

The Future of Terrorism

Okay, by now this lecture series has covered quite a lot of material about the history and key concepts of terrorism, a broad range of terrorist groups and their ideological motivations, and various political and socioeconomic factors that impact a terrorist group's operational environment. We have examined the many ways in which terrorism is a type of violent human behavior fueled by a mixture of push and pull factors (including a sense of identity, personal frustrations and aspirations, and contextual opportunities) that may lead an individual to support or directly engage in terrorist activity. And we have also explored various kinds of decisions that terrorists make, particularly regarding finances, tactics, weapons, and targets. There is of course much more than this in the vast landscape of terrorism studies, so I hope this book has inspired you to explore the work of other scholars, such as those I have recommended in the resource lists at the end of each lecture.

To conclude this lecture series, I'd like to do three things: first, I'll describe some recent trends in terrorist activity as this book goes to press (late 2018); then I'll provide some research-based observations about counterterrorism; and finally, I'll share with you a number of my own thoughts and concerns about the future of terrorism, particularly as it pertains to the United States.

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN TERRORIST ACTIVITY

One of the most interesting trends in the world of terrorism these days is how peer competition has intensified within the global jihadist movement between the followers and affiliates of Islamic State and the followers and affiliates of al-Qaeda. Following the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri was announced as the new leader of al-Qaeda, and he has been featured in a flurry of audio and video messages that seek to inspire Muslims everywhere to join the movement. Fortunately, these messages have found very limited resonance among his target audience. Furthermore, Islamic State propaganda has increasingly featured Zawahiri in its own propaganda as a target of ridicule and scorn. As Graeme Wood noted, “Dabiq publishes unflattering photographs of Zawahiri, which make him look decrepit, as if waiting for a bowl of Jell-O at a jihadist retirement home.”¹

Meanwhile, from the very day the Islamic State declared the establishment of a new Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria, the leadership cadre of al-Qaeda condemned the move as a mistake and has been highly critical of the self-proclaimed “caliph” Abu al-Baghdadi. Today, al-Baghdadi and his colleagues are no longer appealing for new recruits to come join them in defending their territory—they have no territory to defend. Instead, they have changed their tune and embraced the same kind of “think globally, act locally” propaganda strategy that al-Qaeda has been promoting for nearly two decades. Around the world, some affiliate groups (sometimes called wilayat) of al-Qaeda and Islamic State have switched allegiances, while others (like Boko Haram) have split into opposing factions, one declaring loyalty to al-Zawahiri and the other to al-Baghdadi. The core disagreement between leaders of al-Qaeda and Islamic State remains the question of who should be considered the true vanguard of the global jihadist movement, and it is very likely this intense peer competition will continue until one side gives way and is willing to compromise with the other.

Another important trend has been the rise of right-wing extremist attacks in Europe and North America. While the July 2011 attack by Anders Breivik in Oslo, Norway is perhaps the most dramatic example in recent years, we have seen right-wing attacks against Muslims leaving a place of worship (e.g. Quebec City, January 2017), against Hindus in a bar in Olathe, Kan. (February 2017), and against a crowd protesting a racist rally in Charlottesville, Va. (August 2017). In May 2017 right-wing extremists killed an African-American 23-year-old U.S. Army second lieutenant in Maryland and two people on a commuter train in Portland, Ore. who were simply

trying to prevent the attacker from harassing a Muslim woman in a headscarf. These attackers have all been white nationalists and vocal supporters of right-wing extremist ideologies. Many are anti-global (or anti-“globalist” elites, as described by the far-right media outlet Breitbart), believing in conspiracy theories involving an imminent threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty. And as noted in Lecture 10, these right-wing extremists are motivated by a deep sense of “othering” that directs their anger and violence toward specific types of individuals based on ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, and other characteristics.

In April 2017, the U.S. Government Accountability Office released a report that examined domestic terrorist attacks between 9/11 and December 2016. The conclusions of this analysis were striking: “Of the 85 extremist incidents that resulted in death since September 12, 2001, far-right wing violent extremist groups were responsible for 62 (73%), while radical Islamist violent extremists were responsible for 23 (27%).”² A similar report published two months later by a nonprofit organization, looking at a different collection of data, found that there were almost twice as many terrorist incidents by right-wing extremists as by Islamist extremists in the U.S. from 2008 to 2016.³

Meanwhile, a report by two academics in North Carolina found that U.S. law enforcement agencies “consider anti-government violent extremists, not radicalized Muslims, to be the most severe threat of political violence that they face.”⁴ Among these anti-government extremists, the most worrisome are members of the so-called Sovereign Citizens movement, who have been responsible for dozens of attacks and plots against police officers and others over the past 10 years. According to Bob Paudert, a retired Arkansas police chief whose son was shot and killed during a traffic stop, “every state has sovereign citizens . . . [and] they are willing to kill and be killed for their beliefs.”⁵ Some attacks have involved elaborate plots to kill police officers responding to a fire (Florida, November 2014), wiring a house with explosives (Ohio, January 2014), and ambushing a patrol car (Louisiana, 2012), though the most common attacks have involved seemingly routine traffic stops, often when the patrol officer notices unusual, unofficial-looking license plates on a vehicle.

At the opposite end of the political spectrum we are also seeing an increase in violence associated with Antifa (an “antifascist” group) and other anti-authoritarian, left-wing movements. In January 2017, Antifa members protested Trump’s inauguration in Washington, D.C. by smashing storefronts and bus stops. Two weeks later, other members of this movement attacked the student union center at UC Berkeley in protest of a scheduled speech by a prominent right-wing extremist. In March

and April 2017, pro-Trump rallies were violently disrupted by black-clad protestors wielding makeshift weapons. And other political events in Texas, California, Oregon, and Virginia have also devolved into violence between left-wing and right-wing extremists.

But perhaps the most important trend we see in terrorism today is the increasing frequency of do-it-yourself (DIY) attacks throughout Europe, North America, and the Middle East. The list of recent attacks that can be described as examples of DIY terrorism include a wide variety of places: Tunis, Tunisia (March 2015), Ankara, Turkey (October 2015), San Bernardino, Calif. (December 2015), Orlando, Fla. (June 2016), St. Etienne, France (July 2016), and Quetta, Pakistan (August 2016). Increasingly, DIY terrorists have used ordinary cars or trucks in their attacks. On July 14, 2016, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel used a delivery truck to mow down 86 people celebrating Bastille Day in Nice, France. On November 28, 2016, Abdul-Razak Ali Artan ran down several students at Ohio State University with his vehicle, then stabbed several others. In London, Khalid Masood drove a car into pedestrians on Westminster Bridge on March 22, 2017, killing five and injuring 45 others. Then on June 3, 2017, three attackers drove a car into pedestrians on London Bridge. And on August 12, 2017, James Fields, Jr. rammed his car into a crowd of anti-racism protestors in Charlottesville, Va., killing a young woman.

The good news, if there is any, is that most of the “wannabe terrorists” who try to carry out their own DIY attacks are amateurs, incapable of harming anyone but themselves. Some do not have the resources necessary to succeed, while others make key mistakes in the planning or execution of their attacks, resulting in an overall high failure rate among those “inspired” to do this kind of thing. Often, these attackers are limited to weapons of opportunity: guns, knives, vehicles, basic explosives, etc. rather than the kind of sophisticated suicide vests or improvised explosive devices engineered by al-Qaeda, Islamic State, or their affiliates.

Within the ideological sphere of global jihadists, this trend of DIY terrorism involves a relatively low investment by a group’s leaders basically limited to producing and disseminating materials (primarily online) that are intended to provide instruction and motivation for these kinds of attacks. However, to date these attacks have had only a limited impact, particularly compared to the more lethal threat of well-trained cadres of terrorist operatives with battlefield experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere. It remains highly unlikely that DIY terrorist attacks will help the global jihadist movement achieve any significant goals or objectives. But regardless of ideological

category or potential impact, we can also expect that this trend of terrorism will be a security challenge for many years to come.

RESPONDING TO TERRORISM

Of course, our journey through the study of terrorism would be incomplete if we did not focus some attention on the ways in which governments have responded to the terrorist threat, and the ways in which terrorist groups or movements have ended. For example, in some cases a terrorist group's leaders have been captured or killed. In Sri Lanka, the military launched an offensive in 2009 that finally defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the ethnonationalist group that had caused death and destruction there for over two decades. Meanwhile, in other instances the ideology of the terrorists failed to resonate among successive generations, limiting their ability to attract support and recruits among a population. This was particularly notable among anarchist and left-wing terrorist movements of the past century. Some terrorists (like the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines) became more interested in profitable kinds of criminal activities, which eventually eroded the community support upon which they were originally dependent.⁶

In several cases, terrorist groups have abandoned their armed struggle and embraced a political process. For example, after the Good Friday Agreement was signed in April 1998, Northern Ireland finally saw the end of political violence. Well, not entirely: a few months later; on August 15, 1998, a car bomb packed with 500 lbs. of explosives detonated in Omagh⁷ and since then, Republican dissident groups have carried out a spate of terrorist attacks, including bombings in Londonderry and other parts of the country. But despite these attempts to demonstrate the “spoiler” strategic logic of terrorist attacks, it's at least a lot quieter these days in Northern Ireland than it was for many decades.⁸

Similarly, in Spain—as described in Lecture 8—the Basque terrorist group ETA (Euzkadi ta Askatasuna, which means “Basque Homeland and Freedom” in the Basque language),⁹ declared a permanent ceasefire in January 2011 and the creation of a new political party called Sortu.¹⁰ Then in April 2017, the group announced it would hand over all its weapons and explosives to local authorities, and in May 2018, the group issued a formal announcement that it had disbanded permanently. These and other developments indicate that we may finally be seeing a new commitment among the Basque communities toward engaging in the Spanish political process.

And in Colombia, a terrorist movement founded in 1964—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC)—announced a permanent ceasefire in 2016. In December of that year the Colombian government officially ratified the peace accord, and in June 2017 the group provided detailed information for where the United Nations monitoring team could locate their weapons storage bunkers. Then in September of that year, FARC’s leaders announced the formation of a new political party and their intention to participate in the 2018 Colombian elections. Interestingly, they kept the same acronym, but changed their name to the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (*Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común*, or FARC), and their party’s logo is now a red rose.

Overall, understanding the goals, decision-making, and operational challenges of terrorist groups can help counterterrorism professionals find ways to accelerate the demise of terrorist groups like these. Furthermore, there exists an increasing wealth of scholarly research on the strategies and practices used by governments in their response to terrorism (sometimes successful, sometimes not), often addressing questions of effectiveness, efficiency, and ethics. Much of this research is unfortunately ignored in most Hollywood portrayals of counterterrorism, which leads many in the general public to have a lot of misperceptions about how simple or easy it must be.

Alex Schmid defines counterterrorism as “a proactive effort to prevent, deter, and combat politically motivated violence directed at civilian and non-combatant targets, by the use of a broad spectrum of response measures—law enforcement, political, psychological, social, economic and paramilitary.”¹¹ The complexities of counterterrorism are illustrated by the myriad ways in which these different response measures can be used, either separately or combined as components of a comprehensive security strategy. As a result, there exists no universal theory on “what works” and what does not in counterterrorism. Further, there is often a danger of political bias in research and analysis of counterterrorism, creating even greater diversity of opinions and disagreements in the scholarly literature. And when movies and television shows give the impression that countering terrorism merely involves “the good guys” finding and killing “the bad guys,” it creates unreasonable expectations among the members of a society about the immediate effectiveness of any counterterrorism strategy.

What we do know is that because terrorism is a very contextual phenomenon, a counterterrorism strategy must be tailored to address the specific contexts, actions, and impacts of a particular terrorist threat. Further, there are specific attributes of a nation’s power that can (and often should) be brought to bear against a terrorist threat: the

use of force by military and law enforcement, and the supporting roles of diplomatic, information, economic, financial and intelligence activities.¹² And decades of research also show that none of these elements of national power can succeed on their own; as Korb and Boorstin argue, the integration of these elements is critical to the success of any counterterrorism effort.¹³

According to the 2002 *U.S. National Security Strategy*, “we must make use of every tool in our arsenal—military power, better homeland defenses, law enforcement, intelligence, and vigorous efforts to cut off terrorist financing.”¹⁴ The 2006 *U.S. National Strategy for Countering Terrorism* echoes this perspective: “the paradigm for combating terrorism now involves the application of all elements of our national power and influence. Not only do we employ military power, we use diplomatic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement activities to protect the Homeland and extend our defenses, disrupt terrorist operations, and deprive our enemies of what they need to operate and survive.”¹⁵ And the 2011 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* also carried this theme forward by declaring its intent to integrate “the capabilities and authorities of each department and agency, ensuring the right tools are applied at the right time to the right situation in a manner that is consistent with U.S. laws.”¹⁶

The synthesis of these various dimensions of counterterrorism was also highlighted recently in a Brookings Doha Center report on the Islamic State (IS), which recommended that the regional and international response to the threat of IS should include “a series of policies aimed at 1) countering IS’s financial strength and ability to fund the provision of governance and social services to civilians; 2) neutralizing IS’s capacity for military mobility and the rapid re-deployment of manpower; 3) collecting and acting on intelligence relating to IS’s senior leadership and military command and control structure; 4) weakening and delegitimizing IS’s effective use of social media for recruitment and information operations; and 5) seeking to stabilize the existing conflict dynamics in both Syria and Iraq.”¹⁷

Overall, integration of all the elements of national power is essential. However, it can be argued that none is more crucial to the success or failure of counterterrorism than intelligence. Unfortunately, there is some confusion about what is and is not considered intelligence, so let me say a few words about that before continuing. First of all, the purpose of intelligence is to reduce uncertainty about one’s adversaries (and sometimes allies), in order to gain a decision advantage over them¹⁸ (particularly in areas of strategy, operations, and tactics). Information is gathered for this purpose from a very broad range of activities, from human interaction to technology, and then the analysis

of this information is conveyed to policymakers and decision-makers in the form of intelligence reports. Intelligence should not be viewed as predicting the future. It is neither a “best guess” based on a “gut feeling,” nor is it perfect and infallible. In addition to mistakes (which all humans make), inaccurate intelligence is often the result of intentional efforts by our adversaries to mislead and deceive.

Accurate, high-quality intelligence is absolutely critical for determining where, when, and how to apply other instruments of national power. Effective action in military, diplomatic, law enforcement, financial interdiction, and all other areas of counterterrorism requires deep levels of knowledge, insight, and understanding—the intended products of any national intelligence service. Further, as explained in the beginning of this lecture, terrorism is a context-specific phenomenon. Thus, the success or failure of a counterterrorism strategy is often highly dependent on understanding and adapting to situational factors. For example, as research by Gregory Miller revealed, the attributes of a terrorist group impact the relative success of various counterterrorism policies.¹⁹ There can be no one-size-fits-all approach to countering such a complex phenomenon as terrorism. A government must first determine *what kind of terrorist threat it is dealing with*—is it domestic or global in orientation? What do we know about the terrorists’ motivating grievances, funding sources, support networks, leaders, operatives, and capabilities? What ideological category does it fall into (for example, left-wing, ethnonationalist, religious, right-wing, environmental extremism, etc.)? These are questions that must be answered before determining how and where a nation’s resources should be committed.

A country’s political climate will also affect the formulation, implementation, and assessment of counterterrorism strategies. The tendency to politicize certain components of a counterterrorism strategy (for example, surveillance and intelligence collection) can make objective assessment of successes or failures all the more difficult. Thus, when integrating all the elements of national power toward a comprehensive counterterrorism effort, we must be sure to pause and reflect on how well we understand our own intentions, capabilities, and biases about our enemies. One thing is certain: there is no place for prejudice, bloodthirst, or bigotry in effective counterterrorism.²⁰ Intelligence analysts, diplomats, policymakers, law enforcement, military personnel, and others involved in counterterrorism must be committed to objectivity, self-discipline, integrity, and attention to nuances and details of whatever terrorist threat their country is confronting.

As someone who has studied terrorism for many years now, I am an optimist; I have to be, in order to keep my sanity amid the dark realities of the world that I have



Figure 19.1: September 11 tribute lights. U.S. Coast Guard Photo by Public Affairs 2nd Class Mike Hvozda.

described within the pages of this book. Like many of you, I will never forget the attacks of September 11, 2001, nor will I underestimate the lethal threat posed by members of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. But I have also come to recognize the value of resilience as a powerful tool that societies can use to thwart the efforts of even the most well-resourced and motivated terrorists. As you've surely noticed by now, my perspective about terrorism differs considerably from those fear-mongering types who would have you believe there is a terrorist around every corner, waiting to strike. Instead, my understanding of terrorism gives me confidence that the global jihadists will someday, perhaps in our distant future, be nothing more than something we read about in history books.

The death of Osama bin Laden was clearly not a crippling blow to al-Qaeda, but it did inflict some damage to the global jihadist network. Really, all of al-Qaeda's remaining core leaders will eventually die, and when they do their replacements will probably be respected veteran jihadist fighters, but will not have the same mythical saga as the "founders" of the group, and as a result will be less able to influence others in the Muslim world. Of course, al-Qaeda's global "presence" is already relatively shallow and is under increasing financial pressures. Further, because al-Qaeda-related attacks killed an average of eight Muslims for every one non-Muslim during the 10 years immediately following the 9/11 attacks,²¹ there was rapidly decreasing support in the Muslim world for the Salafi-jihadist ideology. But then along came Abu al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State, and we saw a resurgence in both foreign fighter recruitment and in do-it-yourself attacks described in Lecture 15. And yet, the Islamic State has now lost virtually all the territory it once controlled, and with it the group has lost significant legitimacy and influence within the broader jihadist movement. By early January 2018, the Iraqi government was claiming that its war against the Islamic State was over, Russia was announcing a partial withdrawal of its troops from Syria, and counterterrorism officials in both Europe and the U.S. were focusing significantly more attention on the flow of militants fleeing the conflict and returning home, or migrating to other conflict zones like Libya.²²

The decline of the Islamic State's power over the past two years raises questions about whether there may have been too much hyperbole and hysteria about the threat to the U.S. homeland posed by this group. For example, after a 2016 attack in Brussels, Belgium, then-presidential candidate Ted Cruz called for stepped-up police patrols in Muslim neighborhoods in the United States, while the Department of State issued a warning against traveling to Europe. But the worst examples of overreaction in the

U.S. were seen among news media, who have often fueled a perception of the terrorist threat that is not supported by real evidence. As Stephen Walt argued in 2016, news media know that “hyping the danger will keep people reading, listening, and watching . . . [but] airing melodramatic news coverage makes the Islamic State far more dangerous than it really is.”²³

This leads me to my final thoughts about counterterrorism for today, which center on the critically important role of resilience in defeating terrorist movements. As explained early in this lecture series, terrorism at its core is an attempt to use violence and fear to influence a population in ways the terrorist group feels will help them achieve their goals and objectives. As Brian Jenkins explains, “the objective of terrorism is to create fear”²⁴ and they want to use our fear to their advantage—if we are fearful enough, the terrorists can use violence and the threat of violence to coerce our behavior. And unfortunately, after studying and teaching in this field for almost two decades, it strikes me that people seem more afraid of terrorism today than they were in the months immediately following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Yet the evidence shows that between 2001 and 2013, the likelihood of an American being killed in the U.S. by a terrorist attack was less than one in 56 million; in comparison, the chance of drowning in a bathtub was one in 1 million, and the chance of being the victim of an ordinary homicide in the U.S. was one in 20,000.²⁵ As noted in Lecture 2, there were far more terrorist attacks during the 1970s in the U.S. and Europe than there are today. But these risk assessment data and historical facts are largely ignored in contemporary discussions about terrorism.

When a society steadfastly refuses to be coerced by threats and violence, the terrorists fail to achieve anything. And the truth is, we know from historical evidence that the failure of a terrorist group is by far its most likely outcome. But it seems that in the current U.S. political environment, politicians are able to benefit from exploiting that fear, in some cases even with the most authoritarian instincts and awful prejudices. A variety of media also benefit from exploiting that fear, attracting viewers, building and sustaining a base of followers who buy into the narrative that terrorism is the most important security threat we all face. Within this environment, rational voices who—based on a study of the history of terrorism, and a research-based understanding of terrorist radicalization—call for us to keep terrorism in proper perspective are shouted down by both the fearful and those exploiting the fear to their advantage.

My perspective about community resilience is informed by watching how the British responded to recent terrorist attacks in London. Here we have a country, and

particularly a major city, that has endured a generational campaign of nationalist terrorism (IRA/PIRA) and more recently a campaign of Islamist-jihadist attacks. And yet their continued resolve, their refusal to be coerced by terrorists, is worth taking to heart. After the worst of those jihadist attacks (on July 7, 2005), the Queen of England visited hospitals to meet victims and express sympathy. During a visit to the Royal London Hospital, she stated, “Those who perpetrate these brutal acts against innocent people should know that they will not change our way of life.”²⁶ And indeed, the trains throughout London were operating at normal capacity the very next day, people were back to work, the economy did not grind to a halt, people did not stop traveling to or through London. More noteworthy, very few political leaders in the U.K. made any effort to try and exacerbate or exploit the fear of terrorism in ways that we have seen here in the U.S. Most respectable media outlets followed the same norm, reporting the facts as they became known instead of blaring headlines about impending doom. And after the most recent jihadist attacks in London (like those described in Lecture 15), we have again seen a similarly high level of resilience, an adamant refusal to be afraid, and little interest in trying to profit from the fear of terrorism.

In Germany, too, we see a level of calm and resilience that perhaps our American society can learn from. As noted in Lecture 9, Germans suffered a campaign of terrorism from the late 1960s through the 1970s, mainly by the left-wing Red Army Faction (also known as the Baader-Meinhof Group). But the more recent terrorist attacks in that country have been orchestrated by jihadists or by right-wing extremists. After a series of four attacks within one week in July 2016, the spokesman for the Munich police made a public appeal: “Give us the chance to report facts. Don’t speculate, don’t copy from each other.”²⁷ Most politicians and media services heeded his advice. Only a small handful of fringe politicians—like the leader of the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany party—tried to capitalize on the attacks, and was immediately condemned on social and broadcast media.²⁸

Personally, I think each of us has a choice to make, though I recognize it’s a very difficult choice for most of us. On the one hand, we can choose to be fearful—as I noted earlier, this is exactly what terrorists want. Apparently, being fearful is what many politicians and media in the U.S. want as well. Fear is a very powerful emotion. But we would do well to pause and ask ourselves: When we fear for our own personal safety, or for the security of those we love and care about, how does that impact our decision-making? And how can those decisions be manipulated by media and political elites? Furthermore, how can we ever get to a place of comfort and relaxation where

that fear is no longer warranted, particularly if some members of society don't seem to want that to happen? Imposing new security procedures, physical barriers, displays of armed force, policies targeting members of a population deemed a threat based on demographic attributes—these all give the impression of “making us safer” but in 250 years of terrorist history, there is virtually no evidence that such things actually diminish the ability of terrorists to make a society afraid of further attacks.

On the other hand, a society like ours can choose to reject any and all attempts to make us fearful. We can refuse to be terrorized, by the terrorists or by those who might try to benefit from exploiting fear. We can examine the evidence (nonpartisan, factual data on terrorism is plentiful if you look for it), and study the true nature of terrorism in all its forms. When we recognize what this evidence shows—that terrorism is a rare event, especially when compared to the many other tragic and criminal things that could happen to us any day of the year—we have strong reason to question the intentions of those who apparently want us to fear. When each of us actively refuses to allow fear to coerce our behavior, this can strengthen our community resilience. Emergency preparedness and a sense of shared responsibility also strengthen our communities in ways that help us respond effectively in the event something happens (from natural disasters to terrorist attacks).

The historical record reveals how communities that are resilient, that refuse to be terrorized, will never be defeated by terrorists. As Stephen Walt noted, “terrorists cannot defeat us; we can only defeat ourselves.”²⁹ If we embrace this perspective, putting terrorism in its proper place instead of exacerbating and overhyping the threat, the future will never look as bleak and scary as certain media or politicians would have us believe. With that in mind, let me wrap up this final lecture with some comments about the future (or more accurate, potential futures) of terrorism.

THE FUTURE OF TERRORISM

To begin with, the future doesn't really look that promising for terrorists. As we noted earlier in these lectures, terrorist groups have rarely achieved any of their intended goals. They have not brought down any national economies or political regimes. Even those that have been around the longest (IRA/PIRA, ETA, FARC, etc.) failed to acquire the power to make significant change. A colleague of mine, Max Abrahms, has in several of his research articles illustrated how the use of terrorism almost never succeeds.³⁰ So, will the scourge of terrorism just go away in time? Or, are terrorists fatally blinded by

their own arrogance and perceived superiority—especially if they are motivated by a religiously-based ideology? Unfortunately, when we reflect on the broad history of terrorism, we see that it has been as much a part of the human condition as many other kinds of political conflict and violent crime, which leads to the conclusion that terrorism does have a future.

The fact that terrorism will continue to be a part of the human experience raises some questions for which there are relatively few answers. For example, will the Salafi-jihadist ideology be the leading motivation for terrorism 20–30 years from now? If it is, why? And if not, what will take its place as the most prominent ideological motivation of terrorist attacks? Will the future see incremental changes in terrorist tactics, or sudden new innovations similar to 9/11? What kinds of analysis help us anticipate future events?

In looking at the first question, I do believe that the Salafi-jihadist ideology will very likely be the leading motivation for terrorism 20–30 years from now. The reasons for this include several ideological and contextual factors. First, the ideological roots of Salafism and global jihadist ideologies are deeper and more sacred than the roots of many other ideologies (see Lecture 14). Believers of this ideology find theological resonance and perceived legitimacy in historical and contemporary events, from crusades of centuries ago to more recent conflicts in Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. They point to a perceived illegitimacy of apostate regimes in places like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, and also argue that a secularizing, globalization agenda is being imposed by the West as a direct threat to Islamic law, traditions, and religious devotion. Further, the Salafi-jihadist ideology in particular is reinforced by deep animosity between Sunni and Shiite communities, punctuated by periods of bloodshed for well over two decades, including in countries like Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen, and others.

The central driving force behind the spread of this ideology is a powerful vision of the future, involving the re-establishment of an Islamist caliphate. The supporters of this vision see a caliphate as the only means by which legitimate governance and justice can be achieved for the Muslim world. This caliphate is seen by true believers as the physical manifestation of God's will. They believe this vision has been abandoned by apostates, and is being actively obstructed by infidels, enemies of God. With this kind of vision in mind, there is probably no possibility of reaching a negotiated compromise with the true believers.

Meanwhile, we know that strong Salafist networks have been established worldwide. In some cases, wealthy patrons in the Gulf (like Saudi Arabia) have helped promote

and support the spread of Salafism. Now, we know that most Salafists reject the political agenda of the global jihadists; however, these networks would prove valuable to the global jihadists by laying the ideological foundations for attracting new recruits to wherever Jihadist-related conflict emerges next, and for attracting new sources of funding and logistical support. And finally, we know that over the past few years the Islamic State has worked to create an external operations network to promote and facilitate attacks in Europe (France, Belgium, Turkey, Russia, etc.).

In addition to these ideological dimensions, we also have to consider some contextual enablers, like the emerging “youth bulge” in the Middle East and North Africa coupled with economic stagnation and resource scarcity, resulting in limited opportunities to achieve a person’s aspirations for a better life. These trends will only exacerbate longstanding grievances about local corruption, nepotism, and lack of fairness that are unlikely to be resolved soon. As well, some of the major unresolved conflicts that fuel animosity and unrest in the Muslim world are unlikely to end anytime soon. For example, future acts of terrorism could be motivated by the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the conflict that simmers beneath the surface between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or continued animosity between Pakistan and India.

And finally, we will certainly continue to see the global expansion of international communication technologies that are used to spread ideological inspiration and tactical knowledge, especially operational instructions. Since terrorism is largely an idea-driven phenomenon, this global communication technology dimension brings to Salafi-jihadism a sustaining power that previous kinds of terrorism never had. With these ideological and contextual factors as a backdrop, global Salafi-jihadism has become a network of jihadist networks, individuals, wannabes, ideological entrepreneurs, seekers, bomb-makers, facilitators, financiers, and many others. When looking at all these issues cumulatively, it leads to the conclusion that a network this complex, with ideological roots this deep and with so many different potential enabling environments, will not just vanish within the next 20 years.

Instead, this amorphous, decentralized structure may allow the movement to adapt organically to changes in the global operating environment, and to sustain and regenerate itself over multiple decades. It also encourages long-term competition between the various affiliates of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which will be competing for recruits, resources, and relevance over the next 20 years. This intra-network competition could very well lead to the rise of new affiliate groups for both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, or perhaps an entirely new “brand” of global jihadism will

emerge and capture the hearts and minds of those who believe in these ideological goals and objectives.

Meanwhile, beyond the Salafi-jihadist threat it would not surprise me if other ideologies also inspire new or renewed kinds of terrorist attacks. For example, when we reflect on David Rapoport's framework regarding the historical waves of terrorism, it's noteworthy that ecoterrorism has not yet had a wave. So, maybe we'll see new kinds of environmental terrorists (for example, a new Earth First! or Earth Liberation Front), launching attacks against corporate targets whom they accuse of damaging the environment. These extremists would likely be animated by the increasing physical effects of climate change and global warming, such as diminishing food and water supplies in some countries (with drought and famine in the most extreme cases); coral reef bleaching, glacial melting, increasing threats of flooding to low-lying islands, an increasing frequency of extreme weather events worldwide, and so forth. Additional sources of anger among environmentalists could include deforestation, toxic chemical dumping, and the masses of plastic waste floating in our oceans. Really, there are so many things today in our natural environment that could motivate anger, particularly among the youth of tomorrow, and this anger could lead some individuals to embrace a violent course of action. For example, what if some of them begin launching dirty bomb attacks against oil refineries, like at the Port of Houston, with the intention of causing a critical blow to the U.S. oil sector, sending oil prices skyrocketing and creating new demand for alternative energy sources? Perhaps they would begin attacking facilities that manufacture plastic bags and water bottles, or supermarkets where large quantities of these things are sold, in order to change the behavior of consumers regarding such products?

Or perhaps the future will bring a wave of terrorism associated with animal rights activists. Could we see some kind of group like the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) becoming ultra-violent, launching an all-out war to save dolphins, for example? In this scenario, a small cell of ALF members, enraged by the documentary *The Cove*, could begin attacking Japanese political and economic targets worldwide as well as SeaWorld and similar kinds of resorts. Or maybe we could see some kind of hybrid "act local" movement, in which members of ALF merge with anti-globalization activists or others to form violent groups that launch terrorist attacks against large commercial farms, or food engineering firms like Monsanto, or factories and research institutes that specialize in genetic modification of foods and animals.

Or maybe we'll see the emergence of economically oriented "defending the underprivileged" terrorists, motivated by extreme anger at structural disadvantages linked

to globalization, tax breaks for corporations, and increasing concentration of wealth among a super-wealthy, while the gap widens between haves and have-nots. Certainly we have seen a lot of anti-elite angry rhetoric in recent years. Furthermore, it is widely agreed that underprivileged populations tend to be the ones who suffer the most from the kinds of environmental degradation that animates extremists like the ecoterrorists mentioned earlier. We may also see an escalation of ethnonationalist terror attacks by Kurdish separatists, perhaps even sometimes targeting the West. We can certainly expect the Kurds to have some major frustration at the continued denial of their dreams for independent statehood despite several years of Kurdish fighters working and sacrificing alongside Western coalition forces to defeat the Islamic State. We could also see an escalation of separatist attacks related to the situation in Kashmir, raising the threat (however unlikely) of a nuclear exchange between Pakistan and India.

Meanwhile, within the U.S. and Europe, it is entirely possible that today's rising nationalism, isolationism, and anti-globalization will become increasingly violent. Perhaps we'll see terrorist attacks against multinational corporations, foreign-owned banks, franchises, international university branches, or other entities that are perceived by locals as a threat to their country's sovereignty. On a similar note, the recent actions of the so-called Antifa movement could escalate. Incidents like what we saw in Berkeley, Charlottesville, Chicago, Portland, and Seattle in 2017 could perhaps encourage a violent response by right-wing extremists, sparking a campaign of domestic terrorist attacks by and against both ends of the political spectrum that may last for many years. It's also possible that the increase of "othering" and white nationalism in mainstream discourse will lead to a rise in attacks against immigrant populations or ethnic minority populations in Europe and North America. We've already seen some examples of this in recent years. Over time, in reaction to those attacks, we may see immigrant communities or ethnic minority groups deciding to use terrorism against majority population targets as a form of revenge. Just like we might see the emergence of new Shiite revenge terrorist groups targeting Sunni communities in the Middle East and Asia, we could see a rise of immigrant vs. anti-immigrant terrorist attacks in the U.S. and Europe. In essence, an escalation of terrorist violence between different segments of society is a very possible outcome of the kinds of "othering" we see today.

Beyond the dimension of ideological motivations, I'm sure that in the future we will want to devise new ideas about how to prevent or constrain future technological innovations by terrorists. For example, it is very likely we will see an increase in the use of drones to remotely deliver IEDs to targets. We have already seen Islamic State

terrorists in Syria do this on a few occasions,³¹ and multiple sources already indicate Hezbollah has this capability.³² As the skills for piloting drones meld with video gaming, smartphones, and virtual reality headsets, I can imagine a day when this kind of terrorist attack would become quite popular among young tech-savvy terrorists. Similarly, it's probably only a matter of time before we begin to see robots programmed to carry out terrorist attacks, either autonomously or with limited human control, particularly as robots and remote controlled devices become increasingly cheaper to buy.

Other areas of technology that interest me from a security perspective include the potential for terrorists to use cyberattacks as a way to amplify the fear and terror impact of kinetic attacks. These could include hacking into public utilities, like power stations, and causing them to shut down. Attacks on certain kinds of critical infrastructure could even turn them into weapons of their own. For example, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated how the failure of key levees can have a devastating effect on New Orleans. Terrorists with high explosives could destroy those levees and the deluge of water could cause mass destruction, while they also use misinformation about evacuation instructions to cause further chaos. Other examples could include a cyberattack against a dam in order to flood a nearby populated area, or shutting down the sewage system of a major city, where raw sewage in the streets could produce an outbreak of cholera or any number of other diseases. And there are concerns about the potential for a major cyberattack that causes a global financial market meltdown.

But cyberspace also allows the dissemination of misinformation, fake videos, hacked websites, and Twitter feeds used to manipulate perceptions, amplifying fear and panic before and after a terrorist attack. We are already seeing examples of how Facebook Live, Periscope, and other social media apps could be used for live streaming of terrorist attacks. In the future, it's possible that we'll see a group incorporate some kind of interactive potential, a sort of "choose the next victim" opportunity to encourage virtual participation in terrorism from the comfort of one's home.

I am also very concerned about the future potential for dual-use chemicals to be used by terrorists. We have already seen examples of this kind of WMD terrorism in Syria and Iraq, where Islamic State has allegedly used chlorine and sulfur mustard agents in dozens of attacks.³³ Throughout the U.S. there are thousands of industrial facilities where various kinds of chemicals are used to manufacture pesticides, cleaning agents, textiles, plastics, and much more. A terrorist might decide to attack a chemical storage depot, for example, in order to amplify the impact of the initial explosion by creating a toxic cloud that drifts into a nearby community. And in addition to the

many facilities where such chemicals are found, we must also focus on the security of the trains and trucks that transport these chemicals every day.

And of course there are widespread concerns about the threat of biological weapons as well. For example, we know there are scientists working in areas of synthetic biology, like molecular manipulation, or new forms of potentially lethal biological agents. Is there potential for terrorists to take advantage of a laboratory accident, or an incident in which experiments go wrong? The scientific community is already concerned about the kind of “insider threat” portrayed by the Hollywood movie *12 Monkeys*, in which a lethal virus is unleashed by a biology lab assistant motivated by a belief in the apocalypse and a desire to destroy the human race. Guarding against these kinds of threats is something for which the government has only limited capabilities, particularly because most of the new and innovative biotechnology developments are taking place in the private sector. You can expect companies to screen those they hire to ensure scientific competence, but given America’s protection for civil rights, liberties, and privacy, it is trickier to make sure those they hire aren’t influenced by some extreme religious or political ideologies. A similar concern, of course, is found among companies that own and operate civilian nuclear power plants and research facilities across the U.S. and Europe.

These are just some random projections of what we might want to anticipate for the future based on a cursory analysis of history and current trends in terrorism. At the very least, our expectations for the future should be framed by what we know about the capabilities of modern terrorist organizations, and the many ways in which technologies are evolving. We can never underestimate the capabilities of smart, motivated individuals to come up with new and innovative ways to cause death and destruction. If we fall into the trap of thinking that terrorists are crazy or stupid, we are setting ourselves up for something awful in the future.

SUMMARY

So to sum up this brief look at the future, we have to keep in mind that there is a long history of terrorism, and everything seems to indicate that there is a future for terrorism as well, unfortunately. However, it is a future that we can manage successfully, through interagency coordination, international cooperation, sharing information throughout our intelligence and law enforcement communities, and investing in robust counterideology efforts. We should also try to ensure a moral and ethical

legitimacy in everything the United States and other nations do to counter terrorism. How we fight terrorism has a significant impact on perceptions of justice and legitimacy. When negative, perceptions in these areas can animate terrorist groups and supporters. As we have seen throughout history, a government's reaction to terrorism can be just as damaging as the attack itself. Our government leaders must have vision, nuance, vigilance, and an ability to adapt to the situation. And above all, we must avoid doing things that undermine our own resilience, as a society that refuses to be coerced through violence and fear will never be defeated by terrorists.

Earlier in this lecture, I mentioned how rare it is to find a group that has achieved its core strategic goals and objectives by using terrorism. However, despite the historical record of failure, I'm pretty confident that terrorism is going to be with us for the foreseeable future. It is unlikely that there will ever be a time when we don't have some group or individual who wants the power to make changes, and is convinced that violence is the only means to obtaining that power. Of course, to paraphrase former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, there are many things we know we don't know, and things we don't even know we don't know. For example, are there angry or marginalized groups in the United States or elsewhere today who have not engaged in terrorist activity, but under certain circumstances might embrace an agenda of political violence? Who are they, where are they, and under what circumstances could such a group begin a campaign of terrorism? As we engage these questions in the future, we must be open to answers that are unanticipated. Terrorism is, after all, a type of human behavior, and we surely know that human behavior is not always predictable.

Finally, let's wrap up on a relatively positive note. I believe that government agencies within the United States are doing better every year at cooperating with each other and with their foreign counterparts. Every day, millions of law enforcement, military, and intelligence professionals worldwide are working together in the relentless pursuit of terrorist leaders and to diminish their ability to organize or inspire future attacks. I also believe there are more people today than ever before who are interested in learning about the true nature of terrorism, rather than accepting at face value the superficial and often hysterical portrayal of the terrorist threat to our country. In turn, this learning will contribute to a new level of resilience in our society. Instead of focusing exclusively on terrorists, we can also attack the terror by actively engaging citizens in their own preparedness and response.³⁴ Together, we will find new and increasingly effective ways to deal with the problem of terrorism, in whatever form it presents itself in the future. For now, best wishes for a safe and enjoyable rest of your day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Does terrorism have a future? If so, why?
- If terrorist groups have so very rarely achieved their stated objectives, why won't this problem just go away eventually?
- What kinds of analysis can help us anticipate future events?
- Will the future see incremental changes in terrorist tactics, or sudden new innovations like 9/11?
- What can we do to reduce the chances of terrorist attacks in the future?

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<http://www.uml.edu/ctss>

Perspectives on Terrorism

<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt>

Sentinel—a journal by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

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