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Combating Terrorism: Are There Lessons to Be Learned from Foreign Experiences?

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Summary

As the United States braces for possible repeated incidents of international terrorism in the United States, there may be lessons to be learned from the experiences of other countries which have suffered prolonged onslaughts of terrorism. Other countries have had differing results using approaches now employed or suggested for U.S. policy. While none of the four approaches discussed here appears to have worked in all cases, none can be excluded for that reason; each case is uniquely instructive. The utility of each approach, as well as of specific measures, can depend on a variety of factors, including the nature and organization of a terrorist group, public attitudes toward it, and the depth of support for it. This paper looks briefly at some cases where judgments have been made on the effectiveness of different policy measures, and raises questions relating those outcomes to the current situation.

The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States were extraordinary in terms of the number of lives lost, the extent and cost of the destruction, the audacity of the concept, and the dramatic symbolism of the targets. Obviously, they were not the first incidents of international terrorism suffered in the United States in the post-Cold War period. However, because of these attacks, the United States now fears that it will face a prolonged period of repeated terrorist incidents – including, especially, attempts to launch mass casualty attacks possibly even using weapons of mass destruction.

While September 11 is unique in a number of ways, many other countries have faced prolonged onslaughts of terrorism. This terrorism has taken many forms: terrorism induced by separatist movements, terrorism by indigenous revolutionary groups of the right and the left, and terrorism by international groups seeking to strike at their own government's interests from abroad or to influence the target country's foreign policy. Terrorism is not new: it dates from ancient times and was widely employed in 19th century Europe and in many colonized nations throughout the 20th century. Acts of terrorism are viewed by many experts as the work of rational people who lack other resources to achieve their political aims. All natures of government, at all levels of economic welfare, have been attacked by terrorists: established democracies (including many European

governments), nascent democracies, authoritarian regimes with or without the trappings of democracies, and communist governments. Support for terrorism as a tactic does not depend on social class - working class, middle class, and upper class people have supported and joined such movements - although most who undertake such action are young and male. Martha Crenshaw suggests that terrorism is “the resort of an elite when conditions are not revolutionary,” i.e., when members of elite groups are dissatisfied with the government, but the populations are passive. Thus terrorism may be, she argues, “a sign of a stable society rather than a symptom of fragility and impending collapse.”¹

Although other cases are not analogous to the particular threat that the United States now faces from Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network, the dynamics of the relationships between the counterterrorist measures taken by governments and the factors crucial to the survival and growth of terrorist organizations - particularly their ability to recruit, the strength of their organization, the depth of their support, and the extent of their resources – may prove instructive in the formulation of U.S. policy.

The purpose of the paper is to pose questions about the possible lessons that might be learned from the results of policies adopted by other countries in a few of the most studied cases. These insights cannot be precise policy prescriptions. They may, however, be used to provide a context for an examination of the potential effects, particularly long-term effects, of different policy approaches. They may also help avoid errors of assumption about the effects of policy based on the analysis of a single case. The paper is organized around the four of the policy questions which are currently at the forefront of the counterterrorism policy debate, and for which there is a body of scholarly work on other cases to draw upon for comparisons.²

Should the United States adjust its policies in the Middle East and elsewhere by seeking reforms in countries from which Al Qaeda draws recruits?

Some analysts urge U.S. policymakers to seek reforms that would address the undemocratic nature and economic distress of Middle Eastern and other populations in order to deprive the radical Islamic fundamentalist movement of popular support, resources, and recruits. Other countries have had a variety of experiences with attempts at reform to accommodate terrorists positions. Christopher Hewitt, who has extensively studied the effects of government policies in five cases, notes that despite extensive reforms made by two of those governments, i.e., Spain and Northern Ireland, separatist terrorism continues in those countries. Hewitt found that in the initial phases of reform, terrorist violence rose in both countries, an occurrence which he attributes to the terrorists attempts to seek further concessions. Ultimately, he found, violence did decline somewhat, but remained significant in both countries. Further, in looking at all five cases, he did not find evidence that improving economic conditions reduced terrorism.”³

¹ Martha Crenshaw. “The Causes of Terrorism” as reprinted in Edward Moxom-Browne, ed. *European Terrorism*. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1994. p 20.

² As there have been relatively few instances where foreign militaries have been used to deal with terrorism, this brief paper does not deal with the military option.

³ Christopher Hewitt. *The Effectiveness of Anti-Terrorism Policies*. Lanham, MD: University (continued...)

Many scholars have attempted to explain the persistence, indeed the resilience of terrorist movements such as the Basque ETA in Spain and the Catholic factions in Northern Ireland. The ethnic or religious differences, and history of discrimination or persecution because of those differences are obvious factors. Yet, in the case of Spain, the Basques are but one of a number of different ethnic groups, and many question why other groups have not engaged in terrorism. Among the explanations are the “historical memories of repression, the perceived severity of the threat to Basque culture and language, the idealization of traditional Basque society, and the culture of violence legitimated by religious symbolism and sustained by local-level social structures.”⁴ In addition, non-violent forces with similar goals may encourage or even manipulate extremist groups to strengthen their own bargaining positions. Many point out that violence in these and other countries may persist as the terrorist groups demand results which governments cannot deliver for lack of resources, or because popular sentiment nationwide rejects such concessions.

This raises questions about the possible outcomes of reform in Middle Eastern governments and of U.S. attempts to facilitate an end to the Israeli-Palestine dispute. Many analysts have pointed out that attempts at reform could in themselves be destabilizing, but the Basque and Northern Ireland cases raise other possible questions. To what extent do the governments have the economic resources to make broad reforms? To what extent does Al Qaeda, and the groups which feed recruits into the Al Qaeda network, share the characteristics cited above which are believed to contribute to the persistence of terrorism? Given that some analysts believe that the objective of the Al Qaeda terrorist attack against the United States is ultimately the overthrow of the authoritarian Middle Eastern governments and their replacement with “pure Islamic governments,” to what extent is this non-negotiable goal shared by the various groups which comprise or feed into that network? Similarly, how deep are Al Qaeda’s roots in any given country in which it operates?

Is public diplomacy an effective tool?

In hopes of undermining the appeal of Osama Bin Laden and decreasing possible support for groups in the Al Qaeda network, some have suggested that the United States strengthen a public diplomacy program to persuade target audiences of the errors of Bin Laden’s reasoning and the immorality of Al Qaeda’s action, and to counter the anti-Islamic image of the United States that Al Qaeda and other groups are putting forward. Do foreign experiences offer any instruction on what kind of public diplomacy efforts might influence the perceptions of such populations?

Italy is one case that some analysts have cited as running a successful public diplomacy campaign as a counterterrorism measure. Albeit a democracy that lacked the kind of tradition (except in the case of the South Tyrol) of ethnic separatist violence that helped spawn terrorist movements elsewhere, Italy in the 1970s and early 1980s was

³ (...continued)

Press, 1984. pp 88, 94-95, and telephone conversation with the author, January 14, 2002.

⁴ Goldie Shabad and Francisco José Llera Ramo. “ Political Violence in a Democratic State: Basque Terrorism in Spain,” in Martha Crenshaw, ed. *Terrorism in Context*. University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. pp 465-466.

besieged by numerous groups of terrorists of the right and left that enjoyed a considerable amount of popular support. In response, the Italian government undertook a multi-pronged approach, including what was in effect a domestic public diplomacy effort that sought to undermine a perceived acceptance of such violence, which was supported by a glorified history of revolutionary movements that some analysts believed contributed to terrorist movements.

According to the U.S. Army War College analyst, Max G. Manwaring, who judges the Italian effort a success, the aim of the public diplomacy effort, which he refers to as an information “war,” was to “expose and exploit the fact that the various left-wing, right-wing, and separatist, pacifist, and other subversive groups...were not organizations of the masses....[but] self-appointed elites whose goals were not what the people wanted or needed....” Further, the effort “demonstrated that for the Red Brigades and their allies [i.e., the leftist groups], those Italians who were not fellow ideological “true believers” were not really people....Moreover, the government and media exposed the fact that Red Brigadists considered everyone else—even other comrades on the Left—to be mere “shit.”⁵ The result, in Manwaring’s judgment, was that “their legitimacy was greatly eroded, supporters were obviously alienated, and ... intelligence was willingly provided.”⁶

There are some parallels between the Italian case and that of the Al Qaeda network and other radical Islamic groups. In particular, many analysts note that in many countries such groups do enjoy a significant degree of popular support and resources. This support contributes to their ability to survive, and makes it difficult for governments to deal with them, even though a majority of the population may not share their goals. However the differences with the Italian case may be more important to the outcome, in particular the fact that the United States is, to those populations it seeks to influence, a foreign power.

Since September 11 the United States has embarked on efforts to delegitimize Islamic terrorists by asserting that Islam is a peaceful religion, with which terrorist actions are inconsistent. Many analysts say that to be credible, this argument must also be made by moderate Islamic clerics abroad, and by Middle East and other Islamic country governments, but which so far have been largely hesitant to do so. Does a message from a foreign power, distrusted if not resented by the target population, have any hope of influencing attitudes, or might it even be counterproductive? Is the hesitancy of Islamic clerics indicative of the resistance that the United States may experience over the long run to such public diplomacy efforts? Can such efforts be credible absent a concrete and repeated demonstration that the United States is interested in the welfare of Muslim populations?

Questions might also be raised about the extent to which the Italian effort might have been successful without the other policies that were adopted with it. Scholars have also regarded as critical those policies that sought to dismantle such organizations by promising members reduced punishment in return for surrender, and by attempting to bring people

⁵ Max G. Manwaring. *Internal Wars: Rethinking Problem and Response*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, September 2001, pp. 23-24.

⁶ Ibid.

out in groups, allowing former members to retain a collective identity and the moral support offered by belonging to a group to sustain them outside the terrorist organization.⁷

Further questions can be raised as to whether public attitudes in the Middle East may be more resistant than in Italy to messages that seek to delegitimize such groups, regardless of the source. In his study of public attitudes towards terrorism in five countries, Hewitt found that “attitudes toward political violence...depend primarily upon structural-historical features, and are, therefore, little affected by either terrorist actions or by government policies...” Nor, he found, are attitudes affected by whether the terrorists killed people, or how many they killed.⁸ In addition, he has found that in cases of “nationalist” terrorism in Spain and Northern Ireland, popular support “for militant nationalism does not decrease because of terrorist atrocities against the ethnic enemy.”⁹ Regarding the Middle East in particular, he writes that the “Israeli-Palestinian attitudes [towards terrorism]...seem very similar to those found in the nationalist conflicts in Spain and Northern Ireland.”¹⁰

Do restrictions on civil liberties produce a corresponding increase in public security?

Pursuit of the members of the Al Qaeda network in the United States has produced charges that U.S. officials are unjustifiably restricting or violating the civil rights of Muslim and Arab Americans, and to fears that abuses of civil rights will become more widespread. Although the methods used by other countries cooperating with the United States in apprehending members of that network have not been raised as a source of concern in the United States, they may one day have repercussions in the United States. The effect of such restrictions elsewhere may have implications for their utility and desirability in the United States, and the degree to which the United States wishes to have such restrictions employed on its behalf.

Terrorism scholars note that democracies are more vulnerable to terrorism than repressive governments, as terrorists can provoke officials to take acts that undermine the source of their legitimacy - the guarantee of freedom and protection against arbitrary state action. Democratic states may be able to survive this without widespread damage to their internal credibility if arbitrary actions are limited to one geographic area - as in Great Britain’s treatment of Northern Ireland, and Spain’s treatment of the Basques, but some analysts also note that such actions tend to influence world opinion about the nature of their democracy. In other democracies, police reactions have been seen as contributing to the crisis that terrorism provoked in the democratic state. In the case of Germany, one author writes that “the rigidly authoritarian responses of police, city, and university authorities tempted the rebels into escalating the ‘violation of rules...’ and led the student rebels to believe more strongly in the justness of their cause.”¹¹ In Italy, the adoption in the

⁷ Donatella della Porta. “Left-Wing Terrorism in Italy” in *Terrorism in Context*, op. cit. p 159.

⁸ “Terrorism and Public Opinion: A Five Country Comparison.” op. cit., pp 78, 91.

⁹ Christopher Hewitt. “Terrorism and Public Opinion: A Five Country Comparison” reprinted in *European Terrorism*, op. cit. p 90.

¹⁰ “Terrorism and Public Opinion: A Five-Country Comparison.” op. cit. p 92.

¹¹ Peter H. Merkl, “West German Left-Wing Terrorism,” in *Terrorism in Context*. op. cit. p 175.

1970s and 1980s of laws that increased penalties for terrorist crimes, modified judicial procedures, suspended limits for preventive detention, and established special prisons resulted in the “a posteriori judgment...that when weighed against the degeneration of the civil rights they produced, they did not compensate with any efficacy in combating terrorism” and had little deterrent effect. Indeed, increased repression against radical, but legal organizations pushed people underground, and aided recruitment for some organizations.¹²

How effective is it to destroy leadership by capture or assassination?

A primary goal of U.S. policy in combating Osama Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda is to capture or destroy its leadership. U.S. policy may encounter complications if these continue to be primary goals, and cannot be accomplished. The question may well be raised, then, how necessary is the capture of current leadership to prevent the recurrence of terrorist acts, particularly if other policies are in place?

Such policies apparently are counter-effective in some cases, and effective in others. A recent journalistic analysis dismisses efforts to destroy leadership as a productive goal, arguing that in the Middle East conflict Israeli targeting of Palestinian leadership has been unsuccessful, as new leadership arises to take the place of those who are captured or assassinated.¹³ In other countries, there may be different experiences. In Peru, where the Peruvian government managed by the mid-1990s to jail Anibal Guzman, the top leader of the Shining Path, which had seriously threatened the government in the 1980s, and many leaders under him. Although these captures are widely considered to have been an important cause in the sharp reduction of Shining Path terrorist acts, particularly given the nearly cult status within the movement of Guzman, this may prove to be only a short-run phenomenon, and other leadership may re-emerge. Other factors, however, such as a lack of popular support, may counter that possibility.

Questioning the differences between these two, and other cases, may assist policymakers in evaluating the potential of such an approach. What are the conditions which enable organizations to regenerate leadership rapidly? Does the utility of this approach depend on the nature, or uniqueness of the leadership? Is the size of the organization important, the depth and strength of its support, the educational level of recruits, or of the population as a whole? Some experts assert that the longer that political violence goes on, the less amenable it will become to resolution. If true, might that be in part because long-lived terrorist movements can replace leaders more quickly than new ones as more people have had the opportunity to acquire leadership capabilities?¹⁴

¹² “Left-Wing Terrorism in Italy.” op. cit. p 118.

¹³ Joshua Cooper Ramo. “In Hot Pursuit.” *Time*. October 8, 2001. p 58.

¹⁴ One scholar observed that, in the Italian case, protest groups spawned a variety of factions that tested different modes of expression, and that those that “went underground” were those “lacking other kinds of resources but possessing the skills necessary for a greater use of violence.” Donatella della Porta. “Left-Wing Terrorism in Italy.” op. cit. p 126.

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