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The Terrorist: Soldier of the Future?

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The terrorist bombing of the Centennial Olympic Park in downtown Atlanta on July 27, 1996, represents yet another incident in a pattern of terrorism taking place upon American citizens and upon the representatives and institutions of the government that serves them. “Atlanta” will now be added to our collective memories and mentioned in muted tones, along with a growing roll call that includes TWA Flight 800, Dhahran, Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center, Lockerbie and Beirut.

In dealing with these heinous crimes, we focus an enormous effort on identifying the perpetrators — who they are and the groups to which they belong. Now that domestic terrorism has become a reality, right-wing militias and radical Islamic sects receive equal attention. The groups have strange sounding names: Hezbollah, Hamas, Viper and Freemen. They represent extremists of one kind or another, with little stake in or love for American society.

While United States governmental

This article examines the nature of terrorists and terrorist groups and predicts the implications of future terrorists emerging as “criminal soldiers.” Opinions expressed are the author’s and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense. — Editor
authorities attempt to identify who these people are, another equally important concern, what they are, is too often ignored. It is imperative that the U.S. special-operations community not make this oversight.

Given the altered nature of the post-Cold War security environment, asking the question “What is a terrorist?” should become fundamental in our attempts to better understand the future. The answer to that question will give the SOF community insights that can lead to a critical reevaluation of its perceptions of terrorists and of war-fighting in general.

Our current legal interpretations define a terrorist as a criminal. This must be a correct assumption, because such a person violates our conventions concerning the conduct of modern warfare. A terrorist is not viewed as a traditional soldier because he is not a representative of a nation-state’s military forces. A terrorist does not wear the distinctive uniform of a soldier, and he views all targets, including women and children, as legitimate. But the characterization of a terrorist as both a criminal and a coward, echoed repeatedly by our political and military leadership, may be only partially true.

**Advanced form of soldier**

Like the Roman god Janus, a terrorist also bears a second image: the image of an advanced form of soldier. This is a soldier who is not only non-Western, he is also potentially post-Western in his war-fighting orientation and in his level of technical sophistication. For many, this perception may be both surprising and sobering. It reflects the brutal realities of today’s changing world — a world where narcocartels have gained the capacity to wage war against legitimate governments, where intrastate warfare has spread as nation-states continue to implode over many regions of the globe, and where competing tribal and cultural groups select ethnic cleansing as their preferred method of settling disputes.

We may be able to accurately assess the technical sophistication of a terrorist by examining the following advanced war-fighting components that help to define his capabilities:

- Organic stealth. Because a terrorist eschews the traditional symbols of a soldier and does not operate within the boundaries of the Western-defined battlefield, he is almost invisible to detection. And with his ability to blend into the civilian populace of an urban environment, the terrorist is a highly survivable military asset, because what cannot be seen cannot be killed. The war-fighting advantage that is gained by the terrorist is no different from one achieved by a high-technology stealth fighter or bomber, but it is purchased at a fraction of the cost.

- Precision engagement. While we in the
West use high-technology precision-guided munitions, such as laser-guided bombs and Tomahawk sea-launched cruise missiles, to destroy our targets, terrorists have their own forms of precision weaponry. A truckload of explosives detonated in front of a building, inside a building, or in a parking garage must be considered a precision form of attack. Using a radio-controlled bomb in a culvert over which a head-of-state's motorcade is traveling, or smuggling plastic explosives inside the luggage of an unsuspecting airline passenger represent two other methods of precision engagement. The fact that terrorist capabilities can be purchased cheaply does not mean that they are inferior to Western methods of launching precision strikes.

- Information warfare. Terrorists are extremely effective in conducting information warfare. Their violent activities are routinely far less significant than the threat of further violence that the acts themselves create. Within the greater context of American society, the loss of TWA Flight 800 to a possible act of terrorism, while a monumental tragedy to the friends and families of the citizens aboard, is irrelevant to our society's continued functioning. However, because such an act introduces the specter of further violence occurring anywhere and anytime, “terror” is generated in the minds of our citizens far out of proportion to the terror caused by the initial terrorist act. Thus, an event that should be no more significant than a tactical-level operation is elevated into an event of strategic significance.

- Environmental and resource conservation. Because terrorists engage in tactical operations that assume strategic-level importance, terrorists are able to accomplish more with lower expenditures of violence than traditional nation-states can. Mass industrial armies waste huge amounts of human and materiel resources in the conduct of war, and in the process they severely degrade the environments within which they operate. Terrorist groups are far more sophisticated in their war-making approach. Rather than destroying peoples, governments, armies and the environment around them, the terrorists use precision in attacking the ideological and sociological bonds that hold a society together.

- Internetted command and control. Unlike conventional organizations, terror-
terrorist groups organize themselves into small cells. For the purposes of command and control, these cells interact in a web-like fashion. The internette structure offers terrorist groups distinct advantages over conventional organizations that have more traditional hierarchical structures. First, terrorist groups tend to be highly entrepreneurial in nature, which allows them to quickly adapt to changing “battlefield conditions,” unlike the more rigid organizations they are opposing.

Second, terrorist groups are immune to a decapitation attack, since no traditional hierarchical leadership is needed to coordinate their actions. Third, the destruction of a single terrorist cell will have little effect upon the rest of the network. Finally, because we do not fully understand the decision-making process of the network, we may fail to recognize the terrorist network in the traditional sense. As a result, acts of terrorism may go unnoticed. In reality, the current rash of church burnings in the South may be the work of terrorists. Although no conspiracy has been found, the unrelated node that each burning represents may ultimately be recognized as part of a more insidious scenario.

**War-fighting implications**

The emergence of a criminal soldier, one who is more advanced in technology and who possesses more war-fighting capacity than the traditional soldier fielded by nation-states, is cause for immense concern. The war-making monopoly that is unique to nation-states is, for now, the underlying reason they are considered the dominant form of modern political community. But should that monopoly be shattered, nation-states would eventually cease to exist, in the same manner as did their medieval and classical predecessors.

Besides its impact on the nation-state, the emergence of a criminal soldier would alter our perceptions of war and of terrorism. First, we would have to rethink our basic definitions of terrorism. The presence of an advanced form of soldier, incompatible with the institutions and the ethical system of modern Western civilization, would mean that war as we understand it is changing. Naturally, our perceptions of terrorist attacks upon our nation would also have to shift. No longer would terrorist attacks be viewed as unrelated criminal incidents; rather, they might be perceived as the opening battles in a global struggle over humanity’s future social and political organization. This would be a struggle not to determine a victorious nation-state or coalition, but to determine the social and political structure that would succeed the nation-state.

Second, we would have to re-examine our perceptions concerning state-sponsored terrorism. Viewed from our new perspective, terrorist organizations would likely represent an advanced form of mercenary group, one not representative of the minor groups that have existed during the last few centuries of history. The new terrorist groups would have parallels to those mercenary companies that dominated warfare during the early modern European era.

The less-technical explosive devices and the small arms employed by early terrorist groups are now giving way to advanced munitions, precision-guided missiles and computer viruses. The 1995 Sarin nerve-gas attack in the Tokyo subway, while it was not undertaken by a state-sponsored group, has shown that given sufficient funding, many of these groups may soon be capable of fielding weapons of mass destruction.

Third, we can expect the distinction between crime and war to become blurred as an outcome of the development of this new form of soldier. State-sponsored terrorism in the late 1960s initially broke...
down this barrier. Since that time, the distinction has been further eroded by non-national groups (such as narcocartels, religious sects, and ethnic clans) that engage in private wars against nation-states. In some failed nation-states, it is already impossible to distinguish between the criminal activities and the war-making activities of local warlords and regional groups.

Conclusion

The emergence of the terrorist as a criminal soldier is likely to have profound effects upon future American society and government. Some of those effects are apparent today, now that the war over future social organization, already being waged across much of the globe, is beginning to take place on American soil. Direct social costs can be measured by our citizens who have been killed or maimed, our burned-out federal buildings, our loss of productivity resulting from communication and transportation disruptions, and our resource expenditures for counterterrorism, such as the $227 million to protect the Olympic Games in Atlanta.

Indirect social costs will be difficult to calculate, but in the long term they may be more debilitating. They represent the erosion of immaterial goods such as the stability of our social institutions, the trust between our government and its citizens, and the basic psychological health of our people. Further, new debates can be expected to arise over the rights of citizens vs. the need for new security measures. While such measures will better protect our people, they are bound to infringe upon the very rights that we so cherish.

By necessity, the role of special-operations forces in combating terrorism will increase. Because terrorists represent an advanced form of soldier, our conventional forces will be ineffective against them. Only by fielding our own advanced form of soldier, supported by an array of emerging technologies, will our nation have the capability to defeat this enemy.

In the future, we should not be surprised if the U.S. Special Operations Command is increasingly called upon to respond to incidents of domestic terrorism, to shield our foreign bases from terrorist attack, and to engage in the war against drug cartels. During times of uncertainty, such as those we now face, we will increasingly place the burden of our country’s defense upon our elite troops. We will have no choice, for in the battle to determine the future social and political structure of humanity, second best is unthinkable. ☞

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Notes:
1 Even if the destruction of TWA Flight 800 was due to mechanical failure, the psychic damage has already been done.

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