

## TERRORISM AFTER 9/11/01: ONE AMERICAN'S PERSPECTIVE

Allen L. SESSOMS\*

*SUMMARY: I. Introduction. II. A Brief Historical Perspective. III. An American Reaction. IV. The Groups. V. The First Response to Terrorism. VI. Understanding and Addressing the Causes of Terrorism. VII. Conclusions.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The deliberate and calculated mass murder of innocent civilians, or at least the realization that devastating attacks that have this effect can occur in the heartland of the United States, has become for most Americans a fact of daily life. Concern about the potential perpetrators of such acts has led to the most radical change in the functioning of the U.S. government since the end of the Second World War. It has also heightened U.S. sensitivities about the causes of such acts and increased the resolve to address them. The U.S. is equally resolute about confronting the causes of these acts, that as a short-hand we will define as “terrorist acts”, as it is about preventing such acts from occurring, whatever the cause. By the same token the new realization that a terrorist act anywhere, if it is not actively confronted, could embolden the perpetrators to strike directly at the U.S.

\* Former President of Queens College, City University of New York. Former Deputy Ambassador in the Embassy in Mexico with Ambassador John Negroponte. Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University.

The terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 altered the conception of “National Security” for the U.S. It is no longer enough to defend the U.S. against nation-states. It is necessary to define a new type of threat that necessitates taking preventative (pre-emptive) steps to eliminate the *possibility* of terrorist attacks. Thus the entire concept of the security of the U.S. as an entity has changed. No longer is it enough to defend the land within national borders. It is also necessary to defend the physical, economic, social and cultural extensions of the U.S. overseas. This then changes the concept of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other nations. The government of the Russian Federation has come to similar conclusions after the horrendous attack on the theater in Moscow mentioned below. Terrorism has no boundaries and neither must the response to it.

Thus the government of the United States has declared a “war on terrorism” that has no borders and few limits. The challenge is to prevent terrorism and to destroy its perpetrators while addressing the origins of the discontent that give rise to the terrorism in the first place.

## II. A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Terrorism and terrorist-like acts have been a tool of political movements and governments throughout modern history. Governments declare such activities to be acts of war (such as the sneak attack by Japanese forces on the U.S. base at Pearl Harbor that triggered U.S. entry into World War II) when undertaken by one nation against another. The international community has declared them to be acts of genocide when taken by a government against part of its own citizenry (such as the so-called “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia and Iraqi governmental use of nerve gas on its Kurdish population). The genocide in Rwanda, during which millions of innocents died, was part of a struggle by several identifiable, governmentally supported po-

litical entities for control of physical territory. The citizens of Northern Ireland have suffered murderous attacks from Catholic and Protestant para-military groups who are for or against continuing the current political arrangements in that part of the United Kingdom. The people of Israel have suffered and continue to suffer from violent attacks on civilians by groups that do not have formal ties to a government but clearly receive material and other support from governments whose goal seems to be the eradication of Israel as a nation state. The recent murderous attack on a theater full of civilians in Moscow by Chechen separatists appears to be an act in a civil war calculated to force Russia's hand in a region over 2,000 miles away. Closer to home, the recent bombing of a night club in Bogotá that resulted in dozens of deaths appears to be the work of a group seeking territorial control and the freedom to continue illegal narcotics and other activities.

The attacks suffered by the U.S. and some of its allies before, during and since September 11, 2001 appear different than those types mentioned above. They appear to be part of a struggle against the perceived economic and culture prowess of Western societies, as exemplified by the United States, by disgruntled groups that are motivated by the failure of their own societies. Their goal appears to be to stop a historical trend that they perceive has left their societies and cultures behind. Their struggle is couched in religious terms like "good", "evil" and "the great Satan" and invokes "God" or "Allah" as the justifier for their horrendous acts.

These attacks are not just confined to the West. The October 2002 attack on a discothèque on the Island of Bali in Indonesia, the largest Islamic country in the world, was the act of an Islamic fundamentalist organization. It was primarily an attack on innocent westerners but without regard to who else was slaughtered. This sort of "Sacred Terror" as some have called it clearly knows no boundaries.

The asymmetry in military power in the post cold-war world seems to have stimulated some nations to support terrorist organizations and actions as a counterweight to military force. These nations appear to believe that such support could provide leverage to gain political advantage that their lack of conventional military power denies them. This is a dangerous concept since military asymmetry is relative. Any nation that feels in an inferior military posture versus another could use this to justify horrendous actions that in the end could lead to war or worse. In my view this is simply unacceptable.

### III. AN AMERICAN REACTION

To my mind the deliberate murder of innocent civilians for what ever purpose has no place in our globalizing world. Whatever the stimulus for grievance, these types of actions are an unacceptable response. It is fair to say that in many instances grievances are not easily heard or even articulated. Even when heard, in many cases the responses of authorities are inadequate and corrupt. Further, there are a number of countries in which globalization has made matters worse for normal citizens while enriching a well connected and often corrupt few. I am not convinced that this is a problem of globalization although it may have exacerbated some of the conditions. It may be rather a structural problem rooted in the vestiges of colonialism, governmental corruption and mismanagement, human greed and outdated cultural aphorisms.

In some instances those in positions of power believe that it is their right to personally benefit from the potential wealth of those over whom they hold sway. They argue that they rule by a “divine right” and thus are immune from the norms that have permitted countries such as those in the West to thrive in a globalizing environment. Such rulers use religion as a yoke to subjugate their peoples rather than as an inspiration for the better-

ment of their daily lives. They also use it as an excuse to blame others for their own inadequacies. The “West” is at fault for going along with this situation as long as it serves its own purposes without regard for the effect it has on those that are exploited.

A prime example is the exploitation of petroleum resources in the Middle East. Many of the regimes are corrupt but are useful to us because they can guarantee a steady supply of oil. We in the West are willing to support these regimes, some of whom we created for this purpose, while showing little or no concern for the conditions in which the vast majority of the citizens of these countries live. We seem to care about stability and supply: human rights and a fair distribution of the wealth we provide simply do not play a role. In this example are the roots of hatred and mistrust that give rise to desperation. And to terrorist acts.

I believe that the appropriate response for the United States and indeed for the world community is two fold. In the first instance we must protect innocent human life. We must prevent the willful act of murdering innocent civilians for political purposes from occurring and eliminate those who would commit such acts. We cannot negotiate with murderers no matter what justification they might argue they have. To do so would encourage others with whatever motives to use murder as a legitimate instrument to achieve political or social ends. This is clearly unacceptable.

The second part of the response, in parallel with the first, is to address the grievances of those who have been alienated by the modernizing world. In some cases this will have to be done despite their governments. This is, of course, a major problem for some governments that may be, or are perceived to be, illegitimate, not representative of the people and/or rule by “divine right”. The international community may have to change the rules of non-interference in the domestic affairs of countries in order to address concerns that threaten all of humanity. The irony

is that some of the governments that are causing the problems are important players in international affairs. Will the international community have the courage to address this issue? Will the “West” subjugate its own narrow interests to its broader and more important international responsibilities? If the answers to these questions are not resounding “yeses” then the consequences will be severe.

#### IV. THE GROUPS

The U.S. Department of State has compiled a list of those organizations that it considers “Foreign Terrorist Organizations”. This designation has wide ranging consequences in U.S. law and has a major impact on the conduct of international law enforcement. The current list (as of January 30, 2003) is as follows:

1. Abu Nidal Organization (ANO)
2. Abu Sayyaf Group
3. Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade
4. Armed Islamic Group (GIA)
5. Asbat al-Ansar
6. Aum Shinrikyo
7. Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)
8. Gama’a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group)
9. HAMAS (Islamic Resistance Movement)
10. Harakat ul-Mujahidin (HUM)
11. Hizballah (Party of God)
12. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)
13. Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM) (Army of Mohammed)
14. Al-Jihad (Egyptian Islamic Jihad)
15. Kahane Chai (Kach)
16. Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) a.k.a. Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK)

17. Lashkar-e Tayyiba (LT) (Army of the Righteous)
18. Lashkar i Jhangvi
19. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
20. Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK)
21. National Liberation Army (ELN)
22. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)
23. Palestine Liberation Front (PLF)
24. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)
25. PFLP-General Command (PFLP-GC)
26. Al-Qa'ida
27. Real IRA
28. Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)
29. Revolutionary Nuclei (formerly ELA)
30. Revolutionary Organization 17 November
31. Revolutionary People's Liberation Army/Front (DHKP/C)
32. Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC)
33. Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso, SL)
34. United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)
35. Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA)
36. Jemaah Islamiya organization (JI)

In order to gain a place on this list an organization must meet certain criteria. They must be engaged in “terrorist activity” as defined in this quotation from the State Department’s “Terror Fact Sheet”:

any activity which is unlawful under the laws of the place where it is committed (or which, if committed in the United States, would be unlawful under the laws of the United States or any State) and which involves any of the following:

(I) The highjacking or sabotage of any conveyance (including an aircraft, vessel, or vehicle).

(II) The seizing or detaining, and threatening to kill, injure, or continue to detain, another individual in order to compel a third

person (including a governmental organization) to do or abstain from doing any act as an explicit or implicit condition for the release of the individual seized or detained.

(III) A violent attack upon an internationally protected person or upon the liberty of such a person.

(IV) An assassination.

(V) The use of any—

(a) biological agent, chemical agent, or nuclear weapon or device, or

(b) explosive, firearm, or other weapon or dangerous device (other than for mere personal monetary gain), with intent to endanger, directly or indirectly, the safety of one or more individuals or to cause substantial damage to property.

(VI) A threat, attempt, or conspiracy to do any of the foregoing.

The State Department Fact Sheet further defines what it means to engage in terrorist activity. It states that: “the term ‘engage in terrorist activity’ means in an individual capacity or as a member of an organization”.

1. To commit or to incite to commit, under circumstances indicating an intention to cause death or serious bodily injury, a terrorist activity;
2. To prepare or plan a terrorist activity;
3. To gather information on potential targets for terrorist activity;
4. To solicit funds or other things of value for
  - (aa) a terrorist activity;
  - (bb) a terrorist organization; or
  - (cc) a terrorist organization, unless the solicitor can demonstrate that he did not know, and should not reasonably have known, that the solicitation would further the organization’s terrorist activity;

II. To solicit any individual

(aa) to engage in conduct otherwise described in this clause;



- (bb) for membership in terrorist organization described in clause; or
- (cc) for membership in a terrorist organization described in clause, unless the solicitor can demonstrate that he did not know, and should not reasonably have known, that the solicitation would further the organization's terrorist activity; or

III. To commit an act that the actor knows, or reasonably should know, affords material support, including a safe house, transportation, communications, funds, transfer of funds or other material financial benefit, false documentation or identification, weapons (including chemical, biological, or radiological weapons), explosives, or training

- (aa) for the commission of a terrorist activity;
- (bb) to any individual who the actor knows, or reasonably should know, has committed or plans to commit a terrorist activity;
- (cc) to a terrorist organization; or
- (dd) to a terrorist organization, unless the actor can demonstrate that he did not know, and should not reasonably have known, that the act would further the organization's terrorist activity.

## V. THE FIRST RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

It is my view that those engaged in such activity must be brought to justice. The recent arrest of a University of South Florida professor, Sami Al-Arian, in the U.S. for aiding the Palestinian Islamic Jihad is an indication of the extent the U.S. is willing to go to attack the perpetrators of terrorism globally, whether or not their activities directly impact the U.S. homeland. It is well known that the Islamic Jihad has been using American academic and fund-raising groups as fronts since the 1980's. The

“war on terror” is not a foreign war for the U.S. It is also my view that an act of terror anywhere must be treated as an act of terror everywhere, to which we have a collective, international responsibility to respond. I regret that this is not a view that is widely held, even in the West.

Some argue that, in certain instances such as in the Middle East, the Palestinian cause justifies the means. Besides, they say, Israeli action has provoked the “Intifada”, as the Palestinian uprising in the Israeli occupied territories is called, and consequent terrorist activities. This argument is both dangerous and self-serving. There cannot be *any* justification for deliberately killing innocent civilians. Even in war it is considered a crime except in extraordinary circumstances and even then *someone* must have acted in a criminal way for the deliberate slaughter of civilians to occur.

## VI. UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE CAUSES OF TERRORISM

We in the West must also address the causes of terrorist activity. British journalist Robert Fisk noted in an article in the *Independent* newspaper on August 22, 1998:

The use of the word “terrorist” —where Arabs who murder innocents are always called “terrorists”— whereas Israeli killers who slaughter 29 Palestinians in a Hebron Mosque or assassinate their prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, are called extremists—is only part of the problem. “Terrorist” is a word that avoids all meaning. The “who” and the “how” are of essential importance. But the “why” is something the West prefers to avoid.

Bernard Lewis, the eminent American historian of the Middle East, asks in his recent book “What Went Wrong?” exactly that question about the once dominant Islamic culture and its relationship with the now dominant West. There are complex ex-

planations, many of which suggest that at least in part the arrogance of the then dominant Islamic nations led to their own downfall. This is not an unknown phenomenon in the West, with ancient Greece and Rome as prime examples. However, the decline of Islamic culture has also led to the impoverishment of many modern Islamic societies. This then becomes a humanitarian issue that must be addressed.

Islamic culture and heritage are rich in institutions that can adapt well to modern historical trends. The role of the West must be to facilitate that adaptation, not to dictate its terms. The modern dogma of “democratic” institutions must give way to the concept of modern, representative government in whatever form is most appropriate for it to take. Women must be given equal voice, but in a way that is acceptable to them within the context of their culture. The West must be aware that it cannot dictate that culture and must not be at war with it.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

The struggle against international terror is everyone's struggle. There is no excuse under any circumstances for the deliberate slaughter of innocent civilians. Those who carry out such acts must be punished to the fullest extent possible. Those abetting such acts should be treated as if they themselves personally committed those murders. Maximum efforts should be taken at the international level to prevent these violent acts wherever they occur in the world and for whatever reason. Terror is the enemy of civilization. It cannot be tolerated under any circumstances.

The causes of misery and impoverishment that breed despair and then terrorist activity must be addressed in a coherent and rapid way by the international community. Major efforts must be undertaken to understand the causes of these conditions and steps must be taken to improve the lives of the hundreds of millions of people for whom globalization is a synonym for

domination by a foreign culture or power. This will require a change in the rules on international engagement. The domestic affairs of sovereign nations will no longer be their concern alone. Resources must be made available to address pressing problems and transparency in the use of those resources must be guaranteed. The way the world does business will have to change if we are to ensure that everyone benefits to the maximum extent possible from the advances we have made as human beings.