

THE TERRORIST THREAT AND THE WAR ON TERROR FIVE YEARS ON

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The terrorist threat and the war on terror five years on

On the fifth anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., Global Issues Analyst Alexandra Maddy examines how successful the 'war on terror' has been, assesses the current terrorist threat and details current and future trends in terrorism.

Al-Qaida's most enduring impact since 2001 has been to instill other groups with a sense of duty to fight both local enemies and a distant enemy – the US. Although al-Qaida no longer has clear control over emerging terrorist networks, and many question its ability to conduct and co-ordinate further attacks on the scale of September 2001, al-Qaida can still inspire, instigate and co-ordinate operations by others. Groups within its ideological orbit that historically received its support now emulate al-Qaida. These groups were generally formed to fight regional and local territorial struggles, but have adopted the vision and mission of a universal jihad. Al-Qaida now actively promotes its connections to regional and local Islamic extremist groups – such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Kashmiri separatist groups and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) – to maintain its status. JI has used suicide bombings and mass-casualty attacks, hitherto alien to South-east Asian groups. The GSPC recently made a public announcement pledging allegiance to al-Qaida.

The fact that terrorist networks are increasingly diverse, dispersed and independent complicates the threat and government responses to it. It also illustrates that radicalisation is increasing. The response to the attacks – the global 'war on terror', especially in Iraq and Afghanistan – engenders further radicalisation of young Muslims and the rhetoric of the 'war on terror' has helped to strengthen the sense of a clash between the West and an Islamic extremist enemy. At a time when there has never been more commentary, resources and policy measures aimed at countering the international terrorist threat, there has been a growth in numbers aligning themselves with the *jihadist* cause and hence a growth in the potential for terrorist attacks.

There is a need for new policies to address the evolving terrorist threat and in particular the underlying causes of radicalisation. The war on terror does not address the contradiction between the need to promote alternatives to radicalisation and the impact of the war in Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict in encouraging extremism. Neither does it look at the way in which its rhetoric has encouraged a sense of a 'clash of civilisations'. The strategy does not take into account the socio-economic drivers of radicalisation that exist within Western societies, such as poverty, unemployment or social marginalisation. Moreover, the use of the term 'war on terror' is a misnomer because it suggests that the solution is military, when the core of the struggle is ideological.

Some counterterrorism successes...

The situation is not as bleak as many would have forecast in the immediate aftermath of the 11 September attacks. In absolute terms, the number of terrorist attacks outside Iraq and South Asia has gone down or levelled off since September 2001. There has not been another terrorist attack on the same scale as 11 September, and al-Qaida has not been successful in toppling governments in the Middle East and Asia, as it had hoped. Western forces have not left the Middle East and the government of Saudi Arabia still stands. There have been numerous thwarted plots, such as in Denmark, Germany and Canada.

Several counter-terrorism measures have played a role in this. First, the war in Afghanistan toppled the Taleban in 2001, denied al-Qaida training bases and neutralised some of al-Qaida's leadership.

Secondly, intelligence reform has improved understanding of the *jihadist* threat and interception capabilities. There is better information-sharing between national and local law-enforcement agencies and across national boundaries. Terrorists connect with international criminals in obtaining and moving material, finance, documents and information. As more police agencies have shared more information across borders, more criminals have been identified, and this has helped to disrupt plots. Hand-in-hand with this development are improvements in the authorities' ability to disrupt terrorist financing and better understand the tactics and targeting strategies of terrorists.

Third, certain industry sectors – such as aviation and maritime transport – have significantly improved security through more stringent standards and procedures. Fourth, new legislation across many countries has strengthened the ability of the authorities to respond to terrorist attacks to minimise their impact.

...but attacks continue

The perception of the terrorist threat greatly exaggerates the reality, and it is this perception and sense of fear that Islamic extremist organisations such as al-Qaida seek to exploit to achieve their longer-term aims. Fears have been heightened by numerous high-impact, mass-casualty terrorist attacks, including in Indonesia, Spain, the UK, Morocco, Turkey and Egypt. In addition, there is a perception in the West that the threat of terrorist attacks is high: the annual Transatlantic Trends survey, conducted in the US and 12 European countries, recorded that concern about terrorism among US citizens had risen from 72% of those surveyed in 2005 to 79% in 2006, and among Europeans from 58% to 66%. The biggest jump (22%) was in the UK. This illustrates that terrorists are being successful in creating fear and mistrust among communities.

If the struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan highlight that the military element of the war is not yet won, the increasing number of those radicalised illustrates that ideological issues are just as far from being resolved. Terrorists are working hard to keep one step ahead of counter-terrorism and security measures by evolving methods of targeting and employing tactics that enable them to avoid counter-terrorism measures, such as carrying out cheap suicide attacks with small improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or using increasingly sophisticated approaches to conceal explosive devices in innocuous containers, as seen in the August aviation plot in the UK. Terrorist organisations employ thousands of websites, chat rooms, electronic notice boards and emails to gather information, provide training, raise funds, spread propaganda, obtain recruits and plan attacks. New recruits no longer need to physically travel to Afghanistan or Pakistan to be inspired and trained. At the same time, it is feared that al-Qaida operatives are beginning to regroup and regain their strategic planning capability, despite the dislocation of the leadership.

Key trends in international terrorism

Regional and domestic conflicts push up numbers

The statistical analysis of terrorist incidents shows that, while terrorist incidents overall rose more than threefold from 2004 to 2005, this rise was driven by an increase in activity in the Middle East and Asia. This is because the inclusion of attacks by insurgents in Iraq, Kashmir and Nepal as international terrorist incidents has pushed up the figures for attacks in the Middle East and South Asia. In actual fact, the number of terrorist attacks in other parts of the world has either stayed similar or declined.

In 2005, domestic attacks (when terrorists target fellow citizens within their own borders) increased more than international terrorist attacks, highlighting how terrorist campaigns still focus more on regional conflicts and conflicts within states. This is particularly true in areas such as Iraq, where different factions of the population are engaging in what many experts call a civil war. Attacks in Iraq accounted for at least 30% of total terrorist incidents and 55% of related fatalities in 2005.

Soft targets, lethality increasing

One shift in terrorists' tactics is in the amount of soft targets being attacked, such as public transport systems and hotels and bars where tourists congregate. In 2005, the number of private citizens and property targeted by terrorists increased by more than 35%; 25.5% of terrorist attacks targeted private citizens and property. The growing focus on soft targets means that the average lethality of attacks is increasing. Targeting civilians is an effective tactic because it not only creates a sense of fear, panic and mistrust, but it also has a tremendous economic impact that generally reverberates beyond the area of the attack.

Home-grown cells

The London bombings and subsequent foiled plans in the UK have highlighted that there is a new breed of domestic terrorists in Europe and point to the more general trend for decentralised,

autonomous terrorist cells operating in both the developed and developing world. These groups are able to function with much less money and fewer logistical issues. IEDs and suicide bombings require relatively little technical expertise and can be accomplished with minimal expense and resources. The existence of these groups opens up the number of possibilities for targeting and makes prevention a lot more complicated.

Suicide bombings

Suicide bombings by individuals on foot are the most feared among potential methods of attack because they can involve the perpetrator entering a crowded location. The US' National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) recorded 360 suicide bombings in 2005, which were responsible for about 3,000 fatalities.

Future for international terrorism

Terrorists acquire CBRN capability...

The use of co-ordinated suicide attacks on commercial aircraft using IEDs remains a persistent threat, as the UK's failed August terrorist plot illustrates. However, a number of terrorist organisations have long harboured the ambition to acquire a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) capability. The global Islamic extremist network's ambition to stage a CBRN attack can be assumed to remain undiminished following an upsurge in reporting relating to mass-casualty CBRN programmes. While al-Qaida is unlikely to have already obtained both suitable radiological material and a reliable means of delivering it, this is almost certainly a focus of current activity. Intent and any form of concrete capability would make for a catastrophic mix.

... or shift their focus to the shipping sector?

The linkages between terrorism and maritime security could grow. A number of high-profile maritime terrorist attacks have occurred in recent years, including on the USS Cole in 2000, the MV Limburg in 2002 (both off the Yemeni coast) and the MV Superferry in the Philippines in 2004. The methods range from the more straightforward to the complex, but it is worth noting that such attacks are generally even more difficult to carry out than attacks on aviation. Scenarios could include militants ramming vulnerable vessels or blowing up vessels in ports. Cargoes could also be infiltrated, with containers used to convey hazardous materials into target jurisdictions or serve as weapons. Such an eventuality is yet to materialise, but port and container security measures to pre-empt such an eventuality remain weak.