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# Countering Terrorism: Some Key Issues

Harjeet Singh

## Introduction

Warfare has changed significantly in the past sixty years. Many of the traditional attributes of warfare are no longer present. The major changes are:

- The changed character of victory. In the “war on terror,” the goal is not to defeat an enemy but instead to find a solution. Compromise and negotiations accompanied by lengthy wars have acquired profound implications.
- There is a shift to asymmetric warfare. Instead of a clash between two armies, warfare today is unbalanced. With the rise in insurgency and low intensity conflict, a powerful force is up against a significantly less powerful one. Territory has become less of an issue.
- In the war against terror and in low intensity conflict, professional armies tend to take on the roles of a police force and gaining intelligence of targets on the run assumes great importance.
- Human rights issues are critical, as is the welfare of the population. This makes it difficult to engage in combat as the nature of the enemy has changed. Major considerations are the psychology, motivations and circumstances of the enemy.
- Finally, there is a shift in the characterisation of allegiance, from geographical to political. Governments can no longer assume the allegiance of their population; they are forced to take measures to win their allegiance.

## The Rise of Religious Terrorism

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in human history. It has been an integral part of social behaviour for centuries, and yet, there is no international consensus regarding what constitutes terrorism. This imposes many obstacles

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in fighting terrorism effectively. The most commonly agreed upon definition is: "The use of [or the threat to use] violence against civilians in order to attain political goals." The emphasis on political goals is what differentiates terrorism from other types of violence (such as criminal violence).

The first terrorists were motivated by religious fanaticism. In fact, religion provided the justification for terror. The emergence of nationalism, imperialism and Marxist ideology led to a change in the nature of terrorism. It was mainly driven by secular motives, while the influence of religion declined. The main features of this kind of terrorism were guerrilla tactics, political kidnappings, and sabotage. Starting from the mid-1960s, international terrorism was characterised by both the secular nature of the organisations and by its lethality, indiscrimination and intent to create havoc and fear.

There is now a reemergence of religious terrorism, mainly among Islamic organisations. In the 13 known terrorist organisations identified in 1968, none was characterised as religious. Yet today, of the 42 known terrorist organisations, more than half are Islamic religious-motivated. The threat has intensified with the emergence of global *jihad* – a more extreme mutation of international terrorism. It is characterised by a combination of the extreme ideology inherent in the Islamic radical belief of the holiness of the personal *jihad* and the deadly methods employed, together with the willingness to use non-conventional weapons.

Religion is a vague term that constitutes many different aspects, some not entirely objective. The main purpose of religion is to make an individual a better human being. Its concerns transcend the human, temporal and contingent. Religion is also set of practices to produce a proper world. It nurtures a community which constructs identity. Religion also allows every human being to apply his own subjective definition of what is involved in keeping his faith and to practise it accordingly. It, thus, becomes an unpredictable aspect of cultural identity. In many cases, it is impossible to distinguish between religion and culture as two separate concepts that comprise the collective identity of a specific community or nation. Thus, religion and culture are directly interlinked and have led to destructive consequences in supporting and perpetrating terror. It is impossible to determine which is the predominant instigator, religion or culture, in relation to terrorism. However, the fact that religion is an integral part of culture provides fertile ground for religious-motivated terrorism.

No terrorist organisation can act effectively if the society that surrounds it does not support its activity. Mao Tse-Tung once said: "The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea." Although he was referring to guerrilla fighters, terrorists are no different in their necessity to feel comfortable in

their natural habitat. When the natural environment does not accommodate terrorism, there is a need for a cultural environment in which terrorism, especially religious-motivated, can operate.

The use of the electronic and print media creates a culture of terrorism within a society that glorifies suicide attacks, manufactures heroes and is committed to continue the fight against a perceived enemy. As a result of the cultural environment, religious-motivated terrorism can flourish and the massive support it has amongst the people and the leaders provides the necessary legitimacy for terrorist attacks and allows the terrorists to use religion as a justification for their acts.

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### **Suicide Bombings: The Ultimate Weapon?**

One of the main means of attack open to terror organisations is suicide terrorism. The choice of this type of attack emanates from the fact that it is easily put into practice and materially “inexpensive” to execute, while, at the same time, is extremely damaging to public morale. Suicide attacks, like all terrorist attacks, are first and foremost aimed at giving their perpetrators widespread media coverage, thereby inflating their own image.

Modern suicide terrorism is unique. In the last two decades, suicide attacks have been carried out by one or more persons who were aware that they were human time-bombs. Suicide bombers carry the explosives on their body or in a vehicle driven by them and, by personal choice and with full awareness, approach a previously chosen target and blow themselves up. The suicide bomber invariably chooses the time and place to execute the explosion so that it causes maximum damage. Defining a terror attack as a suicide bombing depends primarily on whether the perpetrator is killed. If the mission is incomplete, it is not a suicide bombing. The death of the perpetrator is the key to the success of the attack; and the bombers know in advance that success depends entirely on their death.

The most prominent organisation for suicide bombings is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It began carrying out suicide bombings in 1987 and has since perpetrated over 200 such attacks. Their bombings have been particularly lethal and caused hundreds of casualties. Their targets are usually

senior political and military officials in Sri Lanka. This organisation is the only one in the world to succeed in assassinating two heads of state by suicide bombings — Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, while he was on an election campaign tour in Madras on May 21, 1991, and President Premadasa of Sri Lanka, along with 22 other people, on May 1, 1993. On December 17, 1999, the organisation attempted to assassinate President Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka, using a female suicide bomber who blew herself up at an election rally. The president was wounded but survived the attack.

The LTTE has also targeted politicians from the Sinhalese majority, pragmatic politicians from the Tamil minority and senior military officers, as well as boats, command centres and economic installations, such as fuel depots. The organisation has never been particularly mindful of the safety of passersby and innocent bystanders who happened to be in the vicinity of their attacks. The LTTE suicide squads draw their inspiration from a combination of a strong nationalistic motive and the charismatic leadership of the head of the organisation, Prabhakaran. It is still the most active group using suicide terrorism. In India, there have been several suicide attacks carried out against political and military targets in Kashmir.

There are many motives for suicide attacks: religious beliefs, nationalistic ideologies, or obedience to charismatic and authoritarian leaders. The *modus operandi* may vary: whether to use one or several suicide bombers, whether to use men or women. The explosives can be concealed on the human body, on an animal, or in a vehicle, and conveyed by sea, land or air. The targets can be senior government officials, military targets, economic installations, or public transport vehicles, while the level of operations can range from scores of attacks to a solitary event. The common denominator is their success in causing large-scale casualties and negatively influencing public morale. While they have failed to change regimes or to force governments to agree to their strategic demands, the perpetrators have succeeded in delaying strategic political processes for brief periods of time.

## **Coping with Suicide Terrorism**

At the operational level, a successful response requires comprehensive knowledge of the apparatus for the recruitment and training of the suicide bombers. This apparatus operates on two levels: selection and training of the suicide bomber, and the operational preparation of the attack. On the first level, the potential suicide bomber must be selected, either when he joins the organisation or during his “basic training” period. Usually, the person who recruits the suicide bomber also accompanies him throughout his training

and spiritual preparation for the attack. Meanwhile, the operational groundwork is laid for the attack. This includes preparing a safe-house for the bomber, acquiring and hiding weapons, preparation of the explosives according to the method to be used, and, finally, transfer of the attacker and the explosives to the target area. In addition, a video is made to memorialise the suicide bomber.

All these preparations are targets for an intelligence operation. It requires the use of human, technical, and operational measures to

neutralise the suicide attack in its preparatory stage. If the suicide bomber has already been dispatched to the intended target, everything must be done by the security forces to try and minimise the physical damage of the attack by keeping the attacker away from enclosed and crowded areas.

In addition to coping physically with suicide bombers, it is also important to deal with the psychological aspects. This requires an intensive educational effort by experts in the fields of psychology and counter-terrorism. Suicide terrorism is not a winning strategy, and must not be treated as such; we must not give its perpetrators a decisive capability which they don't actually have. The ability to cope with terrorism in general rests on three factors: the political handling of the basic problems that give rise to the attacks, proactive military and intelligence action against the perpetrators, and the public's ability to endure. The terror attacks that have occurred in the UK reflect a different kind of terrorist – native British-Muslim citizens underwent indoctrination by Al Qaeda members in training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan and came back to their country of origin to perpetrate suicide attacks.

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## **The Need for Counter-Surveillance**

Almost any criminal act, from a purse-snatching to a terrorist bombing, involves some degree of pre-operational surveillance. In fact, one common denominator of all the different potential threats, whether from lone wolves, militant groups, common criminals or the mentally disturbed, is that those planning an operation will monitor their target in advance. The duration of the surveillance may vary. A militant organisation might conduct detailed surveillance of a target for several weeks or even months.

Regardless of the length of time surveillance is performed, the criminal or militant conducting it is exposed, and, therefore, vulnerable to detection. Counter-surveillance — the process of detecting and mitigating hostile surveillance — is an important element of counter-terrorism and security operations because it is one of the few security measures that allows for threats to be dealt with before they can develop into active attacks.

## **Tools for Countering Future Terrorism**

What shape do we expect future terrorist activities to take? Most probably, these will be a mixture of what we already see around us, enriched with some surprises we are afraid to think about. This might include assassinations and direct action against governments, together with the usual pressure on public opinion and psychological warfare. We may see suicide attacks combined with weapons of mass destruction, multiple attacks, and cyber terrorism. Terrorist acts may be by known as well as ad hoc terrorist organisations that have yet to be formed. Are we ready to confront this threat? It all comes down to the question of the chicken and the egg: what do we do first, kill the crocodiles or drain the swamp?

Relevant issues in the conduct of counter-terrorism are:

- **Public Opinion.** Terrorism is a kind of psychological warfare. Its aim is to undermine the morale of the nation as well as to influence international opinion. Thus, counter-terrorism must start at the true frontline – the level of the general public. Terrorist attacks target public opinion in several ways. A successful attack aims to lower the morale and weaken the resistance of the targeted population. The terrorists' goal is to create a feeling of general vulnerability among the citizens. This psychological warfare results in enormous pressure on the government to take action (or over-reaction), which results in international condemnation of the targeted nation.
- **Media.** It is of crucial importance for both terrorist and counter-terrorist strategies. It is the first responder to terrorist attacks and there is a need to educate the media about their responsibilities. The media can be used and/or misused as part of psychological operations. It can become a partner in counter-terrorism if we cooperate and if we strictly draw the borders between responsible journalism and playing into the hands of terrorists. Future terrorism may well include “media terrorism”. Information channels could be hijacked and panic spread by pre-prepared images and fake political statements. This is something for which we need to be prepared.

- **Political Leadership.** The political leadership forms the policies and guidelines for a counter-terrorist organisation and operations. Political commitment to combat terrorism is the fundamental motivator behind all counter-terrorist activities. The will to fight terrorism — and especially to deal with the grey zones where terrorism and organised crime meet — are crucial for political decision-makers. Today, the grey zones are an integral part of the economic infrastructure of the nation. It will be hard to cut off funding to terrorists when this funding is seen as a legitimate part of the national economy. National leadership is necessary in order to concentrate the efforts of all relevant resources in the war against terrorism. We must demand that political leaders make difficult decisions. In the absence of political guidance, counter-terrorism organisations all too often become institutions for managing problems rather than solving them. Politics is an important partner in counter-terrorism, and is responsible for controlling and supporting counter-terrorism tools.
- **Think-Tanks.** Inter-disciplinary think-tanks can play a role in advising decision-makers and enhancing counter-terrorist strategies. What is needed is a successful networking of think-tanks. These organisations are probably the only ones that can keep up with the pace of terrorist networking. Official governmental operations and coordinated strategies are often held back by office procedures, unnecessary bureaucracy, and political interests.
- **Intelligence.** Intelligence is of central importance in the war against terrorism. The threat of future terrorism requires that the intelligence community establishes multinational intelligence databases, with reasonable access for partner states. This will naturally lead to the dilemma of protecting the sources of intelligence and establishing who gets access, and how much access. One simple rule could be: the more a state gives, the greater its access. It will also be necessary to upgrade our ability to successfully process information under time pressure. It makes no sense to become a vacuum cleaner, sucking in all kinds of information, if the means of analysing and interpreting this information are lacking. Analysed information must be able to flow back to the end users and other elements of the counter-terrorist community. This requires better knowledge management processes. Do we fully recognise the

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power of open sources? We will need specialists to analyse open sources in all languages and in every open forum. Human intelligence will remain the main resource for effective intelligence gathering and the human factor must be the main concern. Intelligence officers will need purposeful career planning and feedback for successful activities. Pride in one's work is one of the main sources of motivation in a career that has little open reward or glory.

- **Special Operations.** Special operations are the spearhead of counter-terrorist efforts. They include rescue operations as well as law enforcement, security and military operations.

In order to effectively fight terrorism, it is necessary to build a community that is single-minded and solutions-oriented. An organisation to counter terror needs an efficient internal communication system, a common language, and a sense of trust and responsibility amongst its members. Effective counter-terrorism necessitates the establishment of operational platforms to exchange views, create training scenarios and set up operational units. It is also necessary to invest extensive efforts into ensuring that new terrorist organisations don't sprout as quickly as we uproot the ones we now face. In other words, it isn't enough to fight the alligators; we must drain the swamp.

There are dilemmas and difficulties in each aspect of counter-terrorism. Operations to reduce the impact of any attack are the fundamental activities of counter-terrorism. In its ambit will be:

- **Rescue Operations.** Professional rescue operations will need to take into account that the attack may be a compound one, with secondary attacks planned to target rescue forces. Medical personnel are an integral part of the security plan and play the greatest role in mitigating the effects of the attack.
- **Security Measures.** Increased security measures can lead to the discovery of the attacker before he or she can reach the target zone, thus, reducing damage or preventing the attack altogether. Successful security measures include the designation of different security zones ranging from non-target to pre-target and target zones. Each zone is characterised by different security activities, ranging from electronic surveillance to physical barriers.
- **Defensive Activities.** This includes special operations against planning and recruiting efforts by specialised cells within the terrorist organisations. Defensive measures must be continually upgraded by constantly reexamining and testing security arrangements. Nothing is more dangerous in security operations than establishing routine procedures which lose their sensitivity.

- **Offensive Strikes.** Offensive counter-terror operations are special operations directed against the close circle surrounding those who execute terrorist strikes, recruit the human bombs, equip them with the explosives, instruct them about favourable targets, harbour them before sending them into action and try to cover up their tracks. Many nations that strike back at terrorist bases justify them on the right to self-defence.
- **Surgical Operations.** This aspect of counter-terrorism includes counter-intelligence activities, as well as special operations against logistics and training infrastructure. Terrorists often hide their activities within legal business, social and even medical or international organisations. Bomb factories have been found in the same building as nursery schools and hospitals. By the same token, weapons procurement may take place under the legal auspices of a supporting state, and fund raising for terrorist organisations may be covered up by legal business activities. This type of interaction between the terrorist infrastructure and civilian institutions makes special operations against such activities extremely difficult and risky.
- **Coordinated Strategies.** Among the most important special operations are those that seek to stem the flow of sympathy and support to terrorist organisations. These operations attempt to denigrate the glorification of suicide bombers, and the misleading of young men and women by religious indoctrination. Counter-terrorism at the highest levels must counter disinformation and psychological warfare. Long-term counter-terrorist strategies must include the winning of hearts and minds to successfully win the war against terror.
- **Preventive Actions in the Virtual World.** Last, is the preventive counter-terrorist “street work,” which is carried out by units and personnel specifically trained to deal with the “virtual infrastructure” of terrorism. Here, intelligence is derived from the continual monitoring of Internet forums, websites, and other forms of digital communications. The goal is to enter the virtual battlefield to pick out potential future terrorists and attempt to open a window for them to return to, and integrate with, our society.

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