PRIFYSGOL ABERYSTWYTH UNIVERSITY

Davies Papers

The Davies Forum Series

2011-2012: No.1

'Should we still fear international terrorism?'

David Davies Memorial Institute
of International Studies

The Davies Papers aim to be an accessible outlet for work for academic articles, as well as work which does not easily fit into traditional publishing formats. The Davies Papers, which will be available only on the DDMI website, are organised into several distinct series: planned so far is the Forum Series, an Africa Series, and a Nuclear Series. A particular Paper might be a finished paper, work in progress, a presentation, an annotated bibliography, etc. Researchers interested in submitting proposals should contact Grant Dawson at gsd@aber.ac.uk.

The Davies Forum Series focuses on current issues in international politics. The actual Forums on which the Papers are based are open to the public, but are particularly geared towards students; the meetings seek to help students relate their studies to recent world events and encourage critical thinking and debate. The Forum Series publishes the opening remarks of the speakers, whose brief is to give a ten-minute presentation providing 'behind the headlines' background material, or advancing a distinct argument.

This number in the Forum series takes up the debate concerning terrorism and international politics. The tenth anniversary of 9/11 was the occasion for a great deal of discussion about the meaning of the decade for international affairs, relations between the West and Islam, the future of terrorism, and so on. The discussion at the Forum involved strong views on all sides concerning the scope and nature of the terrorist 'threat', the impact on societies being 'protected' from terrorism, and the effectiveness of counter-terrorism approaches.

The Davies Papers / Forum Series No. 1 publishes remarks made at the inaugural Forum held on 17 October 2011. The Davies Forum speakers – Dr Claudia Hillebrand and Professors Ken Booth and Richard Jackson – were invited to address the question: 'Should we still fear international terrorism?'

The presentations are in the order in which the contributors spoke:

'Should we still fear international terrorism?'

RICHARD JACKSON

My simple answer to this question is: No, in spite of the spectacular destruction seen on 9/11, we never should have feared terrorism, and we shouldn't fear it now. More importantly, I would argue that the fear of terrorism after 9/11 and the actions this fear induced have resulted in a fate far worse than anything terrorists could ever accomplish. To support this contention and elaborate further, I want to make a number of points.

First, using many decades of data on acts of terrorism, it is a fact that terrorists kill comparatively few people every year. While each death is a tragedy, the few hundred to a few thousand deaths from terrorism every year pale in comparison to the deaths caused by global poverty (more than 30,000 per day), small arms (half a million per year), diseases (millions per year), car accidents (two million per year), suicide, homicides, domestic abuse, crime and so on. Statistically speaking, lightening strikes, allergic reactions or DIY accidents are actually far more likely to kill you than an act of terrorism. The problem is that we live in world where some deaths (and therefore lives) are viewed as far more important than others: the women killed every week by violent partners are valued far less than the innocent victims of a terrorist attack, and will consequently receive far less media attention, academic attention and state preventive assistance. In a way, the fear of dying in a terrorist attack reflects deeper social values centred on security-based rather than human security values.

Second, it is another fact that terrorists can actually achieve very little politically or materially, most are highly incompetent, nor are there that many terrorists just waiting to attack. It is part of our cultural mythology, and media exaggeration and political scaremongering, to see the world as being inhabited by thousands of terrorists all fully capable of killing thousands in a single attack or being able to use devastating weapons of mass destruction. The reality is that terrorism as it is constructed in our collective imaginations is far more capable and fearsome than it is in reality, as most of the recent trials of quite inept terrorist plots demonstrate. These collective fears trap us in a state of ontological hysteria in which we are permanently waiting for terror. Although 9/11 was very destructive, it was an outlier event – an exception like the atomic attack on Japan – rather than an illustration of normal terrorist capability. Most academic studies these days have put paid to the idea that terrorists have either the capabilities or the motivation to use WMD. It is an extreme form of precautionary thinking to presume that they can, akin to assuming that they might one day build an earthquake machine to use against us (another threat that would be devastating in consequence but so unlikely that we shouldn't really expend a lot of effort in preventing it).

Third, it is important to point out that terrorists cannot destroy our way of life – but counter-terrorist reaction surely can. Terrorists can blow things up and occasionally kill people, but only the state or society they attack can choose to change their way of life in response. In other words, a terrorist attack can destroy some buildings and possibly kill and injure a number of people, but it takes conscious government decisions to enact new security measures and practices or change the law in such a way that it alters the way we live as a society. It is unfortunate that in response to the 9/11 attacks, virtually all countries have chosen to alter their legal practices, policing methods, and security measures, most often in ways that undermine and diminish existing human rights standards and ways of life.

Fourth, the reaction provoked by the fear of terrorism has had tremendous negative consequences in a range of areas. In brute terms, counter-terrorism has resulted in far more deaths and injuries than the original terrorism it was intended to counter, not to mention all those illegally rendered, tortured, imprisoned and abused by over-eager counter-terrorism officials all around the world. There is little doubt that the fear of terrorism and the measures aimed at mitigating that fear have led to massive human rights abuses in many countries, and a whole series of injustices against thousands of innocent people. From this perspective it is fair to say that we should fear counter-terrorism far more than we fear terrorism, because states are capable of (and have a long record of) committing vast abuses in the name of security and counter-terrorism.

Finally, the counter-terrorism measures provoked by the fear of terrorism have been a massive waste of resources because the 'reality' of the threat clearly does not warrant such levels of investment. It's like spending the entire health budget on flesh-eating diseases (which kill 1-2 people per year), instead of investing in measures to reduce heart disease and cancer (which kill tens of thousands of people per year). Hundreds of millions of dollars and the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers and hundreds of thousands of civilians have been wasted on measures and operations which were either unnecessary (because there was no terrorist threat in Iraq, for example) or counter-productive (because the military attacks provoked new acts of terrorism, such as the 7/7 bombings, for example). The vast sums spent on counter-terrorism could have been more effectively spent on reducing global poverty, arms control, de-mining, peace projects in Israel-Palestine, and the like. In this respect, counter-terrorism represents a massive opportunity cost and a missed chance to deal with some of the deeper issues which can cause political violence.

For all these reasons, I believe that we should resist the temptation to fear terrorism, and we should demand that our leaders take a more balanced, reasonable and responsible approach to the threat. At the very least, we should resist and question attempts to change our entire way of life in response to what is really a relatively minor threat to public safety.

CLAUDIA HILLEBRAND

In my view, we are still struggling to fully understand the changes that the focus on counter-terrorism since 9/11 has meant for the international community as well as individual states. We have seen a considerable degree of legal activism in the post-9/11 era. For example, only a handful of European countries had anti-terrorism legislation before the attacks in Washington and New York – now they all have it, even countries which have never experienced a terrorist incident on their territory. In the UK alone, there were the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001; the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005; the Terrorism Act 2006; and the Counter-Terrorism Act 2008, to mention just those Acts which are primarily focused on terrorism. Our understanding of the topic is further hampered by the fact that terrorism is a contested topic. In addition, counter-terrorism activities by police and intelligence authorities are a very secretive field and it is therefore difficult to access for outsiders.

Nevertheless, certain trends can be identified, the first one being the shift towards preventing terrorism. This can be seen in changes of mandate, powers and institutional structures of police forces and intelligence services. Yet several practices of preventive or proactive policing are highly problematic with respect to human rights and individual freedoms. But the events of 9/11 and thereafter have led to a shift of understanding of what 'acceptable costs' are in this context. Just two examples for this are the increased use of DNA databases – often including the storing of data of 'innocent' individuals – and the simplified access of law enforcement agencies to immigration databases. Also, recent Home Office statistics reveal that nearly 2,000 individuals were arrested as terror suspects in Britain between 11 September 2001 and autumn 2011. However, 1,070 of those arrested were released without charge and only 37% were charged with offences, including 280 for crimes that were not terrorist-related.

The second major trend is the considerable increase of executive, often intrusive powers. No government wants to be perceived as coddling terrorists in the post-9/11 era. The new or revamped executive powers have often been insufficiently accompanied by mechanisms of parliamentary and judicial scrutiny which would ensure a thorough examination of the necessity and proportionality of counter-terrorism measures. Yet, if oversight bodies are not equipped with sufficient powers or resources to scrutinise counter-terrorist activities, they cannot do their job properly.

Some counter-terrorism measures were simply introduced too quickly and ill thought out. Just one example is the lengthy struggle concerning the system of control orders in the UK. Yet we have seen some changes more recently. For example, researchers of the Center on Law and Security explored terrorist prosecutions in the US and noted an 'early practice of making high-profile arrests while prosecuting few terrorism charges' right after 9/11. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in terrorism-specific prosecutions. A second example is the use of stop and search powers in Britain, which was criticised sharply for being too intrusive and discriminative, and are now used in a more restricted manner.

The third major trend concerns the emergence of a range of new counter-terrorism actors, at all political levels. In particular, the international arena experienced the mushrooming of new, or strengthened, actors. Next to the rise of the UN as a counter-terrorism actor, the EU became very active in this field and pushed legislation of matters of policing and criminal justice, some of which were only vaguely related to terrorism.

There is an inherent danger of emphasising terrorism to the exclusion of other important security concerns. From an institutional perspective, the allocation of substantial funds to newly created terrorism units often led to the cutting of budgets elsewhere. Moreover, bureaucracies are stubborn beasts with a strong survival instinct. Once a counter-terrorism unit or centre has been created, it is likely to exist for a long time, even if the numbers of terrorist incidences will drop.

To conclude, I will answer the question of whether we should still fear international terrorism as follows: Yes, as a society we should be on our toes concerning political violence and terrorism. But this should not draw away our attention from other types of serious crime. A preoccupation with terrorism is dangerous and counter-productive. Moreover, we should also be on our toes concerning counter-terrorism. The period since 9/11 has provided ample examples of abuses of executive powers and these do not only violate certain rights and freedoms of individuals but they can also cause considerable damage to society in the long run.

KEN BOOTH

To be clear from the outset: I have no doubt that international terrorism remains a terrible threat to human society in a number of places around the world. We should indeed still fear it. But fear is a complex phenomenon. Paradoxically, perhaps, I think we should fear our own reactions to international terrorism more than we should fear the murderous attacks that are the business of international terrorism. I will try and clarify this by making five brief points:

First, the threat is real.

The will to kill is present on the part of international terrorist groups:

- Look at the failed terror 'spectaculars' (for example: the plot to bring down seven passenger aircraft over the Atlantic in 2006, and the December 2009 attempt to bring down a packed North Western flight over Detroit.)
- And look at the numerous terror successes in the recent past. There have been well over 100 mass casualty (50+) terrorist actions internationally since 9/11.

A pool of jihadists and potential jihadists still exists, and small numbers can do great damage. Al-Qaeda never won over the majority of the global Muslim population of 1.2 billion, but even the violent radicalisation of one Muslim person in a thousand still represents a huge army of jihadists internationally.

We cannot assume that Bin Laden's death is the end of him. Indeed, over the long term it might prove to have been easier to assassinate him – with all the risks and difficulties entailed - than it will prove finally to eliminate the ideas he embodied.

The war al-Qaeda declared against the United States was in the name of God, but it was embedded in political goals. The religious and political rationales remain for those whose life experiences of one sort or another make them susceptible to believe them.

It remains to be seen whether al-Qaeda's new leaders might demonstrate more strategic and tactical skill than previously. These are early days, but we are now clearly in a different stage of the struggle:

- Will al-Qaeda's shift in 2010 to 'micro-terrorism' ('death by a thousand cuts') prove more politically successful than the mass casualty terrorism that provoked such fear after 9/11?
- And will the franchising of al-Qaeda into smaller groups in more countries (such as Yemen and Somalia) create more agile opponents?

Second, the risks of international terrorism should never be discounted, because the consequences are potentially catastrophic.

Colleagues who are at the heart of the Critical Terrorism Studies project reassure us that the risks are very small. The recent book by Richard Jackson and others, for example (*Terrorism: a Critical Introduction*) tells us that the probability of death from international terrorism in the United States is 1:80,000, whereas the probability of death from falling down is 1:236.

This is no consolation. Deaths by terrorism are deliberate, political, simultaneous, and affect whole societies. Deaths by natural causes or accident are family-sized, sequential, and are not willed. Terror deaths - unlike slipping in a bathtub - spread general fear, undermine social trust, threaten political trauma, and inflict no 'moral injury'. Trying to compare everyday risks and political risks is almost meaningless in my opinion.

What can one say with certainty? When thinking about events like 9/11 what we can say is that low probability/high danger occurrences *always* require serious precautions. When the consequences may be catastrophic, serious attention is necessary, even if the probability is low.

Three, there is an important relationship between the probability of an attack and the security strategy and tactics of a potential target.

We must take precautions against terror attacks, even if we consider the risks low. In this regard, the major Western states have made many false moves, but there have been intelligence and counter-terrorism successes. Even those who want to play down the risks of terrorism (John Mueller for example) do not advocate dismantling security checks at airports, weakening nuclear safeguards and so on.

*Four, al-Qaeda still exists, but has been in steady decline for 5/6 years***.**

Al-Qaeda has made many headlines, but it has made many mistakes. These include the mayhem its supporters caused in Iraq by inflicting mass atrocities against fellow Muslims. It is not today the powerful global force some predicted in the few years after 2003. Its weakness – its ultimate weakness - has been its inability to persuade millions of ordinary Muslims of its call for terror in the name of God.

Whatever happens to the Arab spring – and it is struggling to become a real summer – it shows that the preferred way for Arab civil society is democracy rather than the manipulation of terror for political purposes.

Finally, we should fear our own fear more than we fear 'terrorism'.

9/11's significance was magnified by the globalised, militarised, sometimes illegal, and politically extremist responses by the most powerful governments – notably the United States and Great Britain.

We need to keep 'terrorism' as a political phenomenon in perspective. It can and does cause great hurt and disruption, but it is unlikely ever to overthrow a stable state or change any of the basic features of international politics.

Only we can destroy ourselves – not the terrorists. As President Roosevelt put it in 1933, the only thing it is mandatory to fear is 'fear itself', because fear can provoke unreason and lead to rash and counter-productive responses (We saw this in 2003. President Bush and Prime Minister Blair, by their invasion of Iraq, helped recruit more jihadis than Bin Laden ever did). As a result of their global war on terror – their reaction to 9/11 - the leading Western states became less secure and less free. In other words, our over-reactions are more deadly than the work of the actual terrorists.