

Terror and Counter-terror: Who's Winning the War? —Part II

Joe de Courcy

Joe de Courcy is the editor and director of Intelligence Digest—The Global Early-Warning Service. ID has been an independent source of geopolitical and strategic intelligence for sixty years, operating from the Stoneyhill Centre, Brimpsfield, Gloucester, GL48LF, UK. This is the second and final part of an article which has been reprinted from Intelligence Digest.

Three—Can the West Win the War?

In seeking to assess what the final outcome of the war against terrorism is likely to be, it is vital to bear in mind the nature of the struggle, because the character of the battle will help to determine who wins it.

Boaz Ganor neatly sums up the essence of the campaign being conducted by terrorists when he says:

Terrorism is in fact “morale warfare.” Terrorists know that they are incapable of defeating the military forces of the country they are fighting, and therefore their thinking is directed towards the attrition of the civilian population. It is the deliberate aim of terrorist organizations to undermine the personal security of civilians, to sow fear and trepidation, and to sap public morale. In this way they push civilians into pressuring decision-makers to adopt a policy that will match the organization’s interests.

He adds, tellingly:

The terrorism war is not merely a violent struggle between an army and irregular forces but primarily a battle of morale between two populations. It is the civilian population (on both sides) that bears the brunt of the battle. The winner is the side that is more successful in reinforcing the endurance of its population, strengthening it against the burgeoning fears, bolstering its security, and reassuring it as it bears the onus of the fight.

At present, attempts to coordinate Western anti-terrorism policy are failing. The plain fact is that most countries in the West are not prepared to jeopardize their own economic interests in the war against terrorism. Germany, France, and Italy exemplify this fact. Iran is known to be the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism. It spends some \$100 million a year in support of terrorist groups, of which between \$60 million and \$70 million goes to Hezbollah. The funds are directed to terrorist organizations through the Office of Revolutionary Movements, which supports

Hamas, the Islamic *Jihad*, and other groups. Yet, despite this fact, Germany, France, and Italy continue to trade widely with Iran, thus helping to provide the funds that support the terrorism that they deplore. And those three countries are by no means the only ones.

It seems likely that countries in the West will change their lax attitude to state sponsors of terrorism only when they feel that countering terror is more important than preserving commercial advantage. This balance of interests will change only when terrorism goes beyond a certain threshold of damage and threats grow significantly. In other words, the situation might have to get much worse before the West decides that effective action against terrorism needs to be taken.

This probably means that only when terrorism kills or injures large numbers of people in countries that at present turn a blind eye to the activities of the sponsors of terrorism will anything significant be done about terrorism. One way in which this change could occur would be if nonconventional weapons—chemical, biological, and nuclear—were to enter the arsenal of terrorist organizations to such an extent that they endangered the entire international community.

But it seems bizarre that Western countries that put their own economic interests above the need to fight terrorism should be prepared to do little about state sponsors of terrorism at a time when there is some hope of defeating the terrorists and instead prefer to wait until terror organizations possess weapons of mass destruction that will enable them to blackmail any country that threatens to take punitive action against them or their state sponsors.

Against this background, the U.S. (which is almost the only Western country prepared, to some degree, to put fighting terrorism above its own commercial interest) is sensible to put resources into combating weapons of mass destruction. But given that so much effort is now being concentrated on biochem terror attacks, is it wise to assume that Americans can sleep safely in their beds? Unfortunately, the answer is no.

Early in March 1999, William G. Patrick III, a leading U.S. expert on biological warfare, walked through security at Rayburn House. He was carrying 7.5 grams of powdered anthrax in a small plastic bottle, and he proceeded directly to a hearing before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and displayed the deadly sample. His object, he said, was to show how a hostile state could smuggle powdered anthrax into the U.S. in a secure diplomatic pouch and then attack major federal government installations almost at will.

Patrick told the committee:

I've been through all the major airports and the security systems of the State Department, the Pentagon, even the CIA, and nobody has stopped me. Seven and a half grams [of anthrax powder] would take care of the Rayburn Building and all the people in it.

After Patrick's chilling display, John A. Lauder, director of the CIA's Non-proliferation Center, told the committee that a dozen countries, including Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, and Syria,

. . . now either possess or are actively pursuing offensive biological weapons capabilities for use against their perceived enemies, whether internal or external.

In the light of Patrick's demonstration of lax security, and Lauder's comments about bioterror capabilities, it is clear just how vulnerable the U.S. remains to this type of attack.

But potential biochem terror is not the only source of concern. The threat of nuclear terrorism is growing and will soon become a reality. In September 1998, Klaus Schnuer of the European Commission's nuclear safety directorate revealed that "small quantities" of weapons-grade nuclear material had been uncovered by police since 1994 in Germany, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Finland, and Austria.

At the same time, Ercan Saka of the World Customs Organization said that his agency's database contains information on over 300 seizures of radioactive material, including 197 in Eastern and Central Europe.

Nuclear experts say that the most important change in nuclear security in recent years has been caused by the break-up of the Soviet Union into numerous individual states, many of them with potent nuclear materials within their borders.

The threat to explode a nuclear device in an American city—thus paralyzing United States' decision-making at a crucial time will be a key part of the next Arab/Iranian attack on Israel. Suitable weapons for this purpose are already available. General Lebed, President Yeltsin's former security adviser, has suggested that the Russian military has mislaid some of its KGB designed, suitcase-sized nuclear bombs which, he says, are "ideal for nuclear terror." It is possible that some are now in the hands of terrorists.

We have already detailed the extent to which the U.S. military is vulnerable to cyber-warfare. But a special presidential commission has found that critical components of the U.S. infrastructure are vulnerable to computer terrorism. To illustrate the danger, one U.S. expert claims that he could bring the U.S. infrastructure to its knees in 90 days with 10 selected computer specialists. The U.S. Defence Department reckons that 30 specialists could do the job with \$10 million.

Our own analysts believe that the U.S. has become so dependent on computers, and the expertise and dedication of disaffected individuals with computer skills has become so great, that a lone fanatic could bring the world's only superpower virtually to a standstill.

In this connection, a survey by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), released in May 1999 and reflecting recent comments by top security experts, says that terrorism is increasingly the preserve of individuals willing to cause huge damage. The survey says:

The rise of "loners" and small, looseknit groups is critical in shaping perceptions of the new terrorism. . . . The new terrorists are likely to be more indiscriminate and more lethal than the old.

And these new terrorists will by no means confine their activities to cyber-warfare. They will use conventional weapons to attack a wider range of targets. And as with existing terrorist organizations, there is a danger that they will acquire nuclear weapons which, as the IISS survey says, “they might not hesitate to use.” But, in any event, the survey points out: “What is most serious is that terrorists are using more efficient weapons than in the past.” It is clear, too, that the wrath of disaffected individuals and small groups will increasingly be directed at the U.S.

In February 1999, Lieutenant-General Patrick M. Hughes, head of the U.S. Defence Intelligence Agency, warned Congress:

The terrorist threat to the U.S. will likely grow as disgruntled groups and individuals focus on America as the most prominent symbol of “what’s wrong in the world.”

But he also stressed how difficult it is to deal with existing terror groups, saying:

The characteristics of the most effective terrorist organizations—highly compartmented operations planning, good cover and security, extreme suspicion of outsiders, and ruthlessness—make them very hard intelligence targets. Middle East-based terrorist groups will remain the most important threat. While state sponsorship of terrorism may decline, Iran and some other nations, and private individuals, will continue to support wide-ranging terrorist and subversive activities. The potential for terrorists to use WMD will increase over time, with chemical, biological, and radiological agents the most likely choice.

At the same time, CIA Director George J. Tenet told Congress:

... there is not the slightest doubt that Osama bin Laden, his worldwide allies, and his sympathizers are planning further attacks against us. Despite progress against his networks, bin Laden’s organization has contacts virtually worldwide, including in the United States—and he has stated unequivocally, Mr. Chairman, that all Americans are targets.

Our own sources all agree with these statements. Terrorism against the West in general, and the U.S. in particular, will increase over the coming years and will become more devastating in its effect as terror groups gain access to chemical, biological, and even nuclear weapons.

The West has achieved some success in its fight against terrorism, and further programs to prevent (and counter the effects of) terrorist incidents are in hand. But the fight against groups and individuals indulging in terror attacks will be a long drawn-out affair.

Perhaps the best that can be said at this stage is that whilst the West has not yet lost the war against terrorism, it is still a very long way away from winning it. Ω