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Contemporary Terrorism and Intelligence

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DEALING with contemporary forms of terrorism is fundamentally different than dealing with its past forms or conventional external threats. Previous experience with terrorist groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) may not be of direct use. In the past, many terrorist groups had a clear structure and organization which could be defined and tracked. Such groups also had political agendas that were relatively clear. As such, designing an intelligence collection program to operate against them was a straight forward (albeit difficult) task.

Why make a distinction between groups of the past and the threat posed by contemporary terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and its inspired followers? Even though Al Qaeda had a fairly clear structure and organization, it lacked a direct political agenda. The destruction of the House of Saud and the removal of American troops from Muslim majority lands may have been Al Qaeda goals, but it does appear that Al Qaeada was more about ideology than a specific agenda.

Due to the success of the attacks against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and investigations in other countries, Al Qaeda has mutated. It no longer has a viable structure and organization nor does it have a clear political agenda – other than some vaguely stated ideas about restoring a caliphate reaching from Spain to Indonesia. Recent attacks such as those in London, Madrid, and Mumbai have been planned, financed and executed by locally formed groups acting without central direction. These groups lack the structure and organization that was typical of earlier terrorist groups.

Intelligence Collection and Operational Impact

The lack of defined structure and organization on the part of contemporary terrorist groups poses significant new intelligence collection challenges to intelligence and law enforcement organizations. Intelligence collection in the past has been designed to confront other intelligence organizations, or to collect intelligence against organizations that have similar hierarchical structures. Contemporary terrorists groups do not have such structures; therefore intelligence collection efforts have to be recast in order to more closely mirror the groups they are working against.

What are the actual implications in practical terms? Among them are:

1. Human intelligence and sources are one of the core issues. Success in counter terrorism (CT) will very much depend on these areas. However, several distinctions must be made

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between sources now in CT and sources in intelligence during the Cold War and the 1990s. In the past, a well placed source in a terrorist organization could be useful for years – some were used for ten years or more. Now, the nature of the terrorist threat means that an agent or source will frequently be of use for the time period related to the planning of one attack only. Therefore, despite all the time spent developing a source, the payoff period might be quite short. The recruitment effort has to be continuous and dynamic and expectations about payoffs have to be managed.

2. Integration of intelligence and operational information must occur as soon as possible and at the lowest levels which are closest to the "front lines". Centralization and central bureaucracies impede operational effectiveness, especially in the areas of timeliness and their ability to discern the relative importance of the "fine grains" of intelligence data. Front line intelligence personnel and investigators, together with mid-level front line managers are in the best position to assess the potential impact, validity and required responses. They need to be gathered together in small groups that can work laterally and not in large central bureaucracies. The environment in which this is done needs to be one that is creative rather than one formulated by a centralized bureaucracy. Mid-level managers need to have the skills and the power to create such environments.

3. Tracking jihadist and other such terrorist groups today is difficult due to their lack of structure and the short term existence of each of the self-emerging sub-groups. Anything that can be done to rapidly develop a "picture" of their structure is valuable. Some excellent examples of improving this situation have occurred when mid-level managers and front line personnel have created their own new relationships and methods to adapt. Rather than impinge on these efforts, senior leaders and policy makers must be able to assess the validity of the new methods and then "capture" them and ensure they are used as widely as possible where applicable. At the same, mid-level managers must be encouraged to develop working environments where creativity is encouraged and where new lateral relationships with relevant partners are developed.

4. The distinction between what constitutes domestic intelligence and foreign intelligence is increasingly blurred to the point where the boundaries themselves are almost irrelevant from a collection and operational point of view. For transnational terrorists such as the jihadists, international borders are irrelevant and do not affect their political or operational views. As such, the intelligence collection and analysis efforts against them need to be able to work in the same manner.

5. Counter terrorism operations have seen some successes at the tactical and operational level. The weakest point in the counter terrorism equation, however, is most likely at the strategic level. Governments and intelligence agencies must be willing to create and work with think tanks or to develop their own internal capabilities to understand the problems at the strategic level.

6. Open source intelligence is particularly well suited to national security operations in general and to transnational terrorism. It functions well in non-traditional problem areas where classified methods do not offer broad coverage. It also allows for a greater sharing when dealing with politicians, foreign partners and with agencies that lack clearances. OSINT is low cost as the private sector has already developed and paid for the infrastructure needed to support it and it relies exclusively on information gained through legal and ethical means. It can therefore be used in court proceedings, quasi-judicial hearings or other public

venues and is an effective means of informing the public about threats.

7. The training and development of CT personnel is an extensive process. It can take as long as five to seven years to develop intelligence personnel to a point where they are truly effective, and even then, they need continuous training or front line experience to keep their skills relevant. IT training has to be an integral part of the process and the marriage of effective IT skills and equipment with the right personnel may be the single most challenging impediment to effective CT operations.

8. Joint training across agencies is required. While it may have been a form of heresy to state this five years ago, training courses that involve intelligence, police, military and other relevant personnel are necessary.

9. In the long term, effective CT cannot come from either a militarization of the problem nor will the "guards, guns and gates" approach provide long term security. A comprehensive integrated response must come from the intelligence, enforcement, judicial and military establishments in order to meet this wide ranging problem.

10. Those agencies and individuals involved in counter terrorism must maintain the moral high ground. If intelligence and enforcement agencies want to recruit good sources, then the pool of potential sources must believe that the agency they will be assisting is worthy of their information and the risks they are taking.

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