Middle East Terrorism: New Form of Warfare or Mission Impossible?

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The Middle East has long proven to be the most dangerous source of terrorism in the international community. Over the past year there have been several painful events which raised the specter of terrorism against the United States and its interests. In June 1996, there was the bombing of the U.S. Air Force housing at the Khobar Towers complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia which resulted in 19 Americans killed and 260 wounded. In November 1995, the offices of the Project Manager Saudi Arabian National Guard (PMSANG) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia were bombed and six Americans lost their lives. On the 25 of February 1996, back-to-back bombs exploded aboard city buses in Jerusalem killing 44 Israeli citizens. The following week, bombs exploded in Askelon and in the crowded business district of downtown Tel Aviv killing an additional 33 Israeli citizens. The U.S. viewed the latter as attacks against an ally and against its interests in seeking a comprehensive Middle East peace. These events have heightened U.S. concern over terrorism and again raised calls to vigorously fight this modern plague. Some senior officials have referred to terrorism as a new form of warfare, but terrorism is not new. America has a fairly long history of facing terrorism: the Beirut Marine Barracks, TWA 857, Pan Am 103, the World Trade Center, the Federal building in Oklahoma City and has most recently faced the possibility that TWA flight 800 might have been destroyed by terrorist action.

This article argues that attempting to combat terrorism through military means alone is a mission impossible. Terrorism is not fundamentally a military problem; it is a political, social and economic problem. A military, by its nature, is not suitably structured, trained or equipped to defeat terrorism. Unfortunately, in many cases, the U.S. military and American citizens are the primary targets of terrorist strikes around the world. The military may be able to make contributions in the fight on terrorism, but should not lead the fight. The military's primary emphasis should be on force protection. The first sentence in the Army's Field Manual 100-37 *Terrorism Counteraction* states that "Army Doctrine and U.S. government policy do not indicate that there is a purely military solution to the threat of terrorism." This statement is endorsed by many historical precedents. These include: the demonstrated failure of the Israel Defense Forces (the most powerful military force in the Middle East) to prevent *Hamas* (Islamic Resistance

Movement) bomb attacks against Israeli citizens within Israel proper; to prevent or terminate the Palestinian uprising -- the *Intifada*; or to prevent *Hizb'allah* Katyusha attacks against northern Israel during Operation Grapes of Wrath; the inability of the British Army to deter terrorist actions by the Irish Republican Army either in northern Ireland or within Britain itself; and the inability of the United States to prevent the bombing of the Marine Corps barracks at Beirut airport, the PMSANG office in Riyadh, the Khobar Towers building in Dhahran or subsequently punish any of their culprits.[1]

The Department of Defense defines terrorism as:

> *The calculated use of violence or threat of violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.*[2]

This definition will serve adequately for the purposes of this article, but it should be noted that it is not universally accepted by all students of the field of terrorism. One of the biggest problems of terrorism is in its definition. Walter Laqueur argues, "Terrorism is used as a synonym for rebellion, street battles, civil strife, insurrection, rural guerilla war, coups d',tat, and a dozen other things. The indiscriminate use of the term not only inflates the statistics, it makes understanding the specific character of terrorism and how to cope with it more difficult."[3] One volume on political terrorism contains more than 120 different definitions.[4] Terrorism is generally so broadly defined that any act of violence could fall under it. The key is in who is defining it. This harkens back to the old adage that *one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.*

As an exercise in mental gymnastics, one could take the case of Lebanon's *Hizb'allah* (Party of God). The Israelis vehemently call this organization a terrorist organization for its attacks upon Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers in southern Lebanon. However, according to a reasonable interpretation of International Law, *Hizb'allah's* attacks on Israeli soldiers in southern Lebanon are legal.[5] Conquest as a method of acquiring title to territory is prohibited by Article 4(2) of the United Nations Charter. Paragraph four, Article 1 of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) (adopted 8 June 1977) legitimizes armed conflicts in which peoples "*are fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist regimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.*" Under this definition, *Hizb'allah* attacks on the IDF in southern Lebanon, it could be argued, are not terrorism, but guerilla warfare. This same legal rationale could apply to Palestinian attacks on the IDF and Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip -- the Palestinians are merely opposing an illegal occupation. Palestinian attacks against Israeli citizens within Israel proper; however, must certainly be considered terrorism.

Terrorism is generally a low cost, low risk, high leverage, high payoff proposition for those employing it. It is a surrogate for war, but not a synonym for war. It provides impact for weak players against states or stronger powers. Terrorists have a number of advantages over larger forces: the element of surprise, a generally restricted area of operations (AOR), intimate knowledge of their AOR, a nominal support base within their AOR, simple short-range communications and a very high "tooth to tail" ratio

Figure 1 - Khobar Towers, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia

owing to austere logistics requirements. Most important, the terrorist largely has a monopoly on the offensive; he determines who or what is attacked, when, where and how. By preference, terrorists attack soft, weak, unprepared and unprotected targets. Terrorists generally avoid decisive engagements; striking quickly and departing before the authorities can respond -- effectively extending their life expectancy.

Terrorism can be employed for a variety of objectives: coercion, retaliation, revenge, religion, crime, media coverage, propaganda. Chalmers Johnson proposes four simple typologies for the genus terrorism: *ethnic* (including religious, linguistic, regional, or other particularistic movements), *nationalistic* (irredentist or anticolonial), *ideological* (including anarchist, radical leftist, orthodox communist, extreme rightist and others) and *pathological* (groups that attack public targets for apparently private, biographical reasons -- such as the Manson gang).[6] The goals of terrorism differ across the Middle East, but are primarily religious, ethnic and nationalistic. In the Palestinian occupied territories, terrorism is anti-occupation (anti-Israel) and somewhat religious[7] oriented. In the Lebanese Levant terrorism is religious, anti-occupation, anti-Israel, and anti-Western[8] in orientation. In Egypt and North Africa it is religious, anti-government[9], anti-colonial[10], and somewhat anti-Western. In the Gulf region it is anti-government, religious oriented, anti-U.S.[11] and anti-Western. Currently threats to U.S. citizens and interests are highest in the Gulf followed by Lebanon. As demonstrated over the past year, Americans are now being explicitly targeted in Saudi Arabia as they were in the 1980s and could again be in Lebanon. Terrorism in the Palestinian occupied territories and in North Africa has not yet explicitly targeted Americans.

The United States generally embraces a law enforcement approach to terrorism. Terrorism is evil irrespective of the cause and the causes need not complicate condemnation of terror nor encourage dialogue.

> "*. . . the grievances that [terrorists] supposedly seek to redress through acts of violence may or may not be legitimate. The terrorist acts themselves, however, can never justify or excuse terrorism. Terrorist means discredit their ends.*"[12]

Nevertheless, for the analyst, the causes and the motivations for terrorism are important because they give insights into the terrorist group's intentions and targets. Without such insights, determining terrorist intentions and targets becomes an exercise in pure guess work. Contrary to the pronouncements of some governments in the Middle East, who believe terrorism to be a spontaneous evil, there are precipitate causes for terrorism: for the Palestinians, 29 years of occupation, settlement and land expropriation by the Israelis; for the Lebanese, sectarian differences, the occupation of Lebanese territory and the killing of Lebanese civilians by Israelis; for Saudi dissidents, the perceived corruption of the Saudi Royal family, its refusal to expand political participation and violations of human rights (which they believe to be supported and encouraged by the United States). There is a direct correlation between some governmental activity and the resulting terrorism. When Israeli police assassinate a suspected Palestinian terrorist or declare an intention to expropriate Palestinian land for new Jewish settlements, terrorism is likely to follow. When the Israel Defense Forces attack Lebanese villages in response to a *Hizb'allah* provocation, Katyushas are likely to be fired into northern Israel. When the Saudis arrest, imprison and reportedly abuse a dissident Muslim *Imam,* a response is likely.

In its fight against terrorism, the United States is ill-positioned to prevent Middle East governments from pursuing policies and actions, which could precipitate terrorist acts. This leads to a problem of proximity -- if the U.S. is perceived to accept or encourage such government action it too can become the target of terrorist activity as, to some extent, has been the case in Saudi Arabia. Perceptions of offense, such as the failure to support expanded political participation in a traditional monarchy, an equivocal support for human rights or even participating in joint military exercises with a government perceived by the dissidents as corrupt can be very precipitous and raise the level of threat to Americans in the region. Routine U.S. policy can sometimes exacerbate this threat. In the Gulf region, the U.S. is strongly criticized for its unreserved support of authoritarian regimes and strong preference for the *status quo* over change.

There are numerous systemic reasons why conventional military capabilities are largely ineffective in preventing or defeating terrorism:[13] the asymmetries between conventional warfare and terrorism are profound; the organizational structure of terrorism is significantly below the "threshold of significance" easily addressed by conventional military forces -- identification of the terrorist perpetrators is a daunting challenge; terrorist doctrine is ad hoc and opportunistic; the terrorist chain of command is amorphous; terrorist logistics are small scale; and intelligence requirements differ significantly.

Asymmetry is the key to the effectiveness of terrorism. Terrorism provides a small group the means to successfully attack a larger force (or authority) which it could not engage in direct combat. Realistically, one man with sufficient resources could comprise a terrorist group. Terrorists select the time, place and targets for their attacks. Terrorist actions are generally short duration activities which do not allow authorities sufficient time to effectively respond. A strong military force, by itself, does not deter terrorism -- in point of fact, terrorism has developed as a

response to strong governmental powers. Doctrine, equipment and the advanced technologies of the larger army do not provide it any advantages in confronting or preventing terrorist action. Table 1 contrasts the asymmetries between conventional warfare and irregular or terrorist warfare.[14]

Contrasting Dimensions of War

Modern	Irregular
Organized	Informal
Advanced Technology	At-hand technology
Logistics dependent	Logistics independent
National direction	Local direction
Coherent doctrine	Ad hoc doctrine
Decisive battle	Raids and skirmishes
Soldier	Warrior
Allies	Accomplices
Segregation	Integration

In the last 10 to 15 years, there has been a "changing of the guard" in Middle East terrorism from nominally left-wing, Marxist/socialist, secular terrorist groups to Islamic terrorist groups. Most terrorist groups in the Middle East today are based on an Islamic ideology. There are a few of the left over secular, Marxist Palestinian groups such as George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), but most of the secular Marxist groups were discredited and disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union.[15] One aspect of this Islamic trend has been the inclusion of "transnational" Islamic extremists -- veterans of the fighting in Afghanistan, with combat experience, who have joined terrorist groups in various countries around the region. Many scholars believe that the levels of violence associated with "holy" terror will be much higher than that of their secular counterparts. According to them, the secular groups used to set limits on their targets, excluding targets such as women and children that they believed would be counterproductive to their cause. In contrast, religious groups believe they have a divine mission and that their actions are morally justified and necessary. The killing of the enemies of God becomes a religious commandment. For them, the ends justify the means. This attitude could justify limitless violence on target groups outside of their own religion.

Ideological and targeting guidance appears to come from a layer of Islamic religious leaders within the local community. These holy men make political pronouncements and condemnations during their public and cassette-recorded sermons which appear to encourage and inspire actions by the terrorist cells. These sermons can be extremely vague in nature; leaving the terrorist to interpret its message as he likes. The religious leaders are probably aware of what they are doing,

but given some measure of deniability by the vagueness of their message. One of the most prominent examples of this technique is the Egyptian Sheikh Omar al-Rahman. Rahman was tried and acquitted in Egypt after the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat for preaching that Sadat should die. Many Egyptian authorities believed his pronouncements led to Sadat's assassination. Rahman was later tried and convicted by American authorities as an instigator of the World Trade Center bombings for the preaching of sermons promoting violence against the United States.

In the late 1960s through the 1980s, many scholars of terrorism believed that terrorist organizations (the secular, Marxist type groups mentioned above) were comprised of a hierarchal structure which was functionally oriented to provide the terrorist organization with planning, operations, command and control, logistics, recruitment, and propaganda. Structures such as this proved to be fairly vulnerable to penetration by governmental police and intelligence organizations -- to the terminal detriment of the terrorists. The trend today in the Islamic groups seems to be to cellular structures that are fairly small, ad hoc, quasi-independent, self-contained organizations with very high levels of cohesion.[16] This cellular structure provides safeguards against penetration or compromise by governmental authorities in that any one member captured could not identify more than a few of his colleagues. Security is a primary organizing principle. Realistically these terrorist cells can consist of three to four (or fewer) individuals. In many cases, these groups are comprised of members of a single family or very close friends. The organization of these groups is fairly amorphous. There may be no explicit leader. These groups may be comprised to attack specific types of targets or conceivably only one target. Confounding the problem of group identification further, many of the smaller terrorist groups may subscribe to the objectives of a larger more well known terrorist organization while not having direct membership. They may attribute their attacks to this larger group even though there are no direct operational connections. This claim of membership bolsters their prestige, credibility and self-esteem. It also occurs because the larger organizations see benefit in the practice and don't discourage it.

Terrorist groups tend to be comprised of free lance amateurs without much formal training or doctrine. There is usually little demonstrated tactical innovation in most terrorist attacks. The weapons of choice are the bomb and the gun. Doctrinal training conducted in the Middle East usually consists of inspirational talks and basic training in the use of small arms and explosives. The majority of this training seems to be conducted in Iran, Lebanon, the Sudan and possibly Afghanistan.

Bruce Hoffman holds that the frequency of various types of terrorist attacks is in direct proportion to the complexity of the attack or the sophistication required.[17] The terrorist preference is for easy, uncomplicated strikes. Hoffman cites that, aggregate over time (1968-1993), bombings have constituted 46 percent of terrorist attacks, attacks on installations (with small arms) 22 percent, hijacking 12 percent, assassination 6 percent and kidnaping 1 percent. Concern is increasingly being raised over the possibilities of terrorist attacks using weapons of mass destruction -- chemical, biological and nuclear. These are still considered low probability/high impact attack scenarios because they greatly increase the technical requirements and financial resources needed by the terrorist groups. Most terrorist groups do not yet have the resources for these types of weapons. As demonstrated by the *Aum Shinrikyo* cult chemical

attacks against the Tokyo subway, chemical weapons will probably be the initial threat in this series in the not too distant future.[18]

Guns and bombs will remain the weapons of choice for terrorists in the foreseeable future. These weapons are easily acquired -- the Middle East is awash with uncontrolled weapons, ammunition and explosive ordinance. As such, terrorist logistical needs are generally small and they have few problems in acquiring the weapons they need. The bomb used on the World Trade Center (similar to that used in Oklahoma City) was created by mixing fertilizer materials (urea nitrate) and diesel fuel and cost only around $400. As demonstrated in Somalia, disarming the local population and the terrorists may be an impossible task. As long as the terrorists can maintain the sympathies of the local populations, the support necessary will continue.

The traditional focus of military intelligence (at the Corps, Division and Brigade levels) is on military capabilities through analysis of order of battle, force deployment, force and weapons capabilities, doctrine, technical exploitation (COMINT, SIGINT, ELINT, etc) and post-strike assessment.[19] This focus is inappropriate against terrorism.[20] The measurement of the capabilities of a terrorist is generally well below the threshold of conventional military intelligence assets *per se* as they could reasonably consist of no more than a few rifles and several pounds of explosives. The two or three perpetrators of the Oklahoma City bombing demonstrate the nature of the problem -- none of the national or local intelligence agencies detected their preparations or intentions. The intelligence focus needed against terrorism would more appropriately focus on terrorist group identification and group **intention** and would need to track movements of very small quantities of weapons and explosives, local political alignments and alliances, their goals and objectives, identify and monitor disaffected and radicalized individuals, and assess the influence of the local religious leadership. Unfortunately, accurate assessments of intention have never been a strong suit for military intelligence. The intelligence requirements for countering terrorism are strongly focused on human intelligence collection -- more closely associated with in-country law enforcement organizations.

The problem of intelligence against terrorism is further complicated for the United States by the fact that most, if not all, of the states in the Middle East are not going to allow U.S. intelligence assets to operate unrestricted in their territory. As has been recently noted in Saudi Arabia, these countries are probably not going to be open and forthcoming in intelligence sharing when such sharing would expose internal weaknesses they would prefer left secret.

The conclusions derived from the assessments above is that the likelihood of preventing or defeating terrorism through conventional military means is remote. However, this does not mean that the U.S. military needs to continue to be a target. Effective force protection programs can deny the terrorists the possibilities of a successful strike against U.S. military personnel. Terrorists prefer to attack soft, weak and unprotected targets. The trick is not to be a soft, weak, unprotected target. Antiterrorism measures consist of defensive

. . . we can only reduce, and not eliminate, the risk.

Former Secretary of Defense William Perry
Prepared comments to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 9 July 1996

measures to reduce the vulnerability of personnel and property. These include physical security, operational security and personal protective measures. Passive defenses include guards, barriers, fences, restricted access control points, facility stand-off space and sensors. Innovative technologies should be directed toward this task. Active measures include intelligence and analysis. Intelligence needs to be oriented to providing tactical warning -- a very difficult, although perhaps not impossible task. U.S. military personnel must adopt a long-term mind set to force protection which includes continuous, methodological, innovative, non-linear thinking and planning. Leaders must overestimate the threat and plan for a wide range of threat contingencies because the terrorists they are facing are determined and will continue to "raise the bar" on attack possibilities to achieve success.

Endnotes

1. One possible exception to this assessment, worthy of study, might be the successes of the French Army against the Algerian insurrection in the 1960s, but the resulting moral repercussions over France's brutal tactics made this a rather hollow victory. Argentina and Chile might also be worthy of study. BACK

2. Department of Defense Directive 0-2000.12, p. 2-2.BACK

3. Walter Laqueur, "Terrorism -- A Balance Sheet." *The Terrorism Reader: A Historical Anthology*. New York. Meridian. 1978. p. 262.BACK

4. Alex P. Schmid, Ed. *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide to Concepts, Theories, Data Bases and Literature* (New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 1983).BACK

5. See W.T. Mallison and R.A. Jabri, "The Juridical Characteristics of Belligerent Occupation and the Resort to Resistance by the Civilian Population: Doctrinal Development and Continuity," *The George Washington Law Review*, January 1974, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 185-221.BACK

6. Chalmers Johnson, "Interpretations of Terrorism," in Walter Laqueur, Ed. *The Terrorist Reader*. p. 274.BACK

7. Seeking to establish an Islamic government based of *Shariah* -- Islamic law.BACK

8. Reflective of concerns over Western (primarily American) political and cultural influence.BACK

9. Believes current government corrupt, unworthy to rule and/or without legitimacy.BACK

10. Directed primarily against France for it support and assistance to the Algerian military and the perception that France's historical influence in Algeria contributed to or precipitated the problems.BACK

11. Believing that the U.S. is "propping up" Saudi Arabia's perceived corrupt regime, exploiting Gulf oil resources and corrupting the Islamic holy sites (Mecca and Medina) by its presence.BACK

12. George Shultz, "Terrorism in the Modern World," *Terrorism: An International Journal*, Vol. 7 Num 4, 1985, pp. 431-47.BACK

13. The U.S. does maintain a highly trained cadre of Special and unconventional forces which are the instrument of choice to be employed in terrorist hostage or hijack situations, but these type of long duration situations are fairly infrequent because of the heightened risks to the terrorists. These special forces, like conventional forces, cannot prevent the random bombings or ambushes common in terrorist attacks today.BACK

14. This chart was developed by Jeffrey B. White in *A Different Kind of Threat: Some Thoughts in Irregular Warfare*, p. 5, an excellent monograph contained on the Director of Central Intelligence Home Page at URL: http://www.odci.gov/csi/studies/96unclas/iregular.htm. Please see Mr. White's monograph for a fuller explanation of his terms.BACK

15. There continues to be a third type of terrorist organization in the Middle East which are the nationalist/irredentist type. This group includes groups such as the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) which have conducted attacks in Turkey and in Western Europe pressing their demand to establish a Kurdish home land. These groups have not been addressed in this article because to date they have not been a direct threat to U.S. personnel or property.BACK

16. See Bruce Hoffman, *Responding to Terrorism Across the Technological Spectrum*, a monograph prepared for the U.S. Army War College Fifth Annual Conference of Strategy, April 1994, p. 7 and Walter Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1996, Vol. 75, Num.5, p. 34.BACK

17. Hoffman, *Responding to Terror*, p. 3.BACK

18. Reportedly, USSOCOM has been directed to focus on the military aspects of WMD involved terrorism.BACK

19. See Jeffrey B. White, *Some Thoughts*, pp. 1,9.BACK

20. It should be noted that National level intelligence agencies have been given a mandate to address terrorism as has the SOF community. Many new organizational structures and operational procedures have been developed to focus on the problem. Unfortunately, it appears that there is still a lot of work to be done.BACK

Much about new President Donald Trump's approach remains uncertain, but aggressive counter-terrorism operations for now dominate his administration's policy across the Muslim world. Protecting U.S. citizens from groups that want to kill them must, of course, be an imperative for American leaders. But since the 9/11 attacks a decade and a half ago, too narrow a focus on counter-terrorism has often distorted U.S. policy and at times made the problem worse. Though the influence of European leaders and the European Union (EU) on Arab politics and U.S. counter-terrorism policy has limits, they are likely to be asked to bankroll reconstruction efforts across affected regions. They could use this leverage to Middle East Terrorism: New Form of Warfare or Mission Impossible? by Stephen H. Gotowicki, May-Jun 1997 (FMSO). Patterns of Global Terrorism, annual report by the U.S. Department of State: 2001 Report, May 2002 (US DOS). 2000 Report, April 2001 (US DOS). Terrorism and the Military's Role in Domestic Crisis Management by the Congressional Research Service, 18 Jun 2001 (FAS) (.pdf). strikes of 11 September 2001 and response: America's Lost database of names of those killed or missing compiled by Newsday.com (Newsday.com). America's War against Terrorism by the University of Michigan, 2002 (Univ. of Michigan). Knowledge networks of knowledge workers, the newest form of institutional structure, emerged and their numbers increased in tandem with the availability of the tools of information technology. As information technology advanced, information systems allowed knowledge, or knowhow, to make all the other institutional forms more effective.3. Warfare is the set of all lethal and nonlethal activities undertaken to subdue the hostile will of an adversary or enemy. When the security forces of a state engage an enemy state in warfare, the government determines the specific nonhostile behaviors sought from the adversary. When other groups--guerrillas, gangs, clans--engage in warfare, the group leader decides the specific nonhostile behaviors sought.