Where Are We in the War on Terrorism?

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It is hard to avoid the assessment that the most visible product to date of the war on terrorism has been nothing much more, or less, than more war and more terror. The unhappy reality since September 11 seems to be that all our major cities, and concentrations of Westerners anywhere, are as vulnerable as ever; the capacity of terrorist actors to do harm is as great as ever; their motivations are as great as ever; their identity is as elusive as ever; international cooperation is as fragile as ever; and international policy priorities are as misplaced as ever.

In Iraq, where the terrorist connection was the least plausible of all the reasons for going to war, terrorist violence has now become the most harrowing of all its consequences. The significance of Richard Clarke’s evidence to the September 11 Commission is not what the former anti-terrorism chief had to say, with all the wisdom that hindsight confers, about the failure of either Republican or Democrat administrations to take more effective action before September 11; rather, it is about the decision after September 11 to attack Iraq, a country that had about as much to do with it as Mexico, creating in the process the most expensive recruitment campaign for Islamist extremism ever launched.

In Israel, so far from the road to peace being paved through Baghdad, with the collapse of the Roadmap process the cycle of suicide bombing, retaliatory violence and assassinations, then more suicide bombing, is escalating out of control.

In Afghanistan and its neighbourhood, Osama bin Laden is still alive and al Qaeda is down but not out. Its affiliates, offshoots, imitators and franchisees in South-East Asia and elsewhere may have been damaged but certainly not destroyed. And lethal new groups are spawning — in Turkey, in Morocco and elsewhere — and certainly now reaching into the European heartland, as we know to our horror from the bombings in Madrid.

The Dimensions of the Problem

For all the innumerable homeland security measures that have been taken in the US and elsewhere, we all know that our cities, including our ports and airports, continue to be desperately vulnerable to terrorist attack. The techniques of the different groups keep changing — with Madrid, for example, involving no suicide bombers — and, as each stable door is bolted, another one is found to have been left open.

It has been obvious since September 11 that, in probing our vulnerability, creative imagination has been a far more significant terrorist resource than access to dollars. The cost of hijacking an aeroplane can be as little as the price of a ticket, and the whole cost of the September 11 operation has been estimated at no more than $500,000; Spanish investigators have said that the expenses for materials in the train bombings could have been less than $1000. Chasing the money trail — with all the cooperation in the world from banks and financial institutions — is not going to help much here.

The bottom line, taking into account what we know about our own vulnerability and the capacity of terrorist organisations, is that nobody anywhere is, or can be, confident that the ‘big one’ can’t or won’t happen — an attack bringing together the sophistication and ruthlessness of the attack on the Twin Towers with the use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, with an accompanying loss of not just thousands but hundreds of thousands of lives.

We know just how limited our capacity is and always will be to deny access by terrorist groups to chemical, and especially biological, weapons. But the same is true of nuclear weapons. We are not doing any better than we were in keeping under control the stockpiles of fissile nuclear material that litter the landscape of the former Soviet Russia, and, after the exposure in Pakistan, we know far more than we did about the global market for nuclear technology, materials and expertise. All of it is alarming.

President Bush told us before going to war against Saddam that: ‘If the Iraqi régime is able to produce, buy or steal an amount of [highly enriched] uranium a little bigger than a softball, it could have a nuclear weapon in less than a year.’ But as experts like Harvard’s Graham Allison keep reminding us, the same is true for terrorist groups — and there is enough already fabricated uranium and plutonium lying around now to make some 240,000 such weapons. Much of it, particularly in Russia, is not just poorly, but appallingly, guarded. And when it comes to transporting the finished product, seven million cargo containers will arrive at US ports this year and only two per cent of them will be opened for inspection.

Any threat is a function not just of capacity, but intention, and here the news is no better. Islamist terrorism is not mindless and motiveless, or the product primarily of a generalised socio-economic-cultural discontent of a kind that is hardly susceptible to any kind of redress in the short to medium term. It is largely fuelled by specific grievances: initially, for al Qaeda, the desire to expel the communist-atheists from Afghanistan and the Americans from Saudi Arabia, but with a steady drumbeat around the issue of Palestinian return to Israel, and now the cause of Iraq.

Any doubt about the resonance of these causes — and Iraq in particular — must have been dissipated by the findings of the non-partisan Pew Research Centre in its latest Global Attitudes Survey published in March 2004: anger...
toward the US is still fierce in the Muslim world, or at least the four representative countries surveyed in detail, with two-thirds plus majorities in Jordan and Morocco, and nearly half of those asked in Pakistan, approving suicide attacks against Americans and other Westerners in Iraq, as well as by Palestinians against Israeli citizens. Even in Turkey, three in ten respondents believed that attacks against Americans in Iraq were justified. My own International Crisis Group (ICG) researchers on the ground throughout the Arab-Islamic world confirm the day-to-day reality of these findings. The anger, I am constantly told, is palpable.

Political grievances are a far more obvious immediate motivator for terrorists than poverty and some of the other more broad-based underlying social and cultural grievances that are often argued to be relevant. It is the case that, as researchers such as Frances Stewart at Oxford University have shown, economic inequality between Arab states and the West, and between Muslims and others, is large, persistent and generally growing, both globally and within countries. Where poverty and joblessness do become relevant is in creating a larger class of young men, and increasingly women, insecure to the point of hopelessness about their own futures, who become that much more vulnerable to recruitment — by those who play upon that insecurity, fire up the sense of political grievance endemic throughout the Arab-Islamic world, and, critically, offer a religious justification for jihad: making holy war.

It has been argued, in the aftermath of the Madrid bombings, that nothing adds to motivation like success, and that the unexpected election of the new Spanish government, with its commitment to pull troops out of Iraq (at least in the absence of an appropriate mandate from the UN to keep them there) will prove a disastrous new generator for attacks elsewhere. There is a grain of truth in this, and if the right kind of UN resolution cannot be passed to keep Spain engaged (as I think in fact it can be), a bombing-induced pull-out will send a very unfortunate signal.

That said, it is very hard to accept the extravagant denunciations of the Spanish electorate’s ‘appeasement’ we have heard from so many high places in the US, with the apparent embrace of the Brechtian view that Spain should now respond to its electoral misjudgment by dissolving its people and electing another. At the heart of the Spanish electorate’s response was clearly the feeling that its government, by insisting so long that ETA was behind the attacks, was trying to manipulate the tragedy for political gain, and there is no country in the world where that would not have generated that response, and rightly so for the health of democracy. But as one of my senior staffers wryly remarked to me at the time: ‘There’s nothing like a democratic election to shake America’s faith in democracy.’

It cannot be assumed that the kinds of motivation I have been talking about will mean that the only targets for terrorist violence will be the US and those countries most immediately associated with supporting it — the UK, Australia, Spain and the like. The terrible reality these days is that no one is immune from terrorism and no one can afford to be complacent. Spain was certainly vulnerable, apart from the ETA issue, because of its government’s support for the Iraq war, but it was by no means uniquely vulnerable. Those with political grudges against the West as broad-based as those that have motivated al Qaeda and its offshoots will find reason to justify attacking almost any Western target: the headscarves issue in France, for example, might well suffice, notwithstanding France’s position on Iraq. Terrorists always prefer soft targets, and those who think they are unlikely to be attacked run the risk — through lack of attention to preventive measures, as far as these can go — of being the softest targets of all.

One of the many things making the war on terrorism so hard to fight is the elusive identity of the enemy. There is no single tightly coordinated terrorist network: to decapitate al Qaeda by capturing Osama bin Laden will no more mean an end to Islamist extremism than the capture of Saddam Hussein meant an end to terrorism in Iraq. ICG has been meticulously documenting the way in which the Jemaah Islamiyah organisation has been operating in Indonesia and more widely in South-East Asia: there is a constant process of old alliances breaking up, new ones forming and small new jihadist groups emerging. The fluidity of the situation, here and everywhere else, makes obvious the need for continued monitoring, analysis and vigilance. But it also makes clear the almost hopelessness of the task if it is conceived solely in terms of more effective law enforcement and military action.

**The Policy Response: How Can We Do Better?**

This takes us to the heart of the policy problem with the ‘war on terrorism’ as it has so far been fought. When one is fighting a war, it is natural to be wholly focused on immediate issues of defence and attack: what we have to do in terms of homeland defence to make ourselves less vulnerable, and what we have to do by way of intelligence gathering, criminal investigation and prosecution, and, if necessary, military assault, to rid ourselves of our enemies. But the very language of a ‘war on terrorism’, like that of ‘war on evil’, does not contribute much to clear operational thinking. Terrorism is not in and of itself a self-driving concept, or in and of itself an ‘enemy’. It is not even an ideology, as anarchism was in the nineteenth century. Rather, it is a technique or means, a tool or tactic — for the pursuit of political or ideological ends. And its manifestations are as many and various as its motivations.

Since terrorism is a tactic resorted to almost invariably by the weak against the strong — weak individuals, weak groups, weak states — the use of state military and law enforcement power, conventionally designed to render strong opponents weak, will almost by definition only take us part of the way. Tough police action, internal and external, is part of the answer, and so too can be military force, legitimately used though it was in Afghanistan for punitive, retaliatory and, in effect, self-defence purposes.

But the rest of the answer has to be to address the great dangers that come from political problems — reinforced by
underlying economic and social causes — that are unresolved, unaddressed, incompetently or counter-productively addressed or deliberately left to fester, until they become so acute they explode.

When I addressed the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations on 21 September 2001, just ten dreadful days after the nightmare attacks in New York and Washington, I argued that there were five separate and distinct objectives that had to be pursued simultaneously if the response to the September 11 horror, and to the horrors awaiting us in the future, was to be adequate, and the tightrope was to be walked between overreaction (in the sense of counter-productive action) and under-reaction. They were:

(1) **Strengthening Internal Security** — without sacrificing so much liberty in the process that you sacrificed the very character and identity of the nation that the attackers set out to destroy.

(2) **Bringing the Perpetrators to Justice** — by military action if necessary, but bearing in mind three big constraints: the need for a strong evidentiary foundation for any such action, the need to avoid at almost all costs the killing and maiming of the innocent, and the need to avoid characterising the response as a crusade against Islam, confusing deeds and beliefs.

(3) **Building International Defences against Future Attacks** — making the critical point that the first lines of defence had to be in the countries of origin of the terrorists themselves, and that, in order to build them, you had to create both the capacity and will for their governments to act.

(4) **Addressing the Conflicts and Policy Issues That Generate Grievance** — with a particular emphasis on taking major initiatives to solve the Israeli–Palestinian issue, not least on the principle that being seen to be serious about these issues would be critical in winning the cooperation of regional government, whose capacity and will to cooperate would be dependent in significant part on the mood on their streets.

(5) **Addressing Underlying Social, Economic and Cultural Issues That Generate Grievance** — again, not so much because these were critical motivators for individual terrorists, whose pathologies might be many and varied, but because it was all part of the process of draining the swamps in which terrorists bred, and winning the cooperative support of their governments.

Looking back at this list two and a half years later, there is not much in it I would change, except perhaps to simplify the five points into three, maybe using the ‘3 Ps’ terminology of Kings College London’s Michael Clarke: protection, penetration and political process. The most neglected of the three themes, and in many ways the most critical, remains the third: intelligence cooperation, sophisticated criminal investigation and, ultimately, the use of force, whether in the hands of the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, European governments or anyone else, can never be an effective substitute for the traditional hard work of dealing with the core political problems that create the most violence-motivating grievances and that are the prime determinants of local public opinion. As Graham Allison has succinctly put it: ‘If properly encouraged, foreign nationals and governments can play a huge role in tracking down terrorists. If not, they become a sympathetic sea in which terrorists can swim and hide.’

Any call to address not just the symptoms of terrorism but also the factors that breed and sustain it is bound to generate some negative reaction, along the lines of ‘You’re rewarding them!’ Probably the most negative reaction I have ever received along these lines — and I guess it was understandable given the rawness of emotions so close to 11 September 2001 — was in an e-mail from Chicago after my speech there later that month was reported in the *Chicago Tribune*: ‘Get the fuck out of America you fucking communist piece of shit.’ The point, of course, although I suspect it didn’t have much chance of acceptance by this interlocutor, is that there is a huge difference between rewarding terrorists and addressing the problem they present. Policy makers ignore that distinction at their peril.

The three biggest political-grievance issues whose handling is crucial to the longer-term containment of the terrorist threat from the Arab-Islamic world are Iraq, Israel–Palestine and the opening up to democratic accountability of the region’s numerous authoritarian régimes.

In the case of Iraq, the only hope is that an invasion almost universally seen as unjustified, and an occupation almost universally seen so far as mishandled, can now become a peace-building support exercise capable over time of neutralising the hostility that everything that has gone before has generated. That will certainly require the UN to be seen from now on as playing the central external role in the still extraordinarily fragile political and cultural transition, and for the necessary continuing external security presence to be operating, again, under a clear UN mandate.

In the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the US policy of more or less complete disengagement has been almost universally seen, again, as a disaster. Any incrementalist approach — the ‘Roadmap’ being the latest example — lends itself to sabotage every sequential step of the way by extremists on either side; a comprehensive approach, of the kind long urged by ICG and now the architects of the informal Geneva Accord, in which all critical issues from borders to refugee return would be simultaneously on the table, has been impossible to kick-start internally, with the leadership so far forthcoming from either the government of Israel or the Palestinian Authority; any chance of there being some fruit from the unilateralist approach supposedly being developed by Prime Minister Sharon seems to have died with the assassination of Sheikh Yassin and any chance of the Arab League countries generating a major new initiative capable of changing the dynamics on the ground has died, if it ever lived, with the recent abandonment, in even more than usual disarray, of the intended Tunis summit.

The only hope of serious forward movement lies, as it has always done, with serious commitment by the US — pursuing
a comprehensive blueprint approach and seriously pressurising the two sides to engage. So long as that doesn’t happen — and there is no strong ground for believing it will, even with a change of administration in Washington — the fires of international terrorism will continue to be fuelled.

In the case of reforming the Arab-Islamic world’s authoritarian régimes, the critical need is not only to open up the economies and societies to the kind of modernisation that will create jobs and dramatically shrink the numbers of those who see neither hope nor joy in their personal lives, but to open up avenues for political participation right across the political spectrum and to diminish the incentives for extreme behaviour. Change of this kind will never satisfy fundamentalist Wahabis, but it will make them, over time, ever more unpopular minorities.

The willingness of the US in recent times to at least talk the democratisation and reform talk with some of the region’s worst offenders is welcome and long overdue, although it is deeply regrettable (and bound, ultimately, to be counter-productive) that exceptions continue to be made, in the name of maintaining effective partnerships in the fight against terrorism, with régimes as unpalatably authoritarian as those in Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

But even though most of the recent ‘Greater Middle East’ message is a welcome one, and completely consistent with what the EU has been trying to advance for some time in its own rather ineffectual way, the identity of the messenger has unfortunately proved a huge drawback. The growing numbers of internal reform voices are finding overt US support — so long as the dynamics of the Iraq and Israeli–Palestinian situations remain as bad as they are — more counter-productive than productive. So the primary political-process need remains to manage the transition process in Iraq as effectively and gracefully as possible, and to do something seriously useful to bring about a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

There are and can be no simple solutions to dealing with the harrowing new phenomenon of international terrorism. Maybe it is still not a huge problem in terms of casualties, as compared with civil wars and other threats to human security in the form of hunger, disease and criminal violence. Nicholas Kristoff made the point recently in The New York Times that 43,000 Americans died on US soil last year from automobile accidents and none from terrorism. But the issue is huge in terms of the fear and anxiety it engenders, the economic loss it causes and the number of casualties that we can certainly imagine terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction one day producing.

Groucho Marx once famously said: ‘Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies.’ It would be a little unfair to try to apply all of that description to the progress of the US-led ‘war on terrorism’ over the last thirty months. But it wouldn’t be completely unfair to apply a good deal of it.