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### **Terrorism – The Future of War or Just Another Phase?**

*by Tommy T. Osborne*

Not so long ago, I heard that terrorism was the future of warfare. That interested me enough to examine the premise and I trust it will interest you enough to engage in an interactive conversation with me and others on the probability of that premise being true in the future.

“Terrorism” is an emotion laden term which requires definition for clarity. We’ve all heard the saying: “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” Even if that’s true, what are we talking about? Microsoft’s on-line dictionary is a start. It and other dictionaries (military, political, legal) describe terrorism as Political Violence: the threat or use of violence, usually against civilian targets to gain political, social, economic or religious ends, including intimidating opponents, gaining participation in government or getting economic benefits. The perpetrators frequently see themselves as the victims of some horrible wrong. Some terrorism is an adjunct to guerilla war – violence against combat forces – but for the sake of this discussion, I’ll exclude that option.

Violence against non-combatant targets by non-state actors to achieve political or social ends is not new, not is it based in any particular “belief system” or geographical area. Some references begin the history of terrorism in 66 AD, when Jewish zealots murdered both Jewish collaborators and Roman Officials. Others skip the Middle Ages, when Islamic Hash-Shashin killed important enemies (and possibly gave birth to the term “assassin”). They overlook the plot to blow up the English Parliament in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the Boston Tea Party (destruction of private property for purposes of political change), John Brown’s anti-slavery raids in the 1860s, the incendiary assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, the explosion of Catalan and Basque anger, etc, etc. Many historians show limited terrorism between 1900 through 1946 because nation-states were engaged in major force-on-force combat (World Wars I and II, for example), although there were significant terrorist acts during that interregnum – including LA times being bombed in 1910, the Wall Street bombing in 1920 and Irgun blowing up the King David Hotel in 1946.

The U.S. State Department published a list of “Significant Terrorist Incidents 1961-2003” (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5902.htm>). The time slice and selection are somewhat arbitrary; for example, the Ulster Volunteer Force attacks in 1966 are not counted. Despite its imperfection, I used this source to compile illustrative data by year and region to show the global distribution of terrorism by occurrence. Using target or attacker or cause would yield a different matrix and probably different conclusions. This snapshot in time with a particular point of view simply shows the global sweep and the apparent increase in terrorist acts.

Year	North America	Central America	South America	Africa (1)	Europe	Middle East (2)	Asia (3)	Russia
1960s	1	1	2	0	1	0	1	0
1970s	3	0	1	2	6	3	1	0
1980s	1	3	1	2	15	5	7	0
1990s	3	2	19	14	12	12	13	2
2000-2003	4	0	7	4	4	60	30	10

**U.S. State Department Significant Terrorist Incidents 1961-2003**

*Notes: (1) Includes North Africa; (2) Includes Iraq and Iran; with 17 incidents in 2000-2003 from Iraq; (3) includes the Asian republics of the former USSR, i.e., Tajikistan, as well as Afghanistan.*

Terrorism is a tactic, a tool of those who feel powerless to attain their goals within their own political system and who think they are too weak to defeat that system's military forces face to face. They also feel their cause is important enough to die for and to kill for. Accordingly, terrorists engage in asymmetric combat – leveraging their force through acts which draw instant media exposure and which inspire fear or loyalty out of proportion to the act itself. These acts exploit the physical and psychological weaknesses of their targets as well as play to the desires and fears of the target audiences. Some of the seeming increase in the number significant terrorist acts may be related to the reporting by global media in support of their own profit motive and reporting/editorial bias. The rise is certainly related to actions by governments who once ignored the acts or classified them as criminal rather than terrorist.

Three general causes of increased terrorism may flow into the future. The first is political – the tearing apart of multi-ethnic nation states (Yugoslavia; USSR) and the coming together of ethnics to make nations (greater Kurdistan) – no matter the correctness or fallacy of the reasoning. Second, the rise of the United States as a peerless combatant in symmetric war leaves some no place to turn but to asymmetric means. Third, the explosion of technologies in the commercial sector which provide private citizens capabilities once limited to very advanced militaries (such as the ability to communicate covertly and to intercept non-encrypted communications; to navigate by satellite and see in the dark) are leveling the playing field against main force military units. If the problem of super dissatisfied groups who feel powerless or excessively aggrieved continues, then terrorism may be their continued route of choice. The chart of Significant Terrorist Incidents (1960-2003) indicates increases in number and geographical areas from year to year. The past is not necessarily prelude.

Nothing holds the three causes invariant over the next twenty to thirty years. The forces of explosion and implosion of nation states may be resolved. No nation remains without a peer forever. China may well be preparing to challenge the US on military as well as economic grounds. Other nations have proved equally adroit and soft power may soon trump the hard power of a military giant which has funding issues. On the other hand, the arms race between national militaries and commercially available technology has not been won – it has just started. And the nations may win – their motive isn't profit, it is survival. The vast majority of terrorists don't have the infrastructure to research, develop and produce their own weaponry – that's why they are terrorists. On the other hand, anti-terror is expensive and terror is cheap.

A dramatic change in the willingness of states/groups of states and of angry dissenters to solve their grievances peacefully, or a change in any of the three causes, may make terrorism not the wave of the future, but a trough of the past.

**POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM** (send comments to [forum@futuretakes.org](mailto:forum@futuretakes.org)):

- *Increased willingness for peaceful resolution of grievances – "constructive dialog" in the parlance of some – can indeed reduce the incidence of terrorism. Now, consider the grievances themselves. Should we expect more or fewer interest-based and/or value-based grievances – and more or fewer people who have these grievances?*
- *To what extent is counterterrorism a factor in our becoming a surveillance society? Is it the main driver in a "requirements-pull" sense, or is the surveillance society more a matter of "technology push"?*
- *Finally, does technology favor terrorism or counterterrorism?*