A non-ending struggle: making difficult choices in contending terrorism

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Neil J. Smelser

Kurzgefasst: Terrorismus entzieht sich aufgrund seines wechselhaften Charakters einer klaren Definition – und fordert demokratische Gesellschaften in besonderem Maße heraus. Es gilt, eine Balance zu finden zwischen Überreaktion und Nachlässigkeit, Offenheit in der Kommunikation und Geheimniskrämerei, zwischen Sicherheit und Wahrung bürgerlicher Freiheiten. Eine gewisse Routine im Umgang mit Terror hat sich inzwischen entwickelt, und es hat den Anschein, dass diskrete internationale Zusammenarbeit auf Dauer erfolgreicher ist als quasi-militärische Kriegführung.

Summary: Terrorism is almost impossible to define and difficult to address because of its irregularity and changing nature. Governments and citizens are confronted with tough challenges, like finding a balance between security and liberty, between transparent communication and secrecy, between alarmism and stoicism. It seems that for foiling terrorism cooperative efforts show more results than aggressive, war-like strategies. But there will always be remaining risks for free societies.

The history of inter-group and international conflict reveals a few commonalities. The object of adversaries is to disadvantage one another by killing, injuring, immobilizing, defeating, or conquering. A major resource in conflict, moreover, is the ability of one combatant to outwit adversaries by unanticipated attack and other surprises, and to anticipate others' surprises by spying, infiltration, and other means of gathering intelligence. Finally, for any type of conflict, activities necessary for carrying it out usually become routinized into definite forms, including armies, navies, systems of training combatants, and systems of intelligence and battle strategy. All these may be regarded as ways of mastering the uncertainties of conflict and thereby securing advantage.

To some degree this process of routinization can be found in the brief history of modern international terrorism – which I date somewhat arbitrarily from the middle-Eastern episodes of the 1960s. By now the contemporary pattern of terrorist activities is known – extreme decentralization, local coordination rather than centralized command, shifting objects of attack, reliance on extreme irregularity and surprise, capitalizing on computer technology, and relying on totalistic commitment to religious, national, and regional ideologies. Our capacity to confront this pattern has become somewhat routinized, too, as we learn, painfully but reluctantly, that traditional armed forces equipped to fight national wars are increasingly inappropriate weapons against terrorism, that information must be shared internationally, and that foiling terrorism through cooperative efforts is more workable than trying to crush it. At the same time, adaptation remains incomplete, and a number of serious dilemmas hound our adaptive efforts. These dilemmas are many, and most are not entirely new. They have, however, been given distinctive new twists by the specific nature of contemporary terrorism.

Terrorism is impossible to define

While almost all who think about terrorism feel compelled to offer a definition, there is no agreement; hundreds of definitions have been found in the literature. Part of the confusion arises from terrorism's novelty: it does not fit comfortably into standard definitions of war, crime, and political protest, though it is in some respects all of these. Part arises from historical myopia: historians and contemporary scholars alike fashion definitions from specific historical manifestations and proclaim these as generic. Part arises from the fact that terrorists, victims, the media, and "the public" react to different facets of the phenomenon. And part arises from the fact that the word is used in mainly normative ways; labeling disliked actions of enemies as "terrorist" but never confessing to "terrorism" oneself.

From my own scholarship I concluded that a systematic definition is impossible, even though I could not resist defining it and defending that definition: "Terrorism is intended, irregular acts of violence or disruption (or the threat of them), carried out in secret with the effect of generating anxiety in a group and with the further aim, via that effect, of exciting political response or political change." But I also recognized certain ambiguities and difficulties in my own version. This impossibility of definition has real consequences: the recent American struggle over whether to try terrorists in military or civilian courts may be written off as partisan conflict between Republican hawks and Democratic doves, but at the same time it expresses the fundamental dilemma as to whether terrorism is to be defined as a form of war or a form of crime.

Terrorism appeals to a sense of dispossession

Among terrorism's many determinants, one is its appeal to a sense of dispossession among groups. This is almost a truism. It should also be pointed out that such sentiments often have roots in historical circumstances largely beyond our control – the inherited antagonisms from international colonialism, for example, or the universality of the nation-state as the preferred mechanism for social integration, which frequently dispossesses specific integrative groups based on communal, religious, and ethnic grounds. These "causes" cannot be alleviated without a wholesale revision of centuries of history.

With regard to contending with terrorism itself, the multiplicity of its conditions and causes creates dilemmas as to the means to deal with it: should we ameliorate international injustice? Launch pre-emptive attacks on suspected groups and nations? Discredit terrorism by propaganda and public relations? Disrupt ongoing terrorist activities? Protect borders and control movement of peoples? Bolster defenses of targets of attacks? Any of these might be effective, but we are not certain about which, carried out in what degree, and in what combination are optimal. We cannot pursue all of them maximally because of cost considerations, political constraints, and because terrorist strategies are elusive and changing. We almost always rely on imperfect knowledge and on outcomes of struggles among ourselves in determining anti-terrorist strategies.

The balance between being cautious and over-alarming

Whether to publicize or to keep secret information about terrorism is a general dilemma of wartime situations and is prominent in contending with terrorism. It also has several facets: (a) Should warning systems against terrorist activity be frequent and specific or highly selective and situational? This is an especially difficult question, because, unlike certain disaster situations (for example, flooding, storm warning) specific terrorist attacks, being secret, typically cannot be identified as they are approaching. There can only be "risk probabilities". The troubled history of the five "color coded" warnings of the Homeland Security Department in recent United States history illustrates the difficulty. On the one hand, reducing danger to five "colors" ranging from blue to red conveys little information, especially about how to behave in response to a given color. Further, those in control of issuing warnings, concerned with both being inattentive or over-alarming the public, avoid the "extreme" colors. (b) Should knowledge about terrorism be made public? A National Academies panel on "making the nation safer" on which I served came up with its own informed list of what targets – dams, public buildings, electrical grids, computer systems – were more vulnerable or less vulnerable to attack at that time. Should we have included this diagnosis in our public report or should we have repressed this as information useful to potential enemies? (c) Should the mass media be left completely free to publicize terrorism – often an asset to terrorist groups – or should codes of journalistic reporting be enforced, thus inhibiting the valued freedom of the press? None of these are soluble by fixed formulae.

To what degree should the public be "prepared" for terrorism? Closely related to the publicity-secrecy dilemma is that of preparing the population for the probability of terrorist attacks. This is also a generic problem that faces nations at war, but is especially significant in the case of terrorism. A state of war is usually an enduring state, and the populations of warring nations understand, more or less, that their respective states are so engaged; possibility of attack is correspondingly normalized. Terrorist situations may also endure, but as far as we understand them, terrorist attacks are likely to be rare, unanticipated, and designed to catch the target governments and populations unaware. This combination of rarity, periodicity, and lethality makes for a difficult social-psychological situation for target populations. Under these circumstances populations are inclined to vacillate between alarm and complacency, depending on news, rumors, and actual incidents. Special issues for authorities are the following:

(a) The perils of under-preparing the public by following a policy of secrecy or by simply remaining silent. This fosters more confused responses on the part of

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the population when a terrorist event occurs and increases the probability that authorities will be subsequently blamed for laxness after the fact. This effect has been called "blame assignation".
(b) The perils of over-preparing the population with information, exercises, and drills. At the least this is an irritant to those who are inclined to deny potential threats; it also excites the "cry wolf" response when warnings occur but attacks do not and risks blaming authorities for "panicking".
(c) Unpredictable consequences of communicating with the public. It is a well-known principle in disaster research that segments of the population – based on class, ethnic group, neighborhood, categories – are less likely to receive news and warnings, and that both individuals and groups interpret these differently. Rumors also distort events and situations and compromise the effectiveness of official communications.

Political security versus civil liberties

My comparative studies of terrorism suggest that this is a universal problem accompanying terrorism, as well as war in general. It appears in all forms of terrorism, because authorities are forever inclined to push the case for gathering information, infiltrating, apprehending, arresting, and punishing suspected individuals and groups. Mandates to do their job well and mandates to avoid political criticism press toward this result. At the same time, protecting civil liberties is one of the foundational elements of political democracy, and suspected violations arouse protests not only from victims but also from a larger population of liberal-minded groups. The problem is chronic. It has appeared in efforts to confront domestic terrorism, for example in the United States' government's crackdown on black militant groups in the 1960s, and in the episodes of terrorism in Germany, Italy, and other European countries in the 1970s and 1980s. In the latter historical memories of past totalitarian practices were especially constraining. This general tension is especially serious because it involves the clash of two sacred principles: the sanctity of national self-protection and the sanctity of protecting the rights of individual citizens.

National unity versus partisan politics

Wartime usually pulls together national populations and increases solidarity, trust in leaders, and cooperation. Terrorism as we now experience it lies between war and non-war, and as a result fails to generate such unifying responses, except in extraordinary instances such as the events of September 11, 2001. The main story of contemporary terrorism, especially in the adversarial politics of the United States, is for political parties to seek partisan advantage by blaming the party or past party in power for laxness, extreme reactions, and misguided politics. Such divisions are a source of mischief in the design of deliberative, non-partisan responses to terrorist dangers; they constitute an additional element in the "impurity" of threatened nations' reactions.

The evident conclusion to this analysis is that, at the present time of history, the identified dilemmas assure that nations' responses to international terrorism will be mixed, conflicted, and only partially effective. Contending with terrorism appears to be a forever-changing, stumbling, and non-ending process. To think of "victory" over terrorism – as the analogy of war on against terrorism suggests – is misguided. More appropriate imageries are terrorism as a running sore, as a long war of attrition, and as a patient struggle against a problem that is not once-and-for-all soluble.

References

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