

TERRORISM: THE WAR OF THE FUTURE

Dov Waxman

Bill Clinton's presidency is likely to be chiefly remembered for two things: the Lewinsky affair and terrorism. While the first may be more memorable, the second is clearly of more importance and consequence for the United States and the world at large. Over the past six years, terrorist atrocities have gripped public attention as their horrific images have filled our newspapers, television sets and minds. Indeed, the specter of terrorism now hangs over our public and political life as never before.

Just weeks after taking office, President Clinton had to respond to an event that sent waves of shock and fear around the nation: the bombing of New York's World Trade Center on February 26, 1993. Six people died and thousands were injured in what was the worst act of international terrorism on American soil. However, even then the authorities were to count themselves lucky. Investigators later revealed that the perpetrators, Mahmud Abouhalima and Ramzi Yousef, disciples of the radical Egyptian Islamist preacher Sheik Abdel-Rahman, had intended to kill up to 250,000 people. They had also planned to bomb the Holland Tunnel connecting New York and New Jersey, as well as other sites in New York City.¹ Soon after, the nation was once again confronted with international terrorism as an Iraqi attempt to assassinate former President Bush in Kuwait was foiled. The President swiftly retaliated by ordering cruise missile strikes on Baghdad. The message was clear: America would not be a passive victim, it would fight fire with fire. Nonetheless, while air strikes were an option in reacting to an act of state-sponsored terrorism such as Iraq's, they were of no use in responding to what was to come.

On April 19, 1995, a massive explosion devastated the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 169 people, among them children attending a day care center in the building. As Americans' shock and disbelief turned to rage and anger, fingers quickly pointed to Islamic radicals who were now becoming synonymous to terrorism. Yet when it later emerged that, contrary to widespread suspicions, the attack had been carried out by an American Gulf War veteran, Timothy McVeigh, the American public had to come to terms with the fact that terrorism had not only transplanted itself onto American territory—as in the case of the World Trade Center bombing—but it had actually grown up

Dov Waxman is a Ph.D. candidate in International Relations at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) of The Johns Hopkins University. He also works as a researcher at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), an independent public policy research institute based in Washington, DC. He has published a number of monographs and articles on Middle Eastern affairs.

on American soil. The existence of domestic terrorism and a widespread network of right-wing militias compounded the fear and anxiety already generated by international terrorism and the networks of fanatics worldwide. Americans were used to fighting battles in Europe or Asia: danger had always lain in foreign lands. Now, for the first time, the danger had come home, and the battle was to be fought in the American heartland. Moreover, in the case of right-wing extremists such as Timothy McVeigh, the enemy was not a foreign agent, but "one of us."

The existence of terrorism in the United States is far from new. Terrorism first seized the headlines in the United States with the Haymarket Square bombing in 1886, followed by the Los Angeles Times bombing in 1910, the San Francisco Preparedness Day bombing in 1916 and the Wall Street bombing in 1920. Yet there appears to be something qualitatively different about the type of terrorism that we have been witnessing recently, both in its means and its ends. Dubbed by security experts as "new terrorism," it is this breed of violence that keeps them awake at night and conjures up apocalyptic scenarios in their minds. In the security and defense planning centers of Washington, DC, and capitals around the world, a new type of threat is anxiously discussed, and plans to counter it are hastily drawn up.

In the past, terrorist groups used violence in order to draw attention to their political agenda. Bombings, kidnappings or hijackings were propaganda tools, a means of promoting a political cause. This cause may have been a Marxist revolutionary one, as in the case of the Red Brigades in Italy and the Red Army Fraction in Germany, or a nationalist liberationist one as with the Palestine Liberation Organization, the African National Congress and the Irish Republican Army in their militant heydays. All these groups were engaged in the politics of terror, that is, their aims were overtly political. The latter three organizations, in particular, maintained political wings which sought to enter the political process. In all three cases, they have been willing to forsake violence and don the mantle of respectability in return for a place at the bargaining table. Since their ultimate aim was to attain political power and legitimacy, their use of violence was tailored to this end. They could not afford to alienate the broader social groups in whose name they acted, nor could they afford to entirely alienate the international community at large, to which they sought. In short, their political agenda determined, and at times curtailed, their use of violence.

The terrorists of today, whether Timothy McVeigh or Osama bin Laden, the alleged mastermind of the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, appear to recognize no such limits in their use of violence. What connects the likes of McVeigh with bin Laden is that neither has a clearly discernible political agenda. Their aims are diffuse and vague, often amounting to no more than a general revulsion against the state of society and the world and a desire to exact revenge and express their radical and lethal protest. According to Bruce Hoffman, a prominent U.S. expert on terrorism, the common feature of this new terrorism is "amorphous religious and millenarian aims" and "vehemently anti-government forms of populism, reflecting far-fetched conspiracy notions."² Their anger is directed not only against a political system, but against social and cultural ones as well. Their protest is general, and so are

the targets of their attacks. In the past, terrorists' targets were often political or military, and civilian victims were merely caught in the crossfire. Today, however, indiscriminate killing appears to be the goal rather than the byproduct of terrorism. Everyone is a potential target. Moreover, terrorists have no scruples as to how many people they kill or maim.

As terrorists' targets have increased, so too has their ability to strike at those targets. While the ends of terrorism become increasingly diffuse, the means available to them are becoming increasingly destructive. This is the chilling fact about "new terrorism." There is a horrifying symmetry between the proliferation of terrorists who seek mass destruction and the proliferation of weapons that can accomplish it. Weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical and biological—are the ultimate accessories for the "new terrorist." They promise the ability to deliver on the terrorist's apocalyptic threats, and they help to level the playing field. The arms that terrorists traditionally had at their disposal—high explosives, hand grenades, machine guns—have never been a match for those of the security forces who were fighting them. In contrast, the possession of one "suitcase" nuclear bomb, a stockpile of chemical weapons or even a test-tube of a biological agent is enough to offset the huge discrepancy in conventional arms. A single terrorist, armed with such deadly materials, could hold an entire nation and its government hostage. Even the threat of their use may be sufficient to extract concessions from a government. Which government would risk the lives of tens, if not hundreds of thousands of its civilians in order to stand firm in the face of terrorist demands?

This is not idle speculation. The use of the poison gas sarin in a Tokyo subway in March 1995 by the Aum Shinrikyo religious cult killed 12 and injured 5,000, although the fatalities could have been much higher. Later discoveries by the police that the group had stockpiled enough sarin to kill millions and had intended, in the words of its leader Shoko Asahara, to eradicate major cities in Japan, underlines the danger new terrorism poses. There have been numerous failed attempts by terrorists to use chemical and biological weapons both in the United States and abroad.³ They have involved hydrogen cyanide, VX nerve gas, anthrax, bubonic plague bacteria, typhoid bacteria and even possibly the ebola virus. The successful use of just one of these deadly substances or agents is enough to wipe out hundreds of thousands of people and leave vast areas uninhabitable. Experts fear that it is just a matter of time before terrorists overcome the technical difficulties in storing and distributing these weapons. In addition, although nuclear weapons have not yet featured in the terrorists' armory, their possible availability on the Russian black market is a further cause for concern. Indeed, Harvard University Professor Graham Allison, a specialist on nuclear proliferation, regards nuclear terrorism as the most serious security threat facing the United States today.⁴

The possibility of terrorists employing weapons of mass destruction has catapulted terrorism high up on the national security agenda in the United States. As long as the casualties of terrorist attacks remain in the tens or hundreds, they are a mere human tragedy, and nothing more than a thorn in the side of American power and prestige. As an issue of national security such attacks are

low on the list. Yet, as the catastrophic potential of terrorism exponentially increases, so too does its importance for national security. The lethality of weapons of mass destruction and the numerous possibilities for terrorists to acquire them has dramatically magnified the threat that terrorism presents.

This fact is reflected in the public pronouncements of senior government officials. The most dramatic sign yet of the new priority accorded to terrorism in U.S. national security policy came in August 1998 with the American air strikes against camps in Afghanistan and an alleged chemical weapons factory in Sudan connected with Osama bin Laden. Allegedly, bin Laden was responsible for the embassy bombings in East Africa, and U.S. authorities believed he may plan more anti-American attacks in his self-declared war against the United States. Although air strikes in response to terrorism are not new—Ronald Reagan's bombing of Libya in 1986 in retaliation for that country's role in the killing of two American servicemen in a Berlin disco comes to mind—the statements made in the wake of the air strikes by President Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Secretary of Defense William Cohen all stressed both the severity and the novelty of contemporary terrorism. They heralded the American air strikes as part of an ongoing "war on terrorism," which is, in the words of Madeleine Albright, "the war of the future."⁵

If the United States is indeed entering "the war of the future," then some important issues need to be addressed. First, we must ask what such a war will involve. In answer to this question, analysts point to the recent air strikes as an example of what to expect in the future. While it is likely that there are more of such military responses to come, they will not always be possible. Compare the President's aggressive action in August 1998 with his response to the bombing of the U.S. military compound in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia in June 1996. Although more U.S. citizens died in Dhahran, the fact that the attack occurred in Saudi Arabia, an important U.S. ally, restricted the President's freedom of action. Diplomatic considerations dictated a more cautious response. In the case of Sudan and Afghanistan, neither of these regimes was previously on good terms with the United States nor could they count on much support elsewhere. Thus, the diplomatic costs of military action were significantly lower. There is no guarantee that in the future the United States will have such a clear target for retaliation. There may not even be a discernible target at all. The investigation of the embassy bombings seemed to have produced compelling evidence about who the perpetrator was. Such evidence is not always forthcoming, nor does it always point in one direction, as the Dhahran bombing again suggests. Moreover, while it is psychologically reassuring to be able to point the finger of blame at a particular individual, such as Osama bin Laden or Sheik Abdel-Rahman, behind such men lie diffuse and shadowy networks of activists and sympathizers, many of whom may be implicated, directly or indirectly. The enemy in the "war on terrorism" is not just these notorious individuals but an amorphous, largely invisible mass. How can a government fight such an invisible enemy?

There is a real danger that the American public may now come to expect military action in response to any terrorist attack against U.S. interests or citizens.

Failure to do so may cause the President to appear weak before his domestic constituencies. Yet the use of force could strain relationships with important allies and undermine international law—notwithstanding the American claim to be acting in self-defense. Thus international support for such U.S. actions may be more and more difficult to muster. The United States may be the world's only superpower, but even a superpower cannot fight terrorism alone. The increasingly transnational nature of terrorism means that it can only be tackled transnationally, requiring the cooperation of many states, all of whom jealously guard their national sovereignty. Unilateralism on the part of the United States engenders few supporters worldwide and alienates many. President Clinton recognizes the need for interstate coordination in fighting terrorism and has assiduously worked to build up an international consensus on such matters. However, the incentive for other states to punish an act of terrorism committed against the United States is naturally much weaker than for the United States itself. This is a problem that will remain no matter how many foreign leaders vehemently condemn terrorism and recognize in principle the threat they all face.

In this respect, the Clinton administration's recent efforts to expand the ambit of NATO's activities to include counter-terrorism are likely to encounter difficulties. Although Article Five of the NATO Founding Charter prescribes joint action by members of the alliance against an aggressor, such a commitment was drawn up with the Soviet threat in mind. Not only is there no longer a potential Soviet aggressor today, but, in the case of terrorism, the potential aggressor may not be another state or even a group linked to one. Advocates of an expanded role for NATO in fighting terrorism argue that such a role is necessary to ensure NATO's continued relevance in the new post-Cold War international environment. While this may well be true, it remains to be seen how NATO's strategic doctrine and organizational structure can be adapted to suit this new role. Moreover, the objections already voiced by some NATO members—most notably France—toward “out-of-area operations” will surely become more vociferous if NATO's counter-terrorism activities extend across the globe.

Ultimately, the Clinton administration's call for greater burden-sharing within the Atlantic Alliance is limited both by the disproportionate threat terrorism poses to the United States, and by American reluctance to share its intelligence capabilities with its allies. Other NATO members are unlikely to engage willingly in military operations against suspected terrorists, if they are unable to verify U.S. intelligence sources. The United States may have the most sophisticated and extensive intelligence-gathering capabilities available, but they are far from infallible, as the doubts raised over the U.S. bombing of the pharmaceutical factory in Sudan suggest.⁶ Why should other NATO states be willing to take the United States at its word, especially if in doing so they risk the lives of their own nationals? If the Clinton administration is genuinely committed to burden-sharing within the NATO alliance, it will have to accept sharing its intelligence capacities with its allies. Therefore, multilateral action against terrorism, whether by NATO or any other international grouping, remains a desirable goal, yet one that will be difficult to achieve.

Even when unilateral military action by the United States is feasible, it is seldom popular in all parts of the world and fuels anti-American sentiment in some countries. This would be greatly aggravated if a mistake occurred and large numbers of foreign civilians were killed. One only needs to recall the outrage of the international community when the Israeli military mistakenly bombed Lebanese civilians in a U.N. refugee camp in an attempt to retaliate against rocket attacks in Northern Israel by Hizbollah terrorists. If the Israelis with their advanced hi-tech military weaponry made such a tragic mistake, there is no reason to believe that the United States would not commit similar mistakes. Even without human or technical error, civilian casualties—"collateral damage" in the coldly clinical language of military planners—are almost inevitable. In every war civilians are caught in the crossfire, and a war against terrorism will not be an exception. This is an eventuality for which the American public will have to be prepared.

Perhaps the real risk in this regard is the impact that a war on terrorism might have on the United States' six million Muslims. If the targets of U.S. attacks are in Muslim countries and the casualties are overwhelmingly Muslim, this is bound to provoke concern amongst America's Muslim population. The perception that the United States is victimizing Muslims may bolster the support of some radical Islamist movements both at home and abroad and lead to a dangerous radicalization of the Muslim community. This might also come about if American Muslims feel themselves to be the subject of heightened suspicion, distrust and discrimination. In the three days following the Oklahoma City bombing, an anti-defamation group recorded 222 attacks against Muslims. Such attacks may well escalate if the United States becomes mired in a long and bloody campaign with Islamic terrorist organizations.

The broader and more fundamental challenge in this respect is to reconcile the necessity of combating terrorism with the constitutional, legal and ethical demands of a democratic state. The experience of democratic countries such as Britain, Spain and Israel in their long struggle against terrorism testifies to the difficulty of this challenge. In its fight against the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the British government has restricted the dissemination of information, forbidden the wearing of badges and uniforms supportive of terrorist groups and prohibited membership in designated terrorist organizations. Until recently, British authorities even banned the broadcasting of "the words of any speaker" who claimed to be a spokesman for the IRA or who supported terrorism, and issued informal guidelines to the British Broadcasting Corporation to portray the IRA unsympathetically and to support the government's position relatively uncritically.⁷ Spain and Israel provide even more disturbing examples, as there are documented cases of lengthy internments of suspected terrorists without trial, the use of physical force to extract information and confessions from them while in custody, and even the sanctioning of extra-judicial killings. According to Martin van Creveld, an Israeli expert on warfare, "when you fight terrorism, you become a terrorist."⁸ The temptation to compromise the rule of law and civil liberties when confronting terrorism is therefore a powerful one. The United States thus risks engaging itself in a struggle to promote the values of freedom and democracy abroad, while undermining those same values at home. If the cost of winning a war on

terrorism is the erosion of domestic liberties, one must ask whether this is a price worth paying.

Civil liberties groups in the United States are already protesting against the Department of Defense's recent proposal to establish a permanent task force, headed by a military general officer, to coordinate the military's response to a chemical or biological weapons attack within the United States. Fearful of the danger of "mission creep," civil rights activists warn against the encroachment of the military in civilian emergency response, law enforcement and health agencies.⁹ Such protests are an indication of what to expect if the battleground in the war on terrorism is the U.S. homeland itself. The impact of a war on terrorism upon domestic civil liberties, however, is more likely to manifest itself gradually than overnight. A state of suspicion may prevail rather than an abruptly declared state of emergency, such as depicted in the film "The Siege"—Hollywood's latest offering of terrorism-induced hysteria. The democratic costs may therefore be incremental and drawn out.

More obvious and immediate are the economic costs of fighting the war on terrorism. In his fiscal budget for the year 2000, President Clinton earmarked U.S.\$10 billion for counter-terrorism activities—deterrence, prevention and preparedness. Already, more than U.S.\$2 billion have been poured into counter-terrorism since the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.¹⁰ The Clinton administration's spending plans clearly indicate the severity of the threat terrorism is believed to pose to the United States and the importance it attaches to fighting the war on terrorism. One can expect a similar allocation of funds in the years to come regardless of which party occupies the White House. Those who looked forward to a peace dividend from the end of the Cold War in the form of reduced defense spending will be sorely disappointed. Like all wars, a war on terrorism is an expensive enterprise and one whose economic costs increase in proportion to its duration.

Finally, one must wonder whether such a war can even be won? Radical Islamist leaders, such as Osama bin Laden and Sheik Abdel-Rahman have widespread followings and potentially huge reserves of willing martyrs at their disposal, so that for every one captured or killed, there are ten to take his place. When faced with such a dedicated adversary, the most likely outcome is a war of attrition rather than a decisive victory in the conventional military sense. Even if a resounding victory against such terrorist networks were possible, and even if it could be achieved without a massive cost in lives and liberties, there will always be the risk presented by hateful and angry individuals, such as Timothy McVeigh or "Unabomber" Theodore Kaczynski, who practice their own brand of terror, for reasons only they may understand, but with horrifying consequences for all who must live with them.

This may all sound like an alarming and bleak scenario for the future. To be sure, the catastrophic potential of modern terrorism, both domestic and international, is real cause for concern. But we should not fall victim to the kind of hysteria with which the threat of terrorism is depicted in much media coverage. On the one hand, to do so would be to allow terrorists to achieve their aims, i.e., sowing fear and panic into the general population. On the other hand, despite

its high profile on today's national security agenda, the risk terrorism poses to most of us remains statistically negligible. It is sobering to bear in mind that terrorism still kills fewer Americans than does lightning.

To those like Secretary of State Madeleine Albright who proclaim the fight against terrorism to be the war of the future, one might well ask, what happened to good old conventional warfare? Are we to expect that states will no longer wish to wage war against each other? To declare terrorism to be the war of the future is to imply that traditional forms of interstate warfare are soon to be extinct, or, at least, very rare. But such an implicit assumption is surely optimistic, if not downright wishful thinking, as we currently witness in the Balkans. For now and the foreseeable future, war will remain an activity conducted by states against other states. This is certainly a more familiar scenario, but hardly a more reassuring one. After all, we need only remember that 224 people died in the terrorist bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, while approximately fifty million died during the Second World War, most of whom were civilians. The deadly potential of interstate warfare still dwarfs that of terrorism, even in its catastrophic variety. Is terrorism, then, the war of the future? We should be so lucky! ■

NOTES

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, "Sheik, 9 Others Convicted in N.Y. Bomb; 10 Convicted in N.Y. Conspiracy Case," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1995, A 1.

² "The New Terrorism," *The Economist*, August 15, 1998, 17.

³ Walter Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (September/October 1996): 29-30.

⁴ Graham T. Allison, Owen R. Coté, Jr., Richard A. Falkenrath, and Steven E. Miller, *Avoiding Nuclear Anarchy: Containing the Threat of Loose Russian Nuclear Weapons and Fissile Material* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996). See also, Philip B. Heymann, *Terrorism and America: A Commonsense Strategy for a Democratic Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998), 86.

⁵ "New Kind of War for U.S.," *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 1998, B4.

⁶ James Risen and David Johnston, "Experts Find No Arms Chemicals at Bombed Sudan Plant," *The New York Times*, February 9, 1999.

⁷ Philip B. Heymann, *Terrorism and America* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998), 98.

⁸ "The New Terrorism," *The Economist*, August 15, 1998, 19.

⁹ Bradley Graham, "Pentagon Plans Domestic Terrorism Team," *The Washington Post*, February 1, 1999, A2.

¹⁰ Vernon Loeb, "U.S. Targeting Terrorism With More Funds," *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1999, A4.