WANTED: A NEW STRATEGY TO CONTAIN TERRORISM

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The Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies at the University of Pittsburgh is dedicated to producing original and impartial analysis that informs policymakers who must confront diverse challenges to international and human security. Center programs address a range of security concerns—from the spread of terrorism and technologies of mass destruction to genocide, failed states, and the abuse of human rights in repressive regimes.

The Ridgway Center is affiliated with the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA) and the University Center for International Studies (UCIS), both at the University of Pittsburgh.

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Introduction

The strategies the U.S. government is using to fight its "global war on terrorism" are not working. It is time for new ideas and public debate that engage citizens, the primary targets and victims of terrorism. Al Qaeda, the designated enemy of the war, is not likely to destroy our nation-state, but it is likely to kill many more people unless we find more successful means to contain it. We need an inclusive bottom-up approach to complement what has been a largely top-down, exclusive effort of government. The purpose of this paper is to surface aspects of terrorism we have neglected in our zeal to turn a tactic of political influence into a war we cannot win.

For five years, we have relied on military action and have spent billions of dollars in Iraq, Afghanistan and other related operations. We have pressed friendly, and pressured less than friendly, governments and international organizations to introduce a variety of legislative measures affecting civil liberties. To ensure passage, we have dangled development assistance in front of governments often criticized for human rights abuses. We have enthusiastically partnered with some governments, militaries, police and intelligence services we found repulsive in the recent past. We are bringing the U.S. closer to becoming a gated community through immigration restrictions and controls. We are applying tools of statecraft against criminal and radical religious networks and our methods are not succeeding. Intelligence reports indicate that the threat of terrorism is greater than ever; anti-Americanism is a growth industry around the world and criticism of the U.S. government has become an Olympic sport. With good reason, Americans feel as vulnerable now as they did in 2001.

There is growing acknowledgment that we need to add diplomatic, political, economic and humanitarian activities to the counter-terrorism campaign. However, we have yet to

translate these abstract notions into concrete actions that engage citizens. Of course, terrorism

affects the nation-state, but it operates through individuals and communities – killing and

maiming one to sow fear in the other. This is the reality our strategies need to take into account.

I was serving as U.S. ambassador to Kenya in 1998 when Al Qaeda attacked our

embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Along with most of the embassy

community, I remained in country for the next ten months to deal with the consequences of the

devastation. Four and a half years earlier, as a senior official in the Department of State's

Bureau of African Affairs, I worked with a small team of people to confront the genocide in

Rwanda. I learned through these profound experiences that smart policy wonks competing for

influence in Washington can become so enamored of grand strategies to affect nations, they

forget about people and human behaviors that shape major events. What I propose is a way of

thinking about terrorism that makes people central to the issue.

Terrorism Defined (or not)

As of June 2006, members of the United Nations had not yet agreed on a comprehensive

definition of international terrorism – a major impediment to efforts to contain it. Meanwhile,

the operational definition of the U.S. government is "premeditated, politically motivated violence

perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually

intended to influence an audience."[1] Some argue this is too limited a characterization because it

does not include government-sponsored activities. Everyone agrees, however, that violence

against civilians in the pursuit of political goals has increased exponentially and is likely to

continue.

Terrorism has been used as a tactic for centuries. Some forms target specific individuals

or groups. Other forms, which we see today, are indiscriminate, directed at as many people as

possible, manipulating media attention to spread panic and anxiety throughout large populations.

So-called "tactical" terrorism is used to achieve political goals for a particular constituency.

"Strategic" terrorism, on the other hand, seeks to destroy the political, economic or social

foundations on which societies are organized. Such is the Al Qaeda brand and this group does

not negotiate.[2]

"A major difference between these two types of terrorism is that there is no social constituency
to take care of as a strategic terrorist group. There are no job opportunities to be created nor
hospitals and farms to be run, and no elections to Parliament to be won. Furthermore, we have
never heard of negotiations with Al Qaeda either being offered or sought. Strategic terrorism
cannot afford negotiations because there is nothing to negotiate: It is confrontation to the death
of one side or the other. Almost any other terrorist group has been involved in some
negotiations, but not Al Qaeda."[3]

Terrorists almost never articulate the end state they are seeking. Osama bin Laden, for

example, has changed his purpose from expelling U.S. troops from Saudi Arabia to re-instating a

medieval Islamic caliphate. It is not a concrete end-state he and other terrorists seek; it is

"revenge, renown and reaction." Terrorists feed on past grievances, exalt in publicity and use

action to provoke responses to justify further action.[4]

Terrorism Branded – as War

The Al Qaeda attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, introduced Americans

to this virulent variety of terrorism. Whether Osama bin Laden intended the attacks to

manipulate us into a "clash of civilizations" is a matter of debate and now largely irrelevant. The

United States government reacted with a declaration of war.

This was an expedient, and to many, a logical and laudable step. Making war is

something Americans understand and have experience in doing. It provided legitimate use of

our military might and an emotional outlet for our anger. It also provided a channel for the

considerable resources of the politically powerful "military-industrial complex." War centralizes command and control into the hands of a few, thus permitting our government to take emergency measures, ordinarily unthinkable, with scant debate. As a political rallying cry, such a declaration is nicely black and white. To wit, if you are not with us, you're against us; if you do not support the war, you are not supporting the troops and your patriotism is suspect.

As a metaphor, "global war on terrorism" never worked. First, the United States never intended fighting all terrorists in all parts the world, so there's nothing "global" about it. We narrowed our sights to radical political Islamists, Al Qaeda in particular. Second, our military activities have not fit the definition of "war." According to Webster, war is "a state of usually open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations." In this case, the groups against whom we declared war comprise neither states nor nations.

Wars have beginnings and ends; terror does not. While we can diminish its use as a means for political change we will never be able to declare "mission accomplished," wave flags or hold victory parades. Wars are fought between enemies and among warriors; terrorists target non-combatants. Finally, wars have established rules of conduct; little is "established" in this current conflict. It doesn't matter if you try to define it as a new form of war, or an asymmetrical war, or even a long war, it still just does not fit.

Nevertheless, the metaphor of "war" has shaped our policies. Funding, attention and strategies are focused on military action. The heroes and victims of Al Qaeda terrorism have become soldiers; actual and would-be murderers are now combatants; the tools we use are the military and intelligence instruments of state; people who question our approach are unpatriotic. And civilians, past and future targets, are collateral damage, and largely irrelevant.

The Bush administration is not the first to leap to a military response to terrorism. In the wake of the 1998 Al Qaeda attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, President

Clinton ordered bombings in Sudan and Afghanistan. Then, as now, little effort was made to understand what terrorism is all about, whom it impacts, how it is reinforced, and what alternate strategies are available to confront it. Then, as now, we ignored its psychological and social affects on people and their communities. Then, as now, we learned little about how to engage people, develop resilience and contain a devastating tactic of influence. By rushing into military action, we have misinterpreted the problem, applied faulty solutions and missed the chance to gain insights that could save lives in the future.

Terrorism as a Mind Game

We need to understand, for example, that to reach their goal of creating terror, terrorists depend on the psychological effects of their actions at least as much as the tangible ones. Terrorism, especially the Al Qaeda brand, is a personal, in-your-face form of violence. Perpetrators destroy lives not because of who you are but simply because you are. You are alive in a certain place at a certain time and for that reason, you die. And if you don't, remember, next time you could die, simply for being. Such impersonal and cruel indifference can leave profound marks on an individual. It can affect every aspect of being, from physical and psychological health to income and quality of life. It can bring into question and sometimes shatter every assumption one carries about humanity, God, life, goodness and fundamental beliefs that have framed one's worldview. For people who seek to make sense of a terrorist attack, the journey can be long and painful. This is what terrorists want.

We also need to understand that the impact is not limited to individuals most directly affected. Data collected in the year following the September 11 attacks revealed psychological ripple effects across the country. Past exposure to traumatic events and acquaintance with the people who were killed increased the vulnerability to post traumatic stress even among those

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who were nowhere near "ground zero" or whose lives were not directly affected. For some

individuals, watching the events on television was enough.[5] We have not yet learned what a

"normal" reaction to terrorism looks or feels like; every person filters the event through

individual and past life experiences. Nor have we learned how to balance the need for a free

press with the reality that terrorists intentionally manipulate media to fuel panic.

The role of society and community in the aftermath of an attack is yet another area we

need to explore. Research has shown that when society imposes its own expectations, judgments

and timeframe on the healing process through a so-called "conspiracy of silence," recovery

becomes even more difficult. Too often, after an outburst of sympathy, society expects victims

and survivors to move on, return to normal, find closure, etc. within an arbitrary period.

Behavioral "shoulds" imposed without understanding or empathy can deepen an already painful

sense of isolation and mistrust.[6]

Isolation and mistrust is exactly what the perpetrators seek. With sophisticated use of

media, terrorists can provoke people into spinning all kinds of unlikely scenarios that undermine

confidence and spread panic. The fact is most of us will not be victims of terrorism. Then again

we could, and that's what we think about. The insidious fears terrorists plant have taken seed.

Absent informed efforts to separate what is real from what is imagination, panic spreads.

Resilience as a Counter-Terrorism Measure

Fortunately, human beings are also resilient creatures who can find a "new normalcy,"

and even great transformations, in the wake of a terrorist attack. Community can be

extraordinarily helpful in this effort. Simply listening to one another and sharing experiences,

for example, help us cope with trauma, make sense of catastrophes, and mitigate fears.

"When communities feel threatened, a heightened bonding, coined the 'honeymoon response' in the disaster literature, occurs. After terrorist attacks, people are also highly motivated to help others. These enhanced attachment responses and motivation to help can have strong societal benefits and should be harnessed and utilized for community health in general and in the planning for response to terrorism. In most instances, leaders spontaneously step forward to help. They should be informed about the need for and encouraged to promote psychosocial recovery efforts."[7]

Societies and communities can either help or hinder resilience and recovery. Around the world, thousands of people have been affected by terrorist attacks before and since 2001 and their experience can be used to learn more about what helps. Although the research is still woefully inadequate, information is available. Leaders, policy makers and citizens could learn how to diminish vulnerabilities and strengthen resilience; we do not need to condemn communities or countries as a whole, to painfully muddle through after every attack. Instead, we could make it a matter of public policy to evaluate lessons learned and best practices, develop a body of knowledge based on experience and research, make the information useful to the public and begin to design strategies to counter the effects terrorists intend.

A Case Study

The 1998 Al Qaeda attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania provided an opportunity for analysis. Before the bombing warning signals were misread; after, we responded with good will but no overarching strategy to turn disaster into a lesson for the future. In both countries, embassy leadership and community were largely left alone to reconstruct their organization, heal their physical and psychological wounds and assist their host country recovery initiatives as they saw fit. What happened in Nairobi, which suffered the greater devastation, is worth considering.

In 1998, Kenya was, as it is now, a poor, largely rural and relatively stable country in the turbulent neighborhood of the Horn of Africa. Most of its people are Christian; Muslims

comprise 10-15% of the citizenry, living predominantly near the port of Mombasa on the Indian Ocean, and in the border area of Somalia. A long-standing U.S.-Kenyan friendship began at independence, when the U.S. government brought hundreds of young people to America to be educated through the "Kennedy Airlift."   As much as we criticized President Daniel arap Moi's autocratic and corrupt domestic rule, we appreciated his policy support and mistrust of Islamic fundamentalists' activities in Kenya.

Kenya's porous borders, corrupt officials and agreeable surroundings have made it a nice haven for dubious groups of all stripes, including Al Qaeda.   Marginalized Muslim communities and Somali refugee camps provided particularly good cover. The Kenyan government dismantled two Islamic organizations in 1997 and early 1998, one of them, the Nairobi branch of Al Qaeda. The "sleeper" cell on the coast of Mombasa was untouched.

In the middle of a sunny, Friday morning, August 7, 1998, a red pick-up truck with two occupants and a thousand pounds of explosives turned a busy, downtown corner and drove into the small parking lot nestled among three buildings at the rear of the U.S. embassy. Like too many other embassy buildings, this one lacked the prescribed security setback. Denied entry into the underground parking facility, the truck bomb was detonated in the small exterior space.

The blast registered 4.0 on the Richter scale. The rear wall of the embassy crumbled, the adjacent 8-story office building collapsed, while, in the third structure, a high rise, windows shattered and ceilings fell.   Two hundred and thirteen people died instantly, all but 12 of them, Kenyans. Five thousand more were injured, many blinded or mutilated from shattered glass. Over 300 businesses were partially or totally destroyed.

Inside the embassy, about 25% of the occupants were killed while another 25% were injured or trapped under rubble. Lacking any form of outside resource – 911, rescue squads, or

fire fighters – many of those who could walk or crawl out returned to rescue the colleagues, while medical triage was set up on the sidewalk.

Thousands of people from around the city rushed to the corner to learn what was happening and began digging with bare hands for survivors.   Outside the embassy, they were met by armed American security personnel warning them away. Kenyans did not understand the need for a security perimeter, nor were they aware that embassy employees were in no condition to help anyone but their trapped colleagues. What the crowds saw were foreigners with guns, tending their own while Kenyan office workers were covered in blood or rubble in the buildings nearby.

The city and its inadequate medical facilities were overwhelmed. Kenyans looked to the outside world, particularly the United States, for assistance. In Washington, crisis control systems went into effect, including a travel advisory warning Americans of the attacks. Geographic distance and the equipment malfunctions of two different aircrafts delayed the arrival in Nairobi of emergency teams and equipment. By the time help appeared from the U.S., the height of the crisis had passed.   Israeli search and rescue teams who had arrived with alacrity were already well in control of first response efforts. Nothing, however, had interfered with news of the travel warnings.

Over the next few days, the blast's effects became clearer. The Kenyan government requested $156 million in assistance. An angry Kenyan media asked hard questions. Why did Americans react with such indifference, even hostility, in the moments following the blast? Where were the assistance teams? Why was the U.S. warning people to stay away from Kenya when it was the Americans, not Kenyans, who drew the terrorists to Nairobi? What had the United States done for Kenya recently anyway?

U.S. Response, a Mixed Review

First responders from the U.S. included a small medical team that worked behind the scenes with Kenyan doctors, surgical teams, counseling units, medical equipment and a rescue squad that took second place to the Israelis. Hundreds of FBI agents also arrived in short order to begin investigations in partnership with the Kenyan police. Next came the condolence visits of American officials, including the Secretary of State. While they could voice sympathy and concern, they could not over ride the congressional budgeting process to provide the assistance fund Kenyans sought. It was not until January 1999 that the embassy received $37 million to apportion as we deemed appropriate. It was insufficient to meet either needs or expectations. Far more dramatic, visible and forthcoming than a substantial humanitarian assistance response were the bombs dropped on an alleged chemical weapons factory in Sudan and an Al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan.

Within a month of the attack, the Monica Lewinsky scandal replaced the attacks in media headlines and government policy concerns. The "conspiracy of silence" experts talk about, the unspoken, undefined time limit society imposes on the grieving and coping process had gone into effect, hastened by domestic U.S. politics. Washington and the international press had moved on and the victims and survivors were expected to do likewise. Efforts to provide Kenyans the attention they needed were left to the embassy. For everyone else, August 7 was history.

Lessons

- The speed, effectiveness and visibility of the first responders leave a lasting impression. The U.S. government provided too little, too late and with too little fanfare; it is the Israelis who will be remembered as the true friend in the hour of need.
- Empathy matters, in deed as well as in word. Kenyans felt twice victimized when the U.S. government advised its citizens to avoid unnecessary travel to the country. They also wondered why tangible assistance was so long in coming. Comforting words from

visitors and local embassy officials were not enough to overcome anger at behaviors Kenyans considered unjustified.

- Demands for compensation, or some form of adequate financial support are inevitable. Victims who are hurt and traumatized, particularly those who are poor and denied future livelihood, need help. The U.S. government had justifiable concerns about the fairness and precedence of paying for damages of the attack when we were both the target and the co-victims. Hard feelings remained when the assistance money to individuals and businesses ran dry. When the U.S. Congress generously compensated the victims of another Al Qaeda attack, on Sept. 11, 2001, Kenyans did not understand.

- Public outreach and genuine, lasting concern promote friendship. The U.S. did not close the embassy. Most of the American staff stayed on to attend memorial ceremonies, assist in long-term recovery, listen to concerns and engage Kenyan communities, including Muslims. The consistent and sincere gestures of friendship did much to reduce initial tensions.

- Partnerships work. In the aftermath of the attack, Kenyan and American law enforcement agencies worked together to track and subsequently arrest some of the perpetrators. Kenyans later participated in the public trial in New York City. Relationships were also developed among members of the mental health communities enabling important lessons to be drawn from efforts to address trauma experienced by people of different cultures. Networks such as these have benefited people on both sides.

- Response assessments are needed. A few sporadic evaluations of certain aspects of the U.S. government actions made their way into documents now shelved in offices around Washington, D.C. However, outside of the congressionally mandated Accountability Review Report which focused on embassy security, no comprehensive effort was made to extract lessons prepare for or mitigate possible future attacks either in Kenya or the U.S.

People-centered strategies needed.

History will evaluate the U.S. government response to the 1998 Al Qaeda attacks in terms of what it accomplished (or did not) through its military strikes in Sudan and Afghanistan, not what it did (or did not) do to make people feel more safe and secure. History will likely record the U.S. government response to the 2001 Al Qaeda attacks in the same vein. In both cases, human security took second place to national security and little was learned or achieved in either. We have yet to grasp the lesson that it is the people, not the state, most at risk from terrorists. We have yet to recognize that by engaging and protecting people, the nation will be more secure. Here are four ideas to accomplish both:

1. Define terrorism as an international crime and hold perpetrators accountable in a court of law. Victims have earned the right to see their attackers brought to justice and perpetrators deserve the public disgrace. Author Jessica Stern, describes the effect in an account of the trial of Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, a participant in the 1998 attack on the American embassy in Dar es Salaam. This is what happened when his mother took the witness stand.

"I saw Mohamed looking down as his mother took her seat. It seemed to me that Mohamed had a harder time facing his mother than he did facing his victims or accusers. There was a jolt of pain in the room, as though the air had been ionized with terror –his and ours. Not a fear of death but the recognition of evil. The recognition that this person who had killed so many has a mother who loves him, despite his crimes, and that he is afraid to look in her eye. That despite his evil actions he is human, just like us. It is one thing to understand this intellectually. It is another to see a mother face her killer son, with his many victims looking on, seeing her fear, her agony, and her loss."[8]

2. Plan for the disaster that an act of terror creates. People need straightforward information about the kinds and magnitude of threats they face and what it will take to mitigate their effects. Enough of scary code words like "WMD" and colored threat alerts. We do not lack for practice in planning for and responding to other types of disasters, so why not add terrorism to the list. Engage governments, private and non-governmental sectors around the world in an international discussion about short and long-term assistance needs in the wake of terrorist attacks. Include the difficult issue of financial help for victims and communities.

3. Immunize against psychological effects. Information and best practices can be made available to community leaders, teachers, clergy, employers, parents and media. Like learning to fasten one's safety belt in a vehicle or airplane, we could introduce habits that protect us against another danger of modern life. We could also promote international networks of experts, community leaders and communities of practices to refocus the spotlight from those wishing to destroy societies to people working to strengthen them.

4. Reach out to communities that harbor or nurture terrorists. An alienated individual, complicit society and a legitimizing ideology are the key ingredients of terrorism.[9] We need strategies to take apart this deadly recipe. A place to start is a review of the international programs the U.S. government sponsored in the aftermath of World War II as a means to contain communism. The Marshall Plan, Fulbright Scholarships, Kennedy Airlift, International Visitors' Programs, cultural exchanges, Peace Corps and other initiatives, or variations thereof, are initiatives whose time has come…still and again. Presently, U.S. diplomatic resources are being redeployed to provide a physical presence in population centers long ignored and virtual presence in many more places. Both the mechanisms and the ideas to influence "wanna-be" terrorists and marginalized communities are within our reach.

Conclusion

Finding innovative and common sense approaches to better deal with terrorism is not the problem; opening the issue to the public is. Ironically, in an era when the U.S. government is making the spread of freedom and democracy key policy tenets, it is excluding its own and other citizens from discussions how they can participate in protecting themselves. What we have learned over the past five years is that, when it comes to confronting terrorism, our government does not necessarily know best. It is time to share, not classify information and ideas; time to include, not exclude people from strategy discussions; and time to make people central to policy discussions and strategies.

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[1] U.S. Code, Title 22, Section 2656(d).

[2] Giandomenico Picco, "Tactical and Strategic Terrorism", Yaek Danieli, Danny Brom, Joe Sills, eds., *The Trauma of Terrorism* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2005), 72-75.

[3] Ibid, 76.

[4] Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (Random House, 2006) 88.

[5] Roxanne Silver, Michael Poulin, E. Alison Holman, Daniel McIntosh, Virginia Gil-Rivas, Judith Pizarro "Exploring the Myths of Coping with a National Trauma: A Longitudinal Study of Responses to the September 11th Terrorists Attacks", Yael Danieli, Danny Brom, Joe Sills, eds., *The Trauma of Terrorism* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2005) 129-140.

[6] Yael Danieli, Danny Brom, Joe Sills, "The Trauma of Terrorism: Continental Considerations," Yael Danieli, Danny Brom, Joe Sills, eds., *The Trauma of Terrorism* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2005) 6.

[7] Yael Danieli, Danny Brom, Joe Sills, "Sharing Knowledge and Shared Care," Yael Danieli, Danny Brom, Joe Sills, eds., *The Trauma of Terrorism* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2005) 779.

[8] Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Millitants Kill* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003) 247.

[9] Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (Randon House, 2006) 216.