

What Terrorists Want
Kernthesen des Vortrags von LOUISE RICHARDSON
anlässlich der Präsentation ihres gleichnamigen Buches

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What Terrorists Want

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Terrorism is the deliberate targeting of non combatants for political purpose.

It is the means used and not the ends pursued that determines whether or not a group is a terrorist group

Until we are willing to label a group that is fighting for a cause we consider legitimate, but deliberately targets civilians to achieve this cause, terrorists, we are never going to make progress and certainly never going to forge effective international co-operation against terrorism.

Terrorism is a tactic employed by many different types of groups in many parts of the world in pursuit of many different kinds of objectives.

So it makes no more sense to me to declare war on terrorism, much less terror, than it does to declare war on any other tactic, say precision guided bombing.

I am convinced that when the history of these years is written the declaration of a war on terrorism will be seen to have been a colossal mistake.

If you take a longer and a broader perspective one discovers that many of the widely accepted verities about terrorism today are misplaced:

1. Terrorism is **not new**, and indeed the recent emergence of terrorists groups which have a mixture of religious and political motives is not new either. Such groups have been documented at least as far back as the Sicarii in the first century after Christ.

2. **Nor** is terrorism the sole or even primary preserve of **Islam**. There have been Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Atheist, and secular terrorists.

3. Terrorists are **not irrational**.

- Psychologists who have interviewed former terrorists and imprisoned terrorists are unanimous on this point.
- I would even argue that suicide terrorists are not irrational and I hope we will have time to talk about suicide terrorism which, from an organization point of view, is extremely rational in terms of expending minimum effort for maximum effect. Indeed when the leaders of groups who deploy suicide terrorism talk about the tactic they talk in precisely these calculating cost/benefit terms.

4. Terrorists are **not amoral**.

- I have never met a terrorist who did not believe in the morality of his cause or the immorality of his adversary.
- Fatwas are an effort to justify terrorist action. Al Qaeda pronouncements and those of Bin Ladin regularly seek to justify their actions.
- An internal AL Qaeda document seeking to justify the 9/11 attacks and written by Ramsi Bin al Sheib spoke of the importance of not killing more than 4 million westerners or displacing more than 10 million in order to keep the contest reciprocal
- Sidique's Khan's videotape shown on Al Jazeera last September sought to justify the July 7 bombings in terms of a just war.
- I appreciate that it is hardly encouraging that Al-Qaeda feels justified in killing of up to 4 million of us but it does speak to the fact that they do operate under self imposed constraints.

Causes of Terrorism:

There are two reasons why it is very difficult to explain the causes of terrorism.

The first is because there are so many terrorists: how can one find a single explanation for the behaviour of a Peruvian peasant, a German Professor, a radical Saudi imam, a Tamil teenager, a young cricket player from Leeds?

The second is because there are so few terrorists: one cannot convincingly use meta explanations for micro phenomena. If poverty caused terrorism there would be far more terrorists. The social revolutionary movements that bedevilled Europe in the 1970s were explained by the alienation of young people, yet there were far more alienated young people than there were terrorists.

Terrorism is a complicated phenomenon and the search for simplistic explanations is understandable, often ideologically driven and unlikely to be successful. One characteristic that terrorists share is a highly oversimplified view of the world, a Manichean view that sees the world in black and white terms. There is no reason that those of us trying to understand the phenomenon need to adopt this very limited perspective, even if current American administration has tended to mirror its adversary by responding in over simplified and Manichean terms.

Rather than poverty and inequality being causes of terrorism, for example, I prefer to see them as risk factors. They increase the likelihood of terrorism and once a terrorist group forms they increase the likelihood that it will win adherents. Terrorists groups like Hamas and Hizballah have been extraordinarily successful in exploiting social conditions to win adherents.

My own view is that what causes terrorism is a lethal cocktail of a disaffected individual, an enabling community, and a legitimizing ideology.

The conflict is more likely to be intractable if this ideology is a religious one but it certainly does not need to be.

One of the sinister aspects of the current jihadi movement is that though their exploitation of the high tech attributes of the globalization they decry they are able to create virtual communities to support their adherents whether these adherents are in Leeds, Chechnya or Detroit.

What Terrorists Want:

Quite a lot of hot air is expended in debating the point that terrorism works. But one actually cannot sensibly decide whether or not terrorism works without first establishing what it is that terrorists are trying to achieve.

I find it helpful to think in terms of terrorist having primary and secondary motives. The primary motives differ across different kinds of groups: nationalist groups seek autonomy or secession, religious groups see the replacement of secular with religious law, social revolutionary groups seek to overthrow capitalism, and so on.

Secondary motives, on the other hand, are held across all types of groups, and it has to be said that in seeking these secondary motives terrorists have been altogether more successful than in seeking the fundamental political change they are also trying to effect.

The key secondary motives are what I call the three Rs: Revenge, Renown and Reaction. I believe that this is what terrorists want:

Revenge: By far the most common motive for their actions asserted by current terrorists and former terrorists of every ideological hue from every part of the world is the desire to exact revenge. Sometimes this is revenge for something they or their family suffered, often it is revenge for a wrong inflicted on the community with which they identify.

Far from matching our description of them as selfishly pursuing their own ends they generally identify with others and see themselves as sacrificing themselves for others. (As with the young Briton, Omar Sheik, convicted of murdering the American reporter Daniel Pearl, who once leaped down onto the tube tracks to rescue a man who had fallen in front of an oncoming train, or who invited a beggar to share his apartment.)

While we see terrorists as aggressors and ourselves as defenders, they see us as aggressors and themselves as defenders.

Statements by Al Qaeda, and all other terrorist groups, whether for internal or external consumption, are suffused with the language of revenge. It is difficult to over-estimate its importance.

Renown: Publicity has always been a central objective of terrorism. It brings attention to the cause and spreads the fear terrorism instils. Renown, however, implies more than simply publicity. It also implies glory. Terrorists seek both individual glory, and glory for the cause in an effort to redress the humiliation they perceived themselves as having suffered. For the leaders this glory comes on a national or increasingly global stage. For the followers glory in their own community is enough.

Reaction: Terrorists, no matter what their ultimate objectives, invariably are action oriented people operating in an action-orientated in group. It is through action that they communicate to the world, what used to be called: "propaganda by deed." Action

demonstrates their existence and their strength. In taking action, therefore, they want to elicit a reaction.

Terrorists often have wildly optimistic expectations of the reactions their action will elicit: American and Israeli withdrawal from the Middle East, British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, the collapse of capitalism, It actually appears as though they rarely have a very coherent idea of what kind of reaction they will get. We don't actually know if Bin Ladin was anticipating American capitulation and withdrawal in response to 9/11 or whether he was anticipating an American war on Islam. He may well have concluded that either reaction would suit him. So long as there is a reaction the terrorist purpose is served.

Once one understands the powerful appeal of revenge, renown and reaction the escalating tactic of **suicide terrorism** seems much more readily comprehensible.

Those who train the volunteers for martyrdom operations, as they prefer to call them, understand this and use the training period to guarantee glory in the form of songs, posters and videos to the martyrs who flock to volunteer to exact vengeance after atrocities by the adversary.

Seen in these terms too we realize that the desire for glory, belief that one is fighting for a just cause, and intense loyalty to one's small band of brothers that one finds among suicide terrorists is not unlike the motives that have animated soldiers for centuries.

When one realizes, moreover, that terrorists are motivated by a desire to exact revenge, attain renown and elicit a reaction one realizes that **declaring war on terrorism** is playing directly into their hands.

By declaring war on terrorism we are providing both more opportunities to exact vengeance by the forward deployment of our military and more actions to be avenged due to the conduct of war. (It is perhaps worth pointing out that within 6 months of our invasion of Afghanistan more Afghan civilians had been killed than people were killed on 9/11.)

When the most powerful countries in the world declare a war on what was, after all a motley collection of extremists living under the protection of one of the most impoverished countries in the world, they elevate the stature of these terrorists to a height of which they could have only dreamt.

The goal of defensive warfare is to deny the adversary the objectives he seeks, but by declaring war on terrorism we conceded the very objectives they were trying to achieve: revenge renown and reaction and thereby ensure that it was a war we could not win.

The urge to declare war in response to an atrocity on the scale of 9/11 is very powerful and the decision to do so is very understandable, but I believe it is also very unwise. I believe we should adopt an alternative strategy, one that replaces the overly ambitious goals to "rid the world of the evildoers" and "to root terrorist out of the world" with the more modest and more achievable goal of **containing the threat from terrorism**.

This strategy would be based on the following 6 principles derived from the experience of other democracies in successfully countering terrorism:

- 1) Have a defensible and achievable goal
- 2) Live by your principles
- 3) Know your enemy
- 4) Separate terrorists from their communities
- 5) Engage others with you in the campaign against terrorists
- 6) Have patience and keep your perspective

In fighting against terrorism we have, I believe wrongly, assumed that our side has a monopoly on virtue and have assumed that the purity of our motives was self evident. We have casually assumed that being tough on terrorism means being effective against terrorism and so political debate has been hamstrung by the fear of opposition parties that they might be labelled soft on terrorism.

Instead of worrying about what is tough or soft on terrorism we should focus exclusively on what is effective against terrorism.

Every time we consider a new counter-terrorism law or policy we should ask ourselves one question: Is it effective? And only if the answer is yes, we should then ask the second question: At what cost?

Ultimately our democracy cannot be derailed by someone placing a bomb in our midst. It can only be derailed if conclude that it is inadequate to protect us.