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The evolution of threat narratives in the age of terror: understanding terrorist threats in
Britain *

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That the nature of international security changed fundamentally on a single day is now taken for granted. When those hijacked aircraft were flown into buildings in New York and Washington (and into the ground at Shanksville, Pennsylvania), the catastrophe was to lead, at least in some circles, to a profound change in the ways security was discussed. At least, this is the conventional wisdom. Of course, it could be pointed out that western security thinking has an interesting history of being ‘shocked’ into change by singular events: the massacre of Srebrenica, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the launch of Sputnik, the annihilation of Hiroshima—all had similar effects on ‘our’ thinking. Western security thinking, at least since the end of the Second World War, has seemed to rely on ‘shocks’ for its evolution. But with 9/11, the world had self-evidently changed. Who could disagree with such a proposition? All we can do is try to catch up, and to get on top of those changes. Such is the conventional wisdom.

Yet it is wrong—for policy now, as well as for academic debate—to consider the events of 9/11 simply in this way. The ‘war on terror’ was a deliberate political choice taken by western political leaders, and they could have fashioned other responses. That those events in September 2001 would produce a political response on the part of the US is clear (and was undoubtedly clear to those who planned the attacks). But that response did not have to be the ‘war on terror’. There were choices for the US, for the UK, and indeed for the West as a whole.

For the US, the shock was all the more profound because of the (false) sense that the US homeland had been immune from attack, including attack from terrorism. This was false not only in the context of the Oklahoma City bombing, but also given a whole host of other terrorist attacks in the US in the 1990s, including at the Atlanta Olympic Games, and in the derailing (by bombing) of a train in Arizona. But in the predominant security narratives these were not really significant events, because these terrorists were seen as ‘lone wolves’—indeed, such actions were not always deemed to be terrorism. With 9/11, a new terrorist organisation (Al-Qaeda) was called into central view.

In Britain, policy-makers had been dealing not only with IRA terrorism, but also with a host of other terrorist organizations, some of which acted largely within the territorial confines of Northern Ireland while others, including animal liberation and far right-wing terrorists, acted across the UK and indeed also, on occasion, internationally. In

envisioning the ‘war on terror’, American policy-makers saw a single threat narrative of terrorism, which is why it was possible, in his speech to Congress on 20 September 2001, for President Bush to say: ‘And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.’¹ No-one working on international security and counterterrorism in the UK, in either the policy or the academic community, would have made such a statement in, say, August 2001; terrorism was simply understood differently. But in choosing to respond to the attacks with the political and military strategy of the ‘war on terror’, such complexity was removed, and a new, singular threat was put in its place.²

Americans and Britons understood the threat narrative differently from the very start of the ‘age of terror’. Indeed, that very term—the ‘age of terror’—precisely captures the difference. With a history of atrocity in places as distinct as Birmingham, Guildford, Belfast, Enniskillen, Warrington, Omagh and London (which experienced 14 separate attacks in over 20 years up to the Belfast Agreement, and four more after it), all in the period from the early 1970s to 9/11, the ascription of that title to a new period was, to British and Irish ears, jarring. Americans, though, felt in the wreckage of September 11th a loss of invulnerability, and so ‘age of terror’ was precisely the key description in the United States. As Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda put it:

We’ve never had a good name for it, and now it’s over. The post-cold war era—let us call it that for want of any better term—began with the collapse of one structure, the Berlin Wall, on

¹ Transcript of President Bush’s address to a joint session of Congress on 20 Sept. 2001, broadcast on CNN, 21 Sept. 2001, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>, accessed {?}Jan. 2010.

² Stuart Croft, *Culture, crisis and America’s war on terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

November 9, 1989, and ended with the collapse of another, the World Trade Center's Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 . . . everyone acknowledged that everything had changed.³

The title of their book, written immediately after 9/11 and published in January 2002, expressed this perfectly: *The age of terror: America and the world after September 11th*. America had declared the new age: and that declaration would structure security and foreign policy for the world. For the UK, that would mean that counterterrorism policy, broadly expressed, would be framed far more by the American agenda than it would be by Britain's own experiences in struggles with terrorists.

With the declaration of the 'war on terror', focus was trained on *the* threat narrative to America and the West. But it is the contention of this article that there have been a series of threat narratives; that one of the characteristics of the 'age of terror' has been our failure at a political and public level to agree on what the threat is. As a consequence, we have failed to agree on the name of the enemy: is it 'Al-Qaeda', 'Islamofascism', 'Islamism', 'Islamic terrorism'? All have been tried and, for different reasons, found wanting as descriptors. We have failed to establish a counterterrorism narrative that would persuasively and over time convincingly show linkages between operations in Iraq, the West Midlands, Afghanistan and Glasgow; and for some British citizens, a counternarrative—of Britain 'crusading' against the Muslim world—has taken hold. That which constitutes 'threat' has changed in our minds over the past decade.

This article examines these issues by first looking at four distinct though overlapping notions of the threat posed to the West, and to the UK, in debates about counterterrorism since 9/11. One considered Al-Qaeda to be a central organization, perhaps akin to the Red Army in the Cold War: a military machine conducting hostile operations. Another viewed the threat in network terms, as being decentralized, with a number of local cells operating strategically in common but distinctly in tactical terms. Yet another focused on the 'home-grown' threat, in which radicalized young people are drawn into terrorism by ideologues outside mosques or via the internet; here, Al-Qaeda's role could be seen as more analogous to the Comintern in Cold War days. Finally, there

³ Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda, *The age of terror: American and the world after September 11th* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 3.

has been the apocalyptic threat, with a focus on the perceived determination of the ‘new terrorism’ to inflict extraordinary damage through the use of weapons of mass destruction.

The second section of the article asks the simple question: so what is new about this ‘age of terror’? Clearly, terrorism has been a feature of international and domestic life for centuries: the concept was first articulated by Robespierre in the French Revolution, allowing us to date the beginning of a longer ‘age of terror’, yet what we would recognize as acts of terrorism were certainly committed before that time.⁴ What are the new features? How important are aspects such as the internet and Web 2.0, mobile phones and new technology? These are clearly important operational issues, but how do they impact upon how we think of contemporary terrorist threats? We ask: is there a new and immediate threat—or is that which is new the nature of our own fears?

Four threat narratives

British counterterrorism policy has traditionally sought to understand the nature of the threat that was being faced.⁵ Over time, there have been quite clearly a series of counterterrorism failures, here conceived of not as intelligence failures, but as community failures, lessons learnt by the British state. Internment in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s was a disaster; so were the police investigation into the pub bombings, leading to miscarriages of justice for the Maguire Seven, the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four, and the H-Block policy and the handling of the hunger strikes in the early 1980s. Over a decade or so, successive initiatives had only led to a widening and deepening of that threat: through failure in policy and practice, the British had actually expanded the threat. But there was a process of reflection and learning in London and Belfast; and there

⁴ See e.g. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside terrorism*, 2nd rev. edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 3–4; Albert Parry, *Terrorism from Robespierre to Arafat* (New York: Vanguard, 1976).

⁵ The British counterterror strategy that emerged after 9/11 is known as CONTEST. Details can be found at the Home Office website, <http://security.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism-strategy/>, accessed {?} March 2010.

followed a period of real operational success, not only with regard to Northern Ireland, but also in connection with preventing terrorist attacks by far right groups and others in the 1980s and 1990s. Reflection, learning, and getting to know the people, local context and organizations: these were key practices of British counterterrorism by the early 1990s. After 2001, the ‘war on terror’ was overlaid on this culture and practice and, for a period, obscured them, so that there was a period of ‘unlearning’. As well as reflection, learning and local context there came ‘macro’ ideas from the US that led to different types of threat coming into focus at different times.

This section will examine how each of the four types of threat identified above was seen. The purpose is not to provide evidence or argument that one or more of these narratives is in any objective sense ‘wrong’, nor to assert that the ‘real’ nature of terrorism can be understood outside narratives. Rather, the focus in this article is to understand the nature of the contestation about the nature of ‘threat’, an issue that has to be absolutely core to any counterterrorism strategy and practice.

AQ Central

The first threat narrative, that emerging from the attacks of 9/11, focused on the idea of a centralized, global terrorist threat: a narrative that strongly underpinned the Bush Administration’s response to 9/11. Rather than see the attackers as criminal, they were understood as (illegitimate) soldier-terrorists following the orders of the leader. Hence, a terrorist attack could be faced by invading and changing the government of another *state*: rather than seeing 9/11 as a transnational issue, it became a state to state challenge. But that idea—of Al-Qaeda having central command over a global strategy, that of the leadership of ‘AQ Central’—became important in the United Kingdom not least because the Prime Minister was convinced by it. Tony Blair told the 2004 Labour Party conference that

There are two views of what is happening in the world today. One view is that there are isolated individuals, extremists, engaged in essentially isolated acts of terrorism. That what is happening is not qualitatively different from the terrorism we have always lived with . . . The other view is that this is a wholly new phenomenon, worldwide global terrorism based on a perversion of the true, peaceful and honourable faith of Islam; that its roots are not superficial but deep, in the

madrassahs of Pakistan, in the extreme forms of Wahhabi doctrine in Saudi Arabia, in the former training camps of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan; in the cauldron of Chechnya; in parts of the politics of most countries of the Middle East and many in Asia; in the extremist minority that now in every European city preach hatred of the West and our way of life.⁶

In this view, there were an ideology ('extreme forms of Wahhabi doctrine'), sites of ideological development ('in the madrassahs of Pakistan'), and sites held by that ideology that would be the hubs of attempts at revolutionary change ('Saudi Arabia', 'Afghanistan', 'Chechnya'—indeed, 'most countries of the Middle East and many in Asia'—and 'in every European city'). For Blair, this was a global campaign, from which only the Americas were (at the moment) bastions against the new central threat. As he also said, 'September 11th changed the world; . . . Bali, Beslan, Madrid and scores of other atrocities that never make the news are part of the same threat'.⁷

It is of course important to realize that there was nothing specifically British about this view; it was an idea that was deeply embedded in responses across the West. The attacks of 9/11 were coordinated and delivered with, apparently, great skill; surely that was evidence of a strong organization? Perhaps. But this analysis also reflected two underlying views. The first was that only a 'great opponent' could land such a devastating blow on the continental United States; that America was so powerful as surely to be vulnerable only to a similarly powerful entity. That is, there was also a (western/American) cultural proclivity to understand 'threat' as centralized. The second, rooted in the political and cultural experience of the twentieth century, was that great threats were controlled tightly and centrally, as in the long struggle with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, or with Nazism in the decades before that. In other words, 'we' were in a sense conditioned to see the threat as centralized and powerful. This interpretation was perhaps most pronounced in literal and figurative representations of the 'AQ Central' model, which was published by the United Nations as the 'Al-Qa'idah

⁶ Full text of Tony Blair's speech to the Labour Party conference in Brighton, 28 Sept. 2004, BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3697434.stm, accessed Jan. 2010.

⁷ Blair's speech to Labour Party conference in Brighton, 28 Sept. 2004.

pyramidal structure' in 2002.⁸ This of course illustrates another facet of the 'naming' problem: even spellings of 'AQ' have varied in western and in British literature over time.

The network threat

Following analysis of the war in Afghanistan in 2001, a strand of thinking developed to suggest that Al-Qaeda was or had become not a centralized structure, but rather a network. Some, such as Alia Brahim, argued that there had been a *transition, from* a centralized structure *to* a network, and that in this transition the seeds of Al-Qaeda's destruction could be found, for the network model would lead to more innocent Muslim deaths at the hands of Al-Qaeda that would not be possible to justify, either ideologically or theologically.⁹

At the centre of the debate between AQ Central and the network approach has been the battle of wills between Bruce Hoffman and Marc Sageman, two highly respected American analysts—a battle of wills followed in great detail by counterterrorism policy officials in London. The argument is not about whether there is a central leadership for Al-Qaeda, of course, but about the extent to which it is operationally relevant, both in terms of managing and delivering terrorist attacks, and in terms of the degree to which it is able to recruit new members directly to its cause. Doubts as to its operational control emerged soon after the Taleban fell from power in Afghanistan, given the sheer weight of killing and disruption of structures that had taken place with the American bombardment of the country. This moved the focus onto its ideological leadership: as Rohan Gunaratna put it in 2005, 'Although the operational capability of al Qaeda has severely weakened

⁸ United Nations Security Council, letter dated 22 Aug. 2002 from the Chairman of the Monitoring Group established pursuant to Resolution 1390 (2002) addressed to the Chairman of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to Resolution 1267 (1999) concerning Afghanistan, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/599/01/PDF/N0259901.pdf?>, accessed {?} Jan. 2010.

⁹ Alia Brahim, 'Crushed in the shadows: why Al Qaeda will lose the war of ideas', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33: 2, Feb. 2010, pp. 93–110.

during the past four years, the ideology of global jihad articulated by Bin Laden and his group serves as a catalyst for 30–40 Asian, Middle Eastern and African jihad groups and for numerous cells in the West.’¹⁰ AQ Central may not decide on targets, but according to this argument it worked to inspire others.

Marc Sageman’s *Understanding terror networks*, published in 2004, was an important volume whose core thesis was, in policy circles, a slow burner.¹¹ Sageman suggested that it was wrong to see Al-Qaeda as a pyramidal organization. An organization of this sort could be destroyed in a systematic way, mostly through the use of the military. In contrast, he argued that Al-Qaeda was better understood as a social network, and networks cannot be *destroyed*—they have to be *disrupted*. This is the essence of the distinction between a model of a threat from ‘AQ Central’ and that of a threat from a ‘network’. When Sageman followed up with *Leaderless jihad*, there was a much more receptive environment for his argument that the threat did not emanate from a centralized leadership with real resources as well as command and control capabilities, but lay in the capacity to inspire locally formed groups, who were making their operational decisions locally.¹² Bruce Hoffman objected to this analysis. Putting forward the ‘AQ Central’ thesis, he argued, *contra* Sageman, that defeating Al-Qaeda ‘will require a dual strategy of systematically destroying and weakening enemy capabilities—that is, continuing to kill or capture senior al Qaeda leaders—and breaking the cycle of terrorist recruitment . . . Only by destroying the organization’s leadership and disrupting

¹⁰ Rohan Gunaratna, ‘Ideology in terrorism and counterterrorism: lessons from combating Al Qaeda and Al Jemaah Al Islamiyah in Southeast Asia’, CSRC discussion paper 05/42, Sept. 2005, p. 2,

http://kms2.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ESDP/44015/ichaptersection_singledocument/0D07F910-03A4-4CC7-86EA-5B754A6E04FA/en/07.pdf, accessed Jan. 2010.

¹¹ Marc Sageman, *Understanding terror networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

¹² Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: terror networks in the twenty first century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

the continued resonance of its radical message can the United States and its allies defeat al Qaeda.’¹³

The debate between the two analysts was in a sense a classic American argument, with positions staked out and a rush to emphasize difference rather than agreement. As an aside in the exchange between the two, Sageman notes that ‘our [that is, Sageman’s and Hoffman’s] practical recommendations are not that far apart’.¹⁴ Sageman had not argued that Al-Qaeda had been defeated; rather, he had suggested that Al-Qaeda

put out inspirational guidance on the Internet, but it does not have the means to exert command and control over the al Qaeda social network. The surviving members of al Qaeda are undoubtedly still plotting to do harm to various countries in the world and have the expertise to do so, but they are hampered by the global security measures that have been put in place.¹⁵

Nevertheless, through this debate British policy-makers were faced with a choice, particularly because Hoffman raised the stakes. It was no longer sufficient to believe that AQ Central had been shattered on the battlefields of Afghanistan in 2001: Hoffman argued that ‘al Qaeda Central had reconstituted itself in Pakistan’s tribal frontier areas and from that base was again actively directing and initiating international terrorist operations on a grand scale’.¹⁶ Two understandings of the threat had come directly into

¹³ Bruce Hoffman, ‘The myth of grass-roots terrorism: why Osama bin Laden still matters’, *Foreign Affairs* 00: 0{?}, May–June 2008, pp. 000–00{?}, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63408/bruce-hoffman/the-myth-of-grass-roots-terrorism?page=3>, accessed {?} Jan. 2010.

¹⁴ Marc Sageman, ‘Does Osama still call the shots? Debating the containment of al Qaeda’s leadership’, *Foreign Affairs* 00: 0, July–Aug. 2008, pp. 00–0, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64460/marc-sageman-and-bruce-hoffman/does-osama-still-call-the-shots?page=2>, accessed {?} Jan. 2010.{?}

¹⁵ Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, p. 132.

¹⁶ Bruce Hoffmann, ‘Does Osama still call the shots? Debating the containment of al Qaeda’s leadership’, *Foreign Affairs* 00: 0, July–Aug. 2008, pp. 000–00{?},

confrontation, prescribing two different routes of response: maintain the importance of the AQ Central narrative, or focus more on the notion of a grass-roots, leaderless terrorist threat.

Meanwhile, others such as Olivier Roy noted that ‘networks are both international and founded on strict personal relations between members. They unite globalisation and the *esprit de corps* of people that know each other well.’¹⁷ Taking a different reading, Fawaz Gerges suggested that Al-Qaeda should be seen as one network within a broader Salafi–Jihadi movement.¹⁸ Furthermore, offshoots of this debate have led to further analysis of the small groups, and cliques, or of an enclave ‘of like-minded people, prone to polarisation of visions, views and interpretations of the world’.¹⁹ Such thinking was important in the development of a threat narrative associated with converts and home-grown threats.²⁰

The home-grown threat

The third narrative was catapulted to the fore in public debate by the attacks in London in July 2005. The cause of the ‘home-grown threat’ was much discussed. In retrospect, Marc Sageman for one was clear: ‘Iraq is the moment when British jihadists started

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64460/marc-sageman-and-bruce-hoffman/does-osama-still-call-the-shots?page=2>, accessed {?} Jan. 2010.

¹⁷ Olivier Roy, ‘Al-Qaeda: a true global movement’, in Rik Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi terrorism and the radicalisation challenge in Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 112.

¹⁸ Fawaz Gerges, *The far enemy: why jihad went global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Jocelyne Cesari, ‘Muslims in Europe and the risk of radicalism’, in Coolsaet, *Jihadi terrorism and the radicalisation challenge in Europe*, p. 104.

²⁰ This is perhaps most marked in the strategy of ‘Prevent’, one of the four strands of the UK CONTEST counterterrorist strategy.

focusing on attacks inside the UK.²¹ But other accounts did not come to the same conclusion. Tony Blair asserted that ‘we must reject the thought that somehow we are the authors of our own distress; that if only we altered this decision or that, the extremism would fade away’.²² In July 2005, the authors of a Chatham House briefing paper argued:

There is no doubt that the situation over Iraq has imposed particular difficulties for the UK, and for the wider coalition against terrorism. It gave a boost to the Al-Qaeda network’s propaganda, recruitment and fundraising . . . provided an ideal targeting and training area for Al-Qaeda-linked terrorists . . . Riding pillion with a powerful ally has proved costly in terms of British and US military lives, Iraqi lives, military expenditure, and the damage caused to the counter-terrorism campaign.²³

The response of the then Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, was to equate such analysts with apologists for terror:

I’m astonished if Chatham House is now saying that we should not have stood shoulder to shoulder with our long standing allies in the United States. But let me also say this, the time for excuses for terrorism [is] over, the terrorists have struck across the world in countries allied with the United States, backing the war in Iraq and in countries which had nothing whatever to do with the war in Iraq.²⁴

²¹ Sageman, quoted in Mehdi Hasan, ‘The bulletproof case against Blair’, *New Statesman*, 28 Jan. 2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/uk-politics/2010/02/iraq-war-invasion-blair-regime>, accessed {} Jan. 2010.

²² Tony Blair, ‘Clash about civilizations’, speech given in {} London, 21 March 2006, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page9224.asp>, accessed {} Oct. 2006.

²³ Paul Wilkinson and Frank Gregory {}, in ‘Security, terrorism and the UK’, briefing paper, Chatham House and the New Security Challenges Programme, July 2005, <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/research/security/papers/view/-/id/301/>, accessed {} Jan. 2010.

²⁴ Jack Straw, ‘Straw: time for excuses for terrorism over (18/07/2005)’, edited transcript of the Foreign Secretary’s words on BBC News 24, Monday 18 July, 2005,

The home-grown threat narrative was particularly chilling, pointing to British citizens acting as a ‘fifth column’ in ‘our’ midst. The leader of the 7/7 attacks, the suicide bomber Mohammed Siddique Khan, spoke in a broad Yorkshire accent in his ‘martyr’s testimony’. A government adviser advanced the view that one in five British Muslims ‘may’ support militant jihadi violence.²⁵ These elements coalesced into a view that, as Tony Blair put it, the home-grown radicals ‘may have been born here. But . . . [the] ideology wasn’t. And that is why it has to be taken on, everywhere.’²⁶

For Blair, the ideology and indeed the operation were products of AQ Central. But for others, the home-grown threat was could not be separated from the network threat. As Roy noted: ‘We have seen that young westerners went to countries to fight the jihad and came back to Europe to commit terrorist acts. But these networks can function both ways, without us being able to talk about a point of departure and a final point.’²⁷ The focus on the movement of people to and from jihadi theatres sheds some light on networks, but it fails to address other elements of threat narratives, especially those focusing on the home-grown nature of the threat.

Of course, it would be strange to suggest that the home-grown threat had no links to other ways of thinking about the threat, such as that of a ‘network’. But it also had distinctive elements. That is, the home-grown threat is not purely derived from a (mis)reading of Islam. Over three weekends in 1999, David Copeland, the infamous nail bomber, killed three people and injured 129 not to further ‘jihad’, but to attempt to

http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/news/2005/07/fco_not_180705_strawchathamhse, accessed {} Jan. 2010.

²⁵ This figure is attributed to Haras Rafiq, ‘an adviser to the Government’s preventing extremism taskforce’, in James Slack, ‘One in 11 British Muslims backs suicide bombers, says Brown aide’, *Daily Mail*, 2 Aug. 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-472791/One-11-British-Muslims-backs-suicide-bombers-says-Brown-aide.html>, accessed {} Jan. 2010.

²⁶ Blair ‘Clash about civilizations’.

²⁷ Roy, ‘Al-Qaeda’, p. 113.

initiate a 'race war' (he also, of course, attacked the gay community). As Copeland said in his confession to the police, 'My aim was political. It was to cause a racial war in this country. There'd be a backlash from the ethnic minorities. I'd just be the spark. That's all I will plan to be, the spark that would set fire to this country. Chaos, damage, fire, it's okay.'²⁸ A home-grown terrorist, inspired by a network that was both UK-based and international in reach; but in this instance, rather than Islam, the inspiration was contemporary Nazism. Often such individuals are seen as loners; but this is to mix the operational with the ideological. Copeland, and indeed Timothy McVeigh in his bombing of Oklahoma City, may have operated as a loner, but both men were embedded ideologically in networks. Indeed, McVeigh outlined his motivations in a letter to Fox News in which he highlighted the violence at Waco (the attack occurred on the two-year anniversary of Waco) and the actions of the US abroad as justifications.²⁹

The new terrorism threat

One of the particularly noticeable strands of thinking about threat has been a focus on the idea of a 'new terrorism', and specifically the view that the 'new terrorists' were fundamentally different in terms of threat from those of the past. Irish terrorism often gave warnings, and was connected to a political strategy. The 'new terrorists', it was said, simply wanted to kill as many people as possible. Tony Blair was very explicit about this when he said:

I don't think you can compare the political demands of republicanism with the political demands of this terrorist ideology we're facing now . . . I don't think the IRA would ever have set about trying to kill 3,000 people . . . In America, it could have been 30,000 instead of 3,000 [killed on

²⁸ David Copeland, cited in 'The nailbomber', *Panorama*, BBC Television, 30 June 2000, transcript at

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/panorama/transcripts/transcript_30_06_00.txt, accessed {} Feb. 2010.

²⁹ Fox News, 'McVeigh's April 26 Letter to Fox News', 26 April 2001, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,17500,00.html>, accessed {} Feb. 2010.

9/11] and they would prefer that. My entire thinking changed from 11 September—the belief that you have a different form of terrorism.³⁰

And the previous year, he had said: ‘The only path to take is to confront this terrorism, remove it root and branch and at all costs stop them acquiring the weapons to kill on a massive scale because these terrorists would not hesitate to use them.’³¹

In Britain, the idea that terrorism was ‘new’ was very much connected to the fear that it would be apocalyptic. John Reid{?} had said that Britain was facing ‘probably the most sustained period of severe threat since the end of the second world war’, and that there was a new ruthless group of ‘unconstrained international terrorists’.³² The former director of the British Security Service noted shortly before she retired: ‘The terrorist threat from AQ and related groups is, quite simply, unprecedented in scale, ambition and ruthlessness: they have a global reach, and they are willing to carry out mass casualty attacks, including suicide attacks, without warning. It remains a very real possibility that they may, some time, somewhere, attempt a chemical, biological, radiological or even nuclear attack.’³³ The Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Ian Blair, had also expressed this fear in a high-profile lecture: ‘Britain remains a target of the highest possible priority to al-Qaeda and its affiliates; we are in a new reality. The sky is dark. The terrorists seek mass casualties and are entirely indiscriminate: every community is at risk, which is the starkest of reasons why we need representatives of every community in

³⁰ Tony Blair speaking at a news conference, quoted in ‘IRA are not al-Qaeda says Blair’, BBC News, 26 July 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4718223.stm, accessed {?} Jan. 2010.

³¹ Blair’s speech to Labour Party conference in Brighton, 28 Sept. 2004.

³² John Reid, quoted in ‘Anti-terror critics just don’t get it, says Reid’, *Guardian*, 10 Aug. 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/aug/10/terrorism.humanrights>, accessed {?} Jan. 2010.

³³ Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, ‘Partnership and continuous improvement in countering twenty-first century terrorism’, *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 1: 1, 2007, pp. 43–5.

our ranks.’³⁴ ‘Our’ fear has been that not only will ‘they’ attack us, but ‘they’ will try to destroy ‘us’.

At one level, such fears are reasonable. Beyond contextual factors, Martha Crenshaw noted 30 years ago that ‘Violence and bloodshed always excite human curiosity, and the theatricality, suspense, and threat of danger inherent in terrorism enhance its attention getting qualities.’³⁵ The drive to gain recognition and coverage leads to escalation and ‘to ever more destructive and spectacular violence’.³⁶ The corollary deployed by liberal democracies includes the production of ever more frightening threat narratives, including those associated with apocalyptic fears. This theme has been conjoined with repeated references to no-warning, mass-casualty terrorism, often linked to suicide attacks (both person-borne and vehicle-borne), as part of a radical religious agenda deployed by Al-Qaeda. And so an action–reaction cycle develops: ‘they’ want to threaten ‘us’; ‘we’ are genuinely worried about ‘their’ determination to kill; ‘they’ notice ‘our’ fears, and speak and act accordingly.

Of course, these four depictions of the narratives deployed in the past decade are not mutually exclusive notions of threat; you can focus simultaneously on the home-grown threat and the new terrorism threat, for example. One can argue that the fourth narrative is the unifying one—that it is the commitment to a ‘new terrorism’ that has been the key concern, whether the agent be considered as a centralised threat, a network threat or a fifth column. But what this account of differing focal points for ‘our’ threat narratives illustrates is that it has been very hard to secure and maintain consensus about the precise nature of the threat. And that is something new; it was not a feature of the campaign against Irish terrorism, or, further in the past, of the debates about the threats of nuclear

³⁴ Sir Ian Blair, Richard Dimpleby Lecture, 11 Nov. 2005, http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/11_Nov./16/dimpleby.shtml, accessed {?} Oct. 2006.

³⁵ Martha Crenshaw, ‘The causes of terrorism’, *Comparative Politics* 13: 4, July 1981, p. 386.

³⁶ Crenshaw, ‘The causes of terrorism’, p. 386.

war, or of Nazism. Then, whether you agreed with what was being said or not, the official position on who the challenger was, what they were called, and what they would do, was clear. In the past decade, such clarity has been profoundly absent. So what, if anything, is new about the current threats and challenges of contemporary terrorism, and how do these four threat narratives implicitly penetrate recent discussions about features of contemporary terrorism?

New and old terrorism

In the late 1990s a burgeoning literature emerged which sought to address aspects of what was labelled as ‘new’ terrorism, drawing attention to a new phase, or a radically altered form of threat.³⁷ Martha Crenshaw has argued that the literature on ‘new’ terrorism assumes that the means of this terrorism are radically different; that its goals or ends are ‘presumed to be both unlimited and non-negotiable’; and that accounts of it are predicated on a reading of ‘decentralised, “inspirational” and ‘diffuse’ threats, rather than a phenomenon orchestrated by an orthodox entity or organization.³⁸ Crenshaw notes that the effect of 9/11 had a huge impact, akin to the North Korean invasion of South Korea, inasmuch as it cemented ‘the ideas behind interpretations of threat’ which at the time were focused on ‘Communism and the militarisation of containment’.³⁹ She further notes that the ‘1998 embassy bombings, the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000, and the millennium plots strengthened the perception of a completely new threat’.⁴⁰ Crenshaw recognizes that the idea of new terrorism is appealing, but judges it deeply flawed in its assumptions. In effect, it ‘is a way of defining the threat so as to mobilise both public and

³⁷ A representative sample of this literature might include Walter Lacqueur, *The new terrorism: fanaticism and the arms of mass destruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bruce Hoffman, *Inside terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Ian Lesser, *Countering the new terrorism* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1999).

³⁸ Martha Crenshaw, “‘New’ vs. ‘old’ terrorism: a critical appraisal”, in Coolsaet, *Jihadi terrorism and the radicalisation challenge in Europe*, pp. 25–36.

³⁹ Crenshaw, “‘New’ vs. ‘old’ terrorism”, p. 35.

⁴⁰ Crenshaw, “‘New’ vs. ‘old’ terrorism”, p. 27.

elite support for costly responses with long-term and uncertain pay-offs'.⁴¹ The 'shock' of 9/11 was a turning point, and the narrative of 'new terrorism' led to a model which 'permits top-down processing of information' precisely because policy-makers 'rely on metaphors, narratives and analogies that make sense of what otherwise {?} be difficult to understand, if not incomprehensible'.⁴² While this is certainly the case, it is interesting to note that much of the work on 'new terrorism' predates the events of 9/11, and this recognition leads to a number of questions: in particular, what changes, if any, have occurred in the nature and form of contemporary terrorism, and what is new about new terrorism?

First, themes have been framed by a huge growth in the use of the media and more particularly the internet; an active 'system of communication between individuals and between individuals and groups' which leads to 'interactivity'.⁴³ For Sageman, it is this interactivity which is novel, transformative and perhaps even revolutionary, when considering contemporary terror threats. He notes that the 'the intensity of feelings developed online rival those developed offline'.⁴⁴ Computer-mediated communication 'seems to collapse time and eliminate space' and 'has the potential to transform human relationships faster and to an even greater degree', a point illustrated by the fact that 'some networks were created wholesale from forums, which radicalized their members'.⁴⁵ The use of information and communication technologies and the associated electronic networks became a central strategic tool of Al-Qaeda, differentiating it from earlier phases of terrorism.⁴⁶

Groups and networks can raise and even construct awareness about the plight and suffering of peoples in different parts of the world, particularly through videos which can be streamed online. This has led to the creation of new patterns of recruitment—both

⁴¹ Crenshaw, "'New" vs. "old" terrorism', p. 35.

⁴² Crenshaw, "'New" vs. "old" terrorism', p. 35.

⁴³ Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, p. 114.

⁴⁴ Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, p. 114.

⁴⁵ Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Abdel Bari Atwan, *The secret history of al-Qa'ida* (London: Saqi, 2006), pp. 120–49.

passive and active—and the exploitation of propaganda opportunities by radical groups. The shift in the coverage of events from the print media and television to digital media has transformed the context in which terrorism and insurgencies, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are understood and analysed.⁴⁷ One outcome has been a return to discussions about ‘the terrain of the electronic media . . . the kind of immediacy and visual impact you get from television’.⁴⁸ To an even greater extent, the shift from the visual simply to the use of symbols—certain gestures and evocative labels, sounds and motifs—may perhaps reflect a further transformation of the use of imagery by particular groups. Online coverage—both in chat forums and through the filming of particular attacks—gives the virtual community the opportunity to send messages of support and visceral, even graphic, anti-western motifs and mantras. Two young men from Derby—Asif Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif—attempted to detonate explosives in a café in Tel Aviv in an apparent suicide attack, in support of the actions of Hamas, on 30 April 2003, after making martyr videos.⁴⁹ Both, from Pakistani families based in the UK, were disenfranchised—dislocated from their local social communities.⁵⁰ Such people are now able, as they were not in the past, to travel with relative ease from their homes to different conflict zones to commit acts of terrorism, or to gain training, or to learn more about the ‘cause’.

Digital media and travel are important, but a further dimension of the opportunities provided through globalization to radical violent groups is the hybridization of insurgency and terrorism. At the forefront of the hybridization of insurgency was the conflict in the North Caucasus. Ibn Khattab, the leader of the Arab *mujahedin* in Chechnya, had led a group of Arab fighters in the post-Soviet civil war in Tajikistan, having trained in Afghanistan as a young *mujahid*; he, along with his

⁴⁷ David Kilcullen, *The accidental guerrilla: fighting small wars in the midst of a big one* (London: Hurst, 2009).

⁴⁸ Brian Michael Jenkins, ‘Terrorism: a contemporary problem with age-old dilemmas’, in *Terrorism: roots, impact, responses* (London: Praeger, 1992), p. 16.

⁴⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3543269.stm>, accessed March 2010.

⁵⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/may/01/israel5>, accessed March 2010.

erstwhile Chechen supporters, was at the forefront of this transformation of insurgency.⁵¹ Together they presaged the new, being part of a generation of jihadi fighters and ideologues who exploited the growing influence of both media technologies and post-Cold War globalization. Khattab's integration into the Chechen military formations was not simply an enforced union, in which he and his close unit of supporters became an appendage to nationalist and separatist Chechen forces. Rather, Khattab was received in 1995 by a radical Jordanian–Chechen Islamist named Shaykh Ali Fathi al-Shishani (Fathi Mohammed Habib), and together they advanced a reading of defensive jihad which resonated with small groups of local volunteers and found purchase in other circles of volunteers from the Chechen diaspora.⁵² With a pan-Caucasian ideology, Khattab and Shamil Basayev embraced new media technologies, including the use of camcorders. In the build-up to the outbreak of the second Russo-Chechen War in 1999, Khattab and local benefactors established a series of multilingual audio and visual portals for the Arab *mujahedin* in Chechnya, alongside websites through which to publicize the actions of his group and send messages to the outside world through the online community, effectively setting a precedent for 'jihad through the media'.⁵³ Their actions indicate that globalization had not only enabled groups to use the media in novel ways, shaping the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, but had also enabled people to travel between different theatres with greater ease. Insurgency, and the related use of terrorism, was becoming hybridized—a process that gained momentum after the events of 9/11.

As a result of greater access to the media and changes in broadcasting (for example, the introduction of podcasts), new interfaces have been created between local communities and larger regional and global narratives. This enables different audiences to access websites, which are increasingly sophisticated. The use of chat rooms, web

⁵¹ See Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, 'Assessing unholy alliances in Chechnya: from communism and nationalism to Islamism and Salafism', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25: 1, March 2009, pp. 73–94.

⁵² Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, 'Foreign fighters and the case of Chechnya: a critical assessment', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31: 5, May 2008, pp. 412–33.

⁵³ Moore and Tumelty, 'Foreign fighters and the case of Chechnya', p. 417.

forums and live feeds, and the streaming and dissemination of audio-visual messages, extend the reach of small groups, establishing new online networks and communities. This feeds directly into the hybridization of terrorism with information, sermons and fatwas, as well as other messages being posted online. The reshaping of Al-Qaeda, especially against the backdrop of the war in Iraq, enabled it to develop the leadership's long-standing interest in the media and 'the international media in particular'.⁵⁴ According to Sageman, 'websites do play an important educational role in terms of providing information relevant for the jihadis and especially operational knowledge in the absence of training camps'.⁵⁵ The dissemination of detailed step-by-step video guides on how to make improvised explosive devices (IEDs) is one aspect of the burgeoning role of the internet which national and international authorities have identified as a problem.⁵⁶ This increased availability of online instructional content has also led to a renewed attempt to analyse 'self-radicalization', in which individuals or groups actively seek out and engage with radical groups through the internet. Perhaps the most marked example of this phenomenon in the UK was the failed attack in Exeter by Nicky Reilly. News reports indicated that

He is thought to have met British-based Muslim radicals in internet cafés near his council home, which he shared with his mother. Security sources said that radicals encouraged him to visit internet chat rooms and other websites, where he encountered men based in Pakistan who helped to mould a violent hatred of the West. He discussed with the men what his targets should be and they directed him to bomb-making websites.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Gerges, *The far enemy*, pp. 193–4.

⁵⁵ Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, p. 113.

⁵⁶ See e.g. 'The EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment: implementation report', <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/05/st14/st14781-re01.en05.pdf>, accessed {?} Feb. 2010.

⁵⁷ 'Nicky Reilly, Muslim convert, jailed for 18 years for Exeter bomb attack', *TimesOnline*, Jan. 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article5619151.ece>, accessed {?} Feb. 2010.

It is unusual in a violent conflict to be unclear as to the nature of the threat faced. But perhaps some of that uncertainty is rooted in the times—that is, the novelty characteristic of the digital age, which facilitates broader globalized patterns of empathy and action, of information and self-radicalization, and, of course, through mobile communications technology, facilitates new opportunities for operational activity by violent groups. Five years after 7/7, these reflections on the evolution of counterterrorism—and its close cousin counterinsurgency—may lead to radical reconsiderations of the age of terror and the evolution of threat narratives.

Conclusion

The analysis and arguments in this paper have been split into two broad sections. The first has charted the evolution of different, indeed overlapping, threat narratives, which have variously been deployed to demarcate not only the boundaries of the ‘age of terror’ but also western policy responses. In particular, we have drawn attention to the ways in which these stories about threat interpenetrate, producing an evolving discourse about the way counterterror strategies have become operationally and institutionally embedded in policy discussions in the UK. In the second part of the article we have developed this analysis further by showing that the strategy of terrorism remains stable but the context in which it is understood has led to hybridization. Thus questions about new waves, phases or new types of terrorism, and the focus on Al-Qaeda and the global war on terror, are misleading, blurring the complex evolution of and changes in the use of terrorism in a series of other local theatres, particularly through the use of the media by groups in places such as Chechnya. We have argued that terrorism—and the links between visual aspects of security and imagery, symbols and motifs—globalization, insurgency, and media technologies—Web 2.0, live video-streaming, online chat forums—now feeds directly into fears about ‘new’ threats. {?}

Yet perhaps we should also consider not just the enemy, not just the violent ‘other’ out to attack soldiers and civilians, but also ourselves. Why are we so fearful of such groups? Nicky Reilly, the failed bombers not of 7 July 2005 but of 21 July 2005, the failed attack in Glasgow: brutal as these plans may have been, the outcomes show that

there is also a good deal of operational incompetence. This is not to call for complacency, but rather to suggest that perhaps our fear of contemporary terrorism is more intimately linked to the ‘risk society’ than it is to strategic concerns about the future of western civilization. Our fear of terrorism is cultural—we see it in television series (*Spooks*), in stage plays (Alice Bartlett’s *Not in my name*), obliquely in novels (J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*). Pinning down what this terrorist threat is might be as much about reading our own fears as about understanding the plans of the enemy.