusion about why. Since many of the attacks, including September 11, have been perpetrated by Muslim suicide terrorists, many have presumed that Islamic fundamentalism must be the cause. However, this presumed connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism is misleading, and is encouraging foreign and domestic policies that are likely to worsen our situation.

From 1980 to 2003, there were 315 completed suicide terrorist attacks around the world. The world leader is a group that many of you probably haven't heard too much about—because they're not attacking us or our allies. They're the Tamil Tigers of

Sri Lanka, which is not an Islamic fundamentalist organization but a Marxist, secular, Hindu one. The Tamil Tigers have performed more suicide attacks than Hamas or Islamic Jihad. Further, in this period, at least 30 percent of all “Muslim” suicide attacks were by purely secular groups such as the PKK in Turkey, which is another Marxist—and indeed, anti-religious—suicide terrorist group. Overall, at least 50 percent of all suicide attacks around the world in this period were not associated with Islamic fundamentalism.

Instead of religion, what nearly 95 percent of all suicide attacks around the world have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel a democratic state to withdraw combat forces from threatening territory the terrorists continue to view as their homeland or prize greatly. From Lebanon to Sri Lanka to the West Bank to Iraq, what all of the nine disputes that account for 95 percent of all suicide terrorism around the world have in common is that the terrorists are fighting for self-determination for territory that the terrorists prize. That is the terrorists' central goal.

Of course, the pattern has changed in the last five years. From 1980 to 2003, about 7.5 percent of those suicide attacks in that 24-year period could be considered anti-American attacks. But now, in the past five years, fully 89 percent of all the suicide terrorism that is occurring around the world is inspired by anti-Americanism and is directly linked to the new presence of American combat forces on territory that the terrorists prize. This is an extremely dangerous pattern, and it is something that is extremely important for the new administration to work to change.

MARC SAGEMAN, Sageman Consulting:

I want to talk to you about terrorism in Europe. Now, Muslims in Europe are a recent phenomenon. They have grown from about half a million before World War II to about 20 million today. Forgive me, but you might call Muslims in Europe “our Mexicans.” Europe recruited Muslims for labor jobs, such as in manufacturing and construction. They were self-consciously recruited from rural areas

and were not well-educated. The Muslim population of Europe today represents second and third generations of unskilled labor. By contrast, in the United States, first-generation Muslims were well educated and upper-middle class. The average income of a Muslim family in the United States today is about \$70,000, or 40 percent higher than the average American family's income of \$48,000.

In Europe, the Muslim unemployed rate is three times the rate of the native population. In order to sustain those rates of unemployment, you really need to have a strong welfare state, which Europe certainly has. The money for Muslim terrorist Jihadis in Europe does not come from donations, as it sometimes does in the Middle East. Rather, it comes from one of two places: credit card fraud and welfare payments. So, in a way, the state sponsor of terrorism in Europe is the welfare state. The state sponsors of terrorism are Germany, France, and Great Britain! Another, related factor behind the rise of Muslim terrorism is boredom: without a day job, supported by the state, the unemployed Muslims have plenty of time to dream of making their mark, sometimes in violent, destructive ways.

MICHAEL GERMAN, ACLU:

I learned about terrorists in a unique way: by pretending to be one as an FBI agent. That experience provided me with a different way of looking at the problem of terrorism. I ultimately left the FBI due to differences with their policies, which I don't think help our cause in the ongoing

war against terror.

What U.S. policymakers failed to understand after September 11 is that terrorism is not a military strategy that can be defeated with a military counterstrategy. The terrorist's strategy is actually a political one: it is designed to establish his own legitimacy



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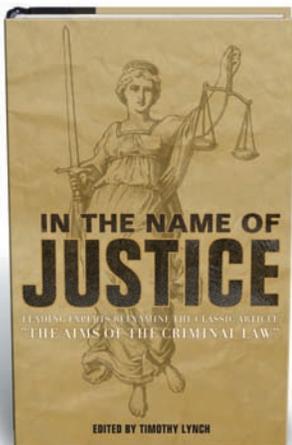
by bringing the legitimacy of the ruling government down in the minds of the masses. It's an interesting political strategy because it begins from a position of profound weakness. It depends entirely on

the victim government reacting to the terrorist provocation in a way that undermines its own support.

By provoking a disproportionate or unjust response that affects innocents along with the guilty, terrorists hope to create legitimate grievances out of their attack. Once the injustice of the opposing government is revealed by way of its unjust counterresponse, the terrorist methods then become justifiable acts of resistance.

Our policymakers fail to understand what Osama bin Laden is actually trying to accomplish. They all but leapt into the trap he had set by embracing policies that did violence to the universal notions of justice and undermined the rule of law. To be sure, the United States was not the first country to abandon the rule of law in response to terrorism. The French in Algeria and the British in Northern Ireland used virtually the same tactics we have adopted, such as extrajudicial detention and coercive interrogation.

Let's consider the results of these policies. As Irish Republican Army member Tommy Gorman explained: "We were creating this idea that the British state is not your friend, and at every twist in the road they were compounding what we were saying, they were doing what we were saying, fulfilling all our propaganda. The British army and the British government were our best recruiting agents." Today, no doubt, bin Laden would say that water boarding, Guantanamo Bay, and Abu Ghraib are among his best recruiting agents.



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