Is the Emergence of International Terrorism Likely to Further Undermine the Institution of the State?

https://www.e-ir.info/2007/12/02/is-the-emergence-of-international-terrorism-likely-to-further-undermine-the-institution-of-the-state/

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*Merely coordinating the existing capabilities… is not adequate to protect the nation or the international order from this major new challenge, because the existing capabilities fall far short of what is needed**[1]**.*

In the post-September 11th world international terrorism is synonymous with catastrophic violence and unprecedented threats to states. International terrorist groups, by their structure, makeup as non-state actors, logistical mechanisms and resources are inherently unpredictable. As we have seen in the bombing of Madrid and the ongoing violence in Iraq, terrorist groups have expanded beyond national boundaries and therefore have an unparalleled ability to strike globally. The common impression of the phenomenon of international terrorism is that it is 'more dangerous or at least more difficult to counter'[2]than conventional, often nationalistic and politically-motivated, terrorism.

In this essay I am going to examine some of the opportunities international terrorists have to undermine states (for I consider 'institutions' to be the constituent parts of a state); what 'homeland' security measures have been put in place by the United States to counter these threats; and to assess if enough has been done to prevent the undermining of the institutions of the state. I believe that international terrorism, in its media-portrayed form as 'Jihad', – while not entirely new – has developed to a stage where without revised and more effective defensive policies, and a period of social and cultural introspection, it could succeed in undermining developed states – albeit temporarily – at the cost of many more innocent lives.

International terrorism has expanded along broadly similar lines to that of contemporary localised terrorism in that, as Tucker claims, 'the new attitude is an increased willingness to cause mass casualties, perhaps using chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons'[3](CBRN). Some suggest that the characteristics of the emerging cell and column based international terrorist groups predispose them to a greater chance of success. The fundamental characteristics can generally be summarised as:

- Organised into groups of highly autonomous cells, referred to by Burton as columns[4], with each cell concentrating on one specialisation (command, intelligence, logistics, training, action &c.).
- A wider 'network' with intermittent communication, perhaps including a hierarchical element, but without centralised command and control.
- Financial support established within the group infrastructure (commonly through illegal activities and wealthy individual sponsors)[5].
- Operating under intense secrecy.

The shift towards semi-autonomous terrorist action within ideological precepts presents a considerable threat to 'open' liberal-capitalist countries of the West, whose institutions are complex and interconnected, whose socio-political values promote freedom of travel, expression and civil liberties, and use an economic Free Trade system that dictates mass import activities. However, while the organisation of modern international terrorists lend them considerable advantages it also exposes them to considerable disadvantages, particularly if they hope to sustain

coordinated long-term global operations.

The need for secrecy invariably leads to a decentralised command structure and herein lay one of the terrorist's greatest weakness. Secrecy on the scale required by terrorists to avoid detection and infiltration results in sporadic and often ineffectual communication. Furthermore, secrecy and decentralisation makes coordination and administration an extremely difficult task. As White explains, the tendency for terrorist units to receive their orders from one man 'paves the way for potential splintering or, at the very least, misunderstandings'[6]. After its early success the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLO) splintered into multiple organisations, some such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine continued to pursue their original political aims but others, notably Abu Nidal's splinter group, have forsaken the Palestinian cause and become 'mercenary' terrorists. In Northern Ireland, the history of the IRA has seen multiple splits that severely hindered not only the peace negotiations but also the desire among many former elements to achieve political legitimacy[7].

Therefore, I believe the structure of terrorist organisations does not innately predispose them to a greater level of success in undermining state institutions *in Developed Countries* (DC). International terrorists do not have the resources to wage the full-scale warfare necessary to effectively undermine countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom in the long-term. They are in a position, however, to cause damage to internal infrastructure and loss of life on a short-term basis. But it is here that a distinction must be drawn; short-term damage can be catastrophic, particularly if terrorists make use of CBRN weaponry. If this becomes the case (or the norm) the strength of international terrorism is dramatically multiplied. Any future use of CBRN weapons would have to be as infrequent as conventional terrorism because of the difficulty of manufacturing or acquiring such items, but the scale of fear provoked in the public of a state the victim of such attacks could easily undermine its institutions. Protests, rioting, the hoarding of goods, increased criminal activity and economic depression are merely some of the possibilities of fear-induced hysteria.

Furthermore, the Western-world's reliance on technology to manage key political, economic and military assets provides potential terrorists with another avenue for attack. White recognises that the US is 'dependent on technology' and that while great efforts have been made to secure military targets against technological attack, 'civilian industry has fallen behind'. The Strategic Survey 2003-2004 from the International Institute of Strategic Studies identifies technological and Internet-based infrastructure as particularly vulnerable to attack. Indeed, it identifies that attacks 'would have far reaching ramifications for the government and private sector ranging from economic trauma to hindering consequence-management operations'[8]. Once again modern technology considerably multiplies the destructive capabilities of international terrorism. I believe that the threat to institutions is greater from potentially coordinated technological attacks than it is from hijacks and conventional bombing. Not only is the global economy reliant on technology but so are almost all of a state's critical infrastructure ranging from transportation and air traffic control to state benefits and medical treatment. Technological terrorism can indeed threaten our very 'way of life'.

Within many academic circles there is a belief that without fulfilling certain conditions, or by continuing on a current policy, it is almost inevitable that there will be, in the words of Steve Smith, 'more, not less, September 11s'[9]. Notably this is argued to be the case with the 'search and destroy' rather than 'hearts and minds' policy of the United States' war on terror. Barry R. Posen accurately asserts that an effective strategy to counter and eradicate international terrorism is necessary, and that such a strategy is only possible through cooperation between the military, political and diplomatic branches of a state[10]. Posen continues, stating that within the military branch strategy can be 'offensive, defensive, and punitive', however I would expand this definition to include the internal political and foreign policy of the state.

It is not possible to examine the military operations of the war on terror in the confines of this essay, but an examination of the *defensive* policies – popularly referred to as 'Homeland Security' – is crucial at assessing the vulnerabilities of the institutions of a state. Ashton B. Carter provides an excellent critique of the United States' efforts at countering terrorism, beginning by claiming that the 'security institutions of the US federal government are particularly ill-suited to deliver homeland security'[11]. This view is supported by a number of notable security experts and academics including those within the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the RAND

Corporation. In the 2003-2004 *Strategic Survey* the IISS proposes that US domestic security has not kept pace with its foreign military policy, instead has been 'slow, inconsistent and under-resourced'[12]. Further, the ISS argues that despite several years of 'intensive interest' in developing an effective array of homeland security measures state infrastructure 'remains considerably exposed' and while improvements have been made in detecting future attacks, adequate progress has not been made in preparing for an emergency response. As al-Qaeda exploited deficiencies in US air safety system on September 11th 2001, it is not difficult to imagine terrorists exploiting the lack of adequate homeland security today.

A key explanation of the US government's ineffective domestic security response is the unconventional and 'new' form of warfare that international terrorism creates. Indeed, this problem transcends the boundaries of states and applies to all governments, liberal-democracies those most under threat. Existing government agencies, law enforcement paradigms, health and agricultural organisations are, as Carter suggests, 'ill-suited to deal with catastrophic terrorism'. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), for instance, previously operated on the basis of investigating and solving crimes *ex post facto*, rather than working towards detection and prevention. This confusion of purpose was abetted by the US government's rapidly changing definition of terrorism; was it war, crime or disaster? Each category would place responsibility with a different federal agency. The US response has been the creation of a 'Department of Homeland Security' as an umbrella organisation to promote the vitally important interagency cooperation that is necessary to counter the emerging problem of international terrorism.

But to assess the threat of international terrorism purely in political, military or economical terms is also insufficient. Christina M. Schweiss proposed that we 'must not let perceived 'cultural' differences push us into opposite corners'[13]. Schweiss was referring to the growing polarity between the United States and wider European Union, but the principle can easily be applied to the perceived ideological gulf between Western 'corporate-democracy' and the Middle East. International terrorism gathers considerable strength from the clashes between the all-pervasive American cultural expansion and minority radical Islamist fundamentalism. Benjamin R. Barber summarises what he perceives to be absolutely necessary if we are to win the war against the emerging form of international terrorism:

*Yet it will be the successful prosecution of a second civic front in the war rather than the strictly military campaign that will determine the outcome in the long-term. It, too, in President Bush's words, will be a war for justice, but a war defined by a new commitment to distributive justice: a readjudication of north-south responsibilities, a redefinition of the obligations of global capital as it faces the claims of global justice and comity, a repositioning of democratic institutions as they follow markets from the domestic to the international sector, a new recognition of the place and requirements of faith in an aggressively secular society. The war against Jihad will not, in other words, succeed unless McWorld is also addressed**[14]**.*

Barber claims that only through intensive cultural introspection on the part of the Western democratic states, particularly the United States, can the growth and thankfully relatively minor but nonetheless existent support for international terrorism be understood and countered.

I believe that international terrorism is likely *at the moment* to further undermine the institution of the state. I would argue that less developed countries (LDC), weak states or those ravished by war will undoubtedly be more attractive targets for terrorist action: whether this is in the form of that in Iraq, whereby attacks are made against foreign personnel and reconstructed infrastructure, or a repeat of the al-Qaeda 'takeover' of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is yet to be seen. The assessment of whether international terrorism will further undermine the institutions of the dominant superpower or its lesser European allies is a more difficult question, and needs to be constantly qualified as developments (or setbacks) are made in domestic security and global cultural exploration and recognition. It is true that in the current climate international terrorists have the advantage, particularly if they exploit the practical and imagined power of CBRN weaponry or technological-based attacks, because state defensive measures and global opinion has not yet reached the extent of its evolution. But as more resources and expertise are devoted to protecting the peoples and institutions of state actors it will ultimately be the terrorists who will find themselves at the disadvantage.

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[6]White, *Terrorism*.

[7]The Provisional IRA claimed responsibility for the murder of **Louis Mountbatten, 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma (August 11, 1979), which caused public and political outrage, even within other IRA groups.**

[8]IISS, *Strategic Survey*.

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