The Nature of Modern Terrorism

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In March 1995, six years before the terrible events of 11 September, another shocking event occurred. In an attack on the Tokyo underground using sarin gas, the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo killed 12 people and affected 5,000,[1] and the way in which terrorism was understood changed for ever. For the first time, an independent substate group, acting without state patronage or protection, had managed to produce and deploy biochemical weapons on a significant scale. A crucial technological threshold appeared to have been crossed.

Terrorists had achieved the unthinkable and were now able to pose threats to states that previously only other states had. The result was a period of unprecedented interest in 'superterrorism' as it came to be called, notably in the United States, with the focus on the means and technology at the disposal of terror groups, rather than on the organisations themselves and their objectives. A new fanaticism represented by cults and religiously motivated groups, equipped with weapons of mass destruction and prepared to use them, now presented the world with a 'New Age of Terrorism', it was argued. Meanwhile, the old terrorism appeared to be on the wane, although significantly a number of its characteristics appeared surprisingly resilient, finding expression in the new terrorism and the new terrorists themselves. The debate which ensued pitched analysts of 'old terrorism' against the new exponents of 'superterrorism' in a circular debate over the likely path of terrorist development.

However, when it finally arrived, the superterrorism that was revealed on 11 September 2001 was not at all the sort that had been predicted by most of the analysts on both sides of the debate, although indications of it had been emerging throughout the 1990s. Instead of technologically sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, the superterrorists of 11 September utilised the long-established terrorist approach of careful planning, simple tactics and operational surprise to effect the most stunning terrorist 'spectacular' in history. In the aftermath of 11 September, the anthrax mail attacks in the United States complicated the picture. On the one hand they appeared to confirm the worst fears of the New Age of Terrorism theorists, highlighting the vulnerability of modern societies to unconventional attacks, the lack of resilience in the official response and the ease with which a nation might be brought to its knees by a tiny number of people; on the other, the indications were that the anthrax concerned was probably domestically produced in an American weapons laboratory and probably well beyond the abilities of substate groups to manufacture. Furthermore, the attacks, although of significant psychological impact, did not result in mass casualties and

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rather indicated the extent to which mass *effect* was inherent in such weapons. Revealing more about ourselves than the terrorists, the superterrorism debate of the 1990s was shown to have diverted counterterrorist thinking to some extent away from the core tasks of understanding the motives and likely objectives of terror organisations towards a preoccupation with technology, weapons systems and high end risks. This tendency has often been displayed by terrorism analysts, and as the world contemplates the likely evolution of terrorism after 11 September, the focus is on technology, weapons of mass destruction and mass casualties. Once again, the dangers of being diverted from other core tasks of counterterrorism are acute.

This chapter will consider the nature of terrorism, how it has come to be understood over the last two centuries, why there remains no agreed definition for it, and how the last decade of the twentieth century appeared to herald a new age of superterrorism. It will consider why the attacks of 11 September did not fit the model that had emerged in the preceding decade, how the future of terrorism has been altered and why the concept of the 'New Age of Terrorism' had led many to focus on the 'novel' idea of terrorism as asymmetric warfare. In doing so, the chapter will consider some of the enduring questions surrounding terrorism. It is defined by most target states as a crime—which, though understandable for police forces and justice ministries trying to bring prosecutions, tends to obscure the political context of most if not all terrorism. The idea of terrorism as a weapon of the weak and as a justified response to superior force will be contrasted with the fact that much terrorism has been perpetrated by states against their own people. It will also consider how new actors, new technologies and new tactics are undoubtedly changing the nature of terrorism; but it will emphasise that its enduring feature is its capacity as a force multiplier through the exploitation of fear. As the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu said, 'To fight and conquer in all your battles is not the supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.' This is the essence of terrorism: the breaking of an enemy's will through the exploitation of fear. This fear can lead some states to terrorise themselves far better than the terrorists themselves, and this remains one of the most tricky challenges after 11 September in developing a counterterrorist strategy at home and abroad. Finally, the chapter will consider the extent to which terrorism has evolved from a tactic into a strategy, and how the challenge today has become one of containing terrorists' capacity for affecting strategic change.

Defining terrorism

The question of what is (and what is not) terrorism has, for many, disappeared down an academic dead end, never to return in a meaningfully useful way for policy-makers or the public. Indeed, it has been suggested that the attempt to find an agreed definition is doomed to failure and in any event

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has not advanced the study of the subject. That does not mean, as some have suggested, that the question is simply answered by reference to the target, such that, if it is unarmed and civilian, then an assault on it is terrorism.[2] Such reductionism could place all armies that cause 'collateral damage' into the category of terrorist. Furthermore, it would include as terrorist acts the strategic bombing of German cities in the Second World War, and also the dropping of the atomic bombs in 1945—designed to 'shock' the Japanese into submission. However, to resist such reductionism is not to deny that 'terrorism' as a state policy (usually one of internal repression) has killed more people than substate groups ever have. At times, the tendency has been too far in the other direction—to ascribe all non-state violence to terrorism. There has also been a tendency to confer the title on any form of disruptive or undesirable phenomenon, leading to neologisms such as 'bioterrorism', 'cultural terrorism' and even 'fashion terrorism'!

The confusion even occurs within individual governments. While the US State Department defines terrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience',[3] the Federal Bureau of Investigation prefers a different form of words: 'the use of serious violence against persons or property, or the threat to use such violence, to intimidate or coerce a government, the public, or any section of the public in order to promote political, social or ideological objectives'. Such differences can in part be explained by the differing objectives of the departments concerned. Differences exist also between countries and allies. The formulation adopted for many years by the British government, which has tended to use a single definition, was 'the use of violence for political ends including any use of violence for the purpose of putting the public or any section of the public in fear'.

In the late 1990s, established terrorism legislation was reviewed by the British government as it considered the new requirements of international terrorism. Coming as the review did at the *end* of the worst terrorist violence that the UK has ever experienced and during the Provisional Irish Republican Army's most significant ceasefire, there was some irony in this. The previous legislation had been temporary and subject to regular renewal by Parliament; now, with the threat level apparently much reduced, the government, citing the increasing threat from transnational and often religiously motivated terrorism, presciently proposed bringing terrorism legislation into permanent statute. The Terrorism Act 2000, which finally came into force in the UK before 11 September in February 2001, adopted a definition close to the FBI's: 'the use or threat of serious violence against persons or serious damage to property, designed to influence the government or intimidate the public or a section of the public . . . for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause'. Civil libertarians were dismayed at what was perceived as a widening of the state's powers, and particular concern was expressed at the definition of 'serious violence' as including actions 'designed seriously to

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interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system'. Hacking, it seemed, now came under the definition of terrorism. The new Act also sought to remove any false separation between domestic and international terrorism, including within the scope of the legislation actions in support of terrorist activities in third countries.

A question raised by the definition debate and the anti-terrorism legislation introduced by various governments is what, if anything, is legitimate dissent using violent means? When is being a freedom fighter acceptable? The parallel debate on the definition of terrorism has been whether the groups are themselves freedom fighters or terrorists. The weak argue that the strong always condemn them as terrorists, and such freedom fighters condemn the states they are fighting as terroristic in their suppression of the innocent and the defence of the status quo—one of the main claims of bin Laden, who described the United States as fundamentally a status quo power.

The whole subject of terrorism has connotations of danger about it, and while it can in certain circumstances still be descriptive, the term has actually become pejorative—an insult, derived of meaning in many instances. This also has political consequences, since labelling a group or enemy as terrorist usually leads to an increase in the state's powers. Once the state's enemies have been labelled as terrorists, the public accepts more in 'defence' against terrorism: illegal arrests, torture and even state-sanctioned murder have been seen in some states as acceptable (or rather, reluctantly accepted as necessary) when one 'takes off the gloves' in fighting a ruthless terrorist enemy. More problematically, using the language of terrorism can in many ways blind one to what it is one is facing, to such an extent that the terminology actually hampers the state in its defence from violent threats. As one writer has put it: 'To call an act of violence a terrorist act is not so much to describe it as to condemn it, subjugating all questions of context and circumstance to the reality of its immorality.'[4]

Characteristics of terrorism

Historically, terrorism has been seen as a tactical phenomenon which fluctuates according to geography and culture and so cannot be strictly defined. It has sometimes been a tool for revolutionaries and nationalists, but has been used just as often by governments to maintain state power. Defining a person or group as terrorist implies a moral judgement, and it is this which has led to the greatest problems of definition. In answer to the hackneyed question: 'Is one man's freedom fighter another man's terrorist?' the answer perhaps should be that it is a non-question, or rather a false juxtaposition—one can be both. Freedom fighters have adopted terrorist tactics at times, but it did not stop them being freedom fighters (although it probably did not help their legitimacy). On the other hand, many have used terrorism and claimed to be fighting in the name of freedom when other, more financial and worldly goals have very obviously been a significant motiva-

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tion. In the most modern representation of terrorism, bin Laden is in many ways actually defined by his terrorism—he is struggling, claims to be defending Muslims everywhere, but clearly does not and has added one group after another to his enemies. Now it is unclear where his campaign goes from here; perhaps nowhere, since it is unlikely that he or his movement can transcend the struggle itself.

In the past, general wars have been accompanied by systematic terror, as have civil wars, revolutionary wars, wars of national liberation, labour disputes and other broadly defined resistance movements. Terrorists would characterise themselves as serving a goal or a cause, having been driven to use force to attain their goals in the face of the overwhelming power of the state. However hard it is to understand the manifestations of terrorism in the modern world, cloaked as it so often is in the rhetoric of religion and even mysticism, it remains axiomatic that terrorism is and always has been purposeful and planned; political in its aims and motives; violent or threatening of violence; indiscriminate in its targeting, accepting no restraint in this area; and, crucially, designed to have psychological repercussions beyond the immediate target or victim.

To separate this violence from that of organised states, which have taken upon themselves the monopolistic right of legitimate use of organised violence, terrorism is also generally defined as perpetrated by subnational groups or non-state entities. It has traditionally been believed that terrorists seek maximum publicity and that their campaigns are carried out by organisations with a chain of command or cell structure. Publicity has become a difficult question in recent years, given the rise of the unclaimed attack, and this has formed part of the argument in favour of the New Age of Terrorism concept. In the past, terrorist outrages were either followed with long and turgid communiqués from the 'military' command of the terror group, explaining why the particular target was struck, or heralded by a warning that a device had been planted and would explode at a particular time. As Brian Jenkins of Rand Corporation famously put it, 'Terrorists want a lot of people watching not a lot of people dead.' Given the increasing number of attacks which have been neither claimed nor announced, it has been argued that publicity is no longer a main priority of the perpetrators and that the objectives have changed from achieving ends to simply punishment—terrorists now seem to want people dead. However, terrorists act to influence not only their enemy but also their supporters. Communication between the supporters and potential supporters of a group can be just as important as that between the attackers and the attacked, and the psychological impact can be both on victims and on supporters. The need to claim 'credit' for an attack is not as important if, in the minds of the terrorists, the act speaks for itself. Terrorist violence has at times been seen as primarily symbolic, and the question arises whether this has changed.

Our understanding of modern terrorism can be traced back to the anarchists of the late nineteenth century and their adoption of a policy of

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'propaganda by deed'. Their violence was designed to gain publicity, provoke repression and, as a consequence, undermine the government. The violence was symbolic, and, while expressive, its main purpose was to have consequences beyond the immediate victims. Contrary to much of the analysis that has emerged since 11 September, the campaign of bin Laden and al-Qaeda can be seen in this light, with few differences other than (albeit importantly) the scale of effect that a small number of individuals can achieve. It is this scale of effect and the potential for even greater destruction that preoccupied the superterrorism theorists of the 1990s and of which 11 September appeared to provide a demonstration—although, in some ways, the opposite conclusion can also be drawn: for the events of 11 September and its aftermath have shown why terrorists will not necessarily evolve to their maximum destructive potential in the future.

In assessing the implications of the potential for achieving strategic effect (as opposed to change) that the attacks of 11 September revealed, many have concluded that terrorism has transcended its past to become a strategic activity designed to achieve strategic ends. While the point is debatable, it seems clear from events since 11 September that strategically, the al-Qaeda campaign has been stalled, if not derailed. This is because to be strategically successful terrorism must appear irresistible, with groups trading their weakness for time—time in which to undermine the morale of the target state and time in which to increase support for the cause. By sustaining a campaign that frustrates and humiliates the state, terrorists can increase a feeling of vulnerability and eventually lead the population to question the purpose of the counterterrorist campaign. However, crucial to such a strategy is never to become a strategic threat to such an apparent extent that the state has no option but to make the group's destruction a central goal of national security policy. In the UK the enduring campaigns of Irish republicans in Northern Ireland and the mainland, plus the revenge attacks by loyalist terror groups, were characterised by an appalling slaughter that took well over 3,000 lives over a period of more than thirty years in the modern era; but the death toll from an individual attack never exceeded twenty-nine. Furthermore, the 'spectaculars' perpetrated by the Provisional IRA on the mainland achieved strategic effect (and possibly even strategic change) once the focus was directed at economic targets rather than more traditional symbols of state power, or indeed at civilians themselves. At the culmination of their mainland campaigns in Britain, the Provisional IRA exploded two of the largest explosive devices ever seen in peacetime in Britain in the City of London, which together cost the British state more than all the preceding bombs had done collectively.

While it seems clear that bin Laden understood the economic implications of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the expressive violence that took thousands of lives represented such a strategic challenge to the United States that it became inconceivable that thereafter the destruction of al-Qaeda could be anything other than the central goal of US policy. The previous ten years of

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attacks against US interests—including, of course, an earlier attack on the World Trade Center, as well as plots to destroy the tunnels and bridges linking Manhattan Island with the rest of New York, and attacks on US military and diplomatic interests around the world—had created in bin Laden an enemy against whom the United States found it difficult to mobilise, despite the potential for disaster that he represented. A similar pattern was seen in Japan, where the activities of the Aum Shinrikyo sect, including repeated (botched) attempts to release chemical and possibly even biological weapons, went largely unpunished, even uninhibited, for many years, before the 1995 attack on the Tokyo underground resulted in the complete suppression of the organisation. To defeat the strong, the weak terrorists must survive to mount repeated and damaging campaigns against their enemies while garnering support that over time cannot be defeated through coercive military or paramilitary action.

Today, people rarely accept they are terrorists; rather, they identify the systems they oppose as terrorist and argue that to condemn what states call 'terrorism' is to endorse the power of the strong over the weak. However, bin Laden himself came close to acknowledging the attacks of 11 September as terrorist in nature in his video discussion with a supporter. The definition debate also gets bogged down in the question of whether the problem is terrorist violence or its underlying causes. Unlike the anarchists, who did not deny their purpose, modern groups use names to associate themselves with armies and military organisations, images of freedom and liberation, righteous vengeance or neutral positions. The emphasis is on how they have been forced to take up arms and have been driven to violence. The judgement on what is morally the more reprehensible depends on whether you associate with the group or individual perpetrating acts of terrorism, or with the victims of terrorism. Commentators from the developing world have often noted that for much of the modern era of terrorism, all liberation movements, bona fide or not, have been called 'terrorist' by their opponents, as indeed was the French resistance movement during the Second World War (by the German targets).

To the apologists and political representatives of terror organisations, the opponents of terrorism defend the status quo and the terrorists are forced to operate clandestinely because of their weakness, carrying out dramatic acts of violence to attract attention. Most of terrorism's targets state that the defining characteristic of terrorism is the act of violence, not the motivation or justification, but this interpretation remains open to criticism on the grounds that it defends the rights of state entities (which claim legitimacy whatever the effect of their use of organised violence) rather than individuals and groups. Perhaps more powerfully, critics of terrorism point to the failure of substate groups to observe the norms and rules of war, which, although not always followed by states, have granted civilians non-combatant immunity from attack, prohibit the taking of civilian hostages and regulate the treatment of prisoners of war. (Interestingly, the United States has avoided granting the

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Taleban and al-Qaeda detainees the status of prisoner of war.) Terrorists, it is said, violate all these rules, and while states' armed forces have also done so at various times, terrorists refuse to be bound by *any* rules.

Antecedents

Rather than an Age of Terrorism emerging in the twentieth century, it can reasonably be asked whether there has ever been a time without what we now, in attempting to categorise all non-state political violence, all-embracingly call terrorism. The original use of the term 'terrorist' in English can be traced back to the French Revolution: it entered the language in 1795 in the writings of Edmund Burke commenting on the regime of terror of Maximilien Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety in France. Terror emerged as an instrument of state power exercised by a revolutionary state and, like today, was neither random nor indiscriminate (as it is often portrayed) but organised, deliberate and systematic. The Jacobins spoke positively of themselves as terrorist, Robespierre lauding 'virtue, without which terror is evil; terror, without which virtue is helpless'.[5] But they do not represent the first example of terrorism that has been plucked out of history. The Sicarii, an offshoot of the religious sect of Zealots in Palestine in AD 66–73, was arguably a social movement, but also a radical anti-Roman religious movement that attacked Jewish 'collaborators'. Using short swords, they often attacked in daylight in crowded public places to demonstrate the state's impotence and to strike fear beyond their immediate targets, provoking conflict. More terrifyingly, the selection of targets appeared random—though it actually was not. Like a number of modern-day terror organisations they eventually attracted too much attention from their enemies, and their rebellion in AD 6 was crushed by the Romans, who crucified 2,000 people.

A thousand years later, the Assassins, a Shia sect of Ismailis and Nizari, operated from 1090 to 1275. This group used only the dagger at close range, by this mode of attack both accentuating the terror inflicted and revealing a willingness to die in pursuit of their mission echoed by today's suicide bombers. While they are particularly remembered for attacking the Crusaders, most of their targets were other Muslims: they killed governors and prefects, and even tried to murder Saladin twice. Historically their struggle was a fruitless attempt to defend religious autonomy, but they have been remembered. The Thugs, an Indian secret society, rarely killed Europeans but otherwise were indiscriminate in killing as a sacrifice (they had no discernible political ambitions); they operated for 600 years, possibly killing as many as 500,000 before being suppressed by the British. Some have even suggested that following the American Civil War the Ku Klux Klan, which fought Reconstruction and terrorised the coloured population, can be included in this panoply of terrorist groups.

However, for all the historical examples of political violence one can identify, it is the anarchists of the late nineteenth century, with their

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'propaganda by deed', who have most shaped modern thinking and the fear of terrorism. The experience crucially detached terrorism from its historically accurate linkage with state, rather than non-state, policy. The anarchists sought to invoke fear and repression as a means to revolutionary change, and were very successful in assassinating heads of state—one head of state per year was killed in the 1890s, including US President William McKinley. One of the best-known of these groups was the Russian revolutionary Narodnaya Volya (People's Will), which adopted selective targeting and political assassination, killing Tsar Alexander II in 1881. While the attack was in itself apparently successful, once again the result was vigorous repression by the state and the group's destruction; when revolution came to Russia it was the Bolsheviks, not People's Will, who claimed power.

The anarchists also inspired fear in a rather modern way through the Anarchist International, a shadowy network of anarchists acting in various countries. It proved to be largely a myth, but one which stimulated exaggerated fears disproportionate to the impact or political significance of the groups themselves; anarchism and terrorism were hereafter often linked. The anarchists also introduced the idea of cell organisation and distributed manuals on how to be anarchists—notably the *Anarchist's Cookbook*, a forebear of today's focus on the internet as a source of terrorist information-sharing and the fear of the internationalisation of terrorism by bin Laden. Indeed, the *Anarchist's Cookbook* has for some time itself been available on the internet.

Irish terrorism had emerged with the Dynamiters in the 1870s and the Phoenix Park murders by Irish National Invincibles of Lord Cavendish, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, and his under-secretary, who were killed in daylight with twelve-inch surgical knives, although whether political assassination should be classified as terrorism continues to test our understanding of the terminology. The most famous member of the Young Bosnians (Mlada Bosna) was Gavrilo Princip, the assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914—the event which reputedly sparked the First World War.

Terrorism became a state monopoly in a number of countries in the 1930s and 1940s, reminding observers that enforcement terrorism has historically been far more destructive than agitational terrorism. Following the Second World War, terrorism seemed to be the preserve of indigenous nationalist groups which emerged out of various anticolonial campaigns in, among other countries, Israel, Cyprus, Kenya and Algeria. The idea of 'freedom fighters' emerged at this time, along with the debate over the terminology and definition of terrorism. A number of movements saw independence arrive supported in part by terrorism. Thus, political legitimacy attached to a number of 'wars of national liberation', which many developing countries saw not as terrorist campaigns, but as wholly legitimate armed struggles.

In the radical 1960s and 1970s, terrorism broadened to include ideologically motivated groups such as Germany's Red Army Faction, Italy's Red Brigades, France's Direct Action and America's Weathermen; today there are still a few fringe groups keeping the ideological terrorist flame alive.[6] This modern

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period also saw the emergence of various ethnoseparatists operating outside the traditional colonial context, including the Palestine Liberation Organisation and various groups connected with the Arab–Israeli dispute; ETA, the Basque separatists in northern Spain; the FLQ in Quebec; and, most bizarrely the South Moluccans, who hijacked a train in Holland to publicise their cause.

Modern trends

The 1970s and 1980s saw revolutionary terrorist groups defeated one after another around the world. International terrorism came to be identified through the activities of various groups associated with the struggle against Israel, and a spate of aircraft hijackings and hostage-takings and the alleged use of terrorist organisations by certain state sponsors as tools of foreign policy. The 1986 bombing of a disco in Berlin frequented by US forces was attributed to Libya, and the United States responded by bombing Tripoli. Libya became quiet, but the bombing of Pam Am flight 103 over Lockerbie followed in 1988, as did an increase in arms supplies to the IRA by Colonel Qadhafi's regime. Meanwhile, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 led to a US-backed insurgent movement, including a number of international volunteers, defeating the Red Army. The Iranian Revolution of 1978–9 had led to a revival in Shiite terrorism, now backed by Iran, and the emergence of suicide terrorism in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion of 1982. This campaign, which eventually led to the withdrawal of foreign peacekeeping forces from Lebanon after the suicide bombing of a US Marine Corps base in Beirut and the simultaneous attack on a French paratroop base in the city, appeared to validate the tactic. It was thereafter emulated and taken to new and unprecedented lengths by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka. This separatist movement adopted the tactic of martyrdom to devastating effect to revive its campaign, eventually assassinating the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, and used it more often than any group before.

Suicide terrorism has been seen in many contexts, including Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Lebanon and Israel. The LTTE's Black Tigers, who launched their first attack in July 1987, offer significant evidence that suicide terrorism is not merely a religious phenomenon and that, under certain extreme political and psychological circumstances, secular volunteers are fully capable of martyrdom.[7] But whether the individual perpetrators of such attacks were lone zealots or simply pawns in psychological operations often remained unclear. Is suicide terrorism a tactic of opportunity or an institutionalised strategy? Out of over 270 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2000, the LTTE carried out 168, Hizbollah 52, Hamas 22 and the PKK 15, according to one study. It also suggested three main types of suicide terrorism: groups that neither practise suicide terrorism on a regular basis nor approve of its use as a tactic, but which may initiate it on occasion for specific reasons; groups that formally adopt suicide terrorism as a temporary tactic, the leadership

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obtaining (or granting) ideological or theological legitimation for its use, recruiting and training volunteers, and then sending them into action with a specific objective in mind; and finally groups that use suicide terrorism as a permanent strategy.

The events of 11 September suggested that al-Qaeda might fit into this final category of terrorism as a permanent strategy, but the argument for inclusion in the second category of suicide terrorism with specific objectives in mind appears more compelling. Bin Laden may have drawn various false conclusions about US national resolve during the 1990s as a result of a number of attacks on US forces engaged in wars of choice, and underestimated the US willingness to accept causalties in defeating distant enemies as a result of episodes such as the withdrawal from Beirut in 1985.

An increased willingness to engage in suicide terrorism was not the only change in this period; the traditional structures of the groups concerned also evolved. Flatter, less hierarchical organisations began to emerge that were to find ultimate expression in the description of al-Qaeda as a loose network, analogous in some ways to a modern business school model of a responsive business organisation.[8] In the United States, the return of domestic terrorism and the unprecedented attack of 1995 in Oklahoma, resulting in mass casualties, by a reportedly right-wing conspiracy of just two people brought to prominence the concept of 'leaderless resistance'—the idea that individuals with little or no institutional affiliation or relationship with any command element might 'buy into' the doctrine and objectives of other more traditional groupings, but would undertake operations individually and independently.

If such people proved capable of sophisticated planning and execution and gained access to advanced technology, the implications for counterterrorism and law enforcement were grim. The Oklahoma bomber, Timothy McVeigh, proved that an individual using 'old terrorist' techniques, but determined to kill hundreds of people, found few barriers to entry into the terrorist profession. His capture and subsequent prosecution demonstrated the inability of such individuals to pose a strategic threat, but his descendant in terrorist terms, Richard Colvin Reid, who was caught trying to ignite his shoes on a flight from Paris to Miami after 11 September, revealed just how dangerous such leaderless terrorists could be and how the technique had spread. Indeed, al-Qaeda has proven particularly difficult to assess since the fall of the Taleban regime (and before it, for that matter) due to its amorphous structure. It may in fact embrace various types of terrorist operative, from the cell-structured trained professionals down to the leaderless opportunist, further complicating effective penetration and analysis.

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Superterrorism

As the Cold War ended, America's conventional military dominance had been underlined by victory in the Gulf War. Thereafter, the United States only reluctantly allowed itself to become entangled in post-Cold War conflicts, and during the 1990s there occurred a rediscovery of asymmetric conflict in American military thinking. Connected to this process, the concept of superterrorism emerged, closely linked to the other product of the upheavals of the Iranian Revolution, the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War—the phenomenon of the 'rogue state'. That concept evolved through various iterations including rogues, outlaw states, pariah states and, more recently, 'states of concern'. Members have variously included Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Serbia, Syria, Burma and Sudan. Deemed to have little stake in international order, such states were said to be commonly engaged in what was perceived as unacceptable behaviour, involving military aggression and other forms of violence, both internal and external. The concept of 'rogue states' was the subject of great debate and controversy, coming as it did to function as a post-Cold War lightning rod of US foreign and defence policy, and was dismissed by many as no more than an umbrella term for states that disagreed with America. More problematically, it was used to describe a diverse array of states with varying histories, governments, technical capabilities and military ambitions. The states included on the list were also perceived differently by various allies, most significantly in the differing attitudes towards Iran of Europe and the United States.

The United States consistently charged many if not all of the rogue states of supporting or sponsoring terrorism, which, even if they did not engage in aggressive war against their neighbours, did make them a threat to international order. Indeed, the whole threat of international terrorism appeared to be viewed by some observers through the prism of the sponsors, rather than the context of the individual groups. Long believed to be engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction, rogue states that also sponsored terrorists were of particular concern. Aum Shinrikyo's sarin attack on the Tokyo underground led to an outpouring of assessments on the likely use of WMD by terrorist organisations supported by the weapons programmes of rogue states. While it was accepted that virtually all terrorist organisations would face severe barriers in any attempt to procure, produce and, crucially, deploy effectively a mass casualty weapon (which Aum had only partially overcome after enormous expense and effort), if such a group were allied with a sponsor, the threat could prove greater than had previously been thought. This fitted in with the emerging rediscovery of asymmetric challenges in US military thinking and supported the discovery of superterrorism.

In the 1990s, analysts suggested that developing states and non-state groups would select 'asymmetric means' to undermine or attack Western interests. In the military field, the performance of the coalition during the Gulf War demonstrated the technological superiority of US and allied conventional

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forces, and the much-vaunted 'revolution in military affairs' (RMA) promised to widen further the gap between first-world and third-world conventional military forces. As a result, potential adversaries were believed likely to be forced to adopt alternative weapons and unconventional or 'asymmetric' strategies, homing in on first-world military weaknesses and avoiding their strengths, possibly by attacking them through vulnerabilities in their open civil societies. Asymmetric strategies included information warfare, the use of WMD and terrorism. As modern Western societies became more dependent on critical infrastructures, so adversaries, especially terrorists, were thought likely to see the opportunities in such new targets.

Perhaps, it was mooted, as well as a 'revolution in military affairs', one could now begin to speak of a 'revolution in terrorist affairs'.[9] Information warfare might soon be embraced by terrorists; just as the United States and numerous other countries were investing substantial resources in information warfare capabilities, with the aim of achieving 'information dominance', so terrorists could do the same. While the ultimate objective of an offensive information warfare attack would be to eliminate an adversary's information-gathering, filtering, processing and delivery system before a conflict actually began, developed societies' dependence on such advanced information systems and computers made them particularly vulnerable. Information warfare offered 'dangerous regimes' or terrorists that lacked resources a relatively cheap option for inflicting, or threatening to inflict, significant damage on technologically advanced countries like the United States and Britain. This debate broadened into a concern for critical civilian information infrastructures, including computer-based information for financial networks, telephone exchanges, electricity grids and air traffic control networks. In this connection, it was argued that of great concern were the large numbers of foreign students studying computer science and the physical sciences in American universities. Thus, 'third wave' thinking of the sort presented by the Tofflers permeated counterterrorism assessments, always with the caveat that, though there was no evidence for such capabilities as yet, it was inevitable that they would be utilised eventually. The number of foreign students seeking flying training, or indeed travelling to the United States to receive weapons training (a facility offered by certain British Muslim organisations on the internet in the months leading up to 11 September) was not commented upon.

At the strategic level, an asymmetric strategy meant seeking to avoid direct military confrontation; at the operational and tactical levels, it meant seeking ways to 'level the playing field' if forced into engaging the West militarily. As the British Strategic Defence Review of 1998 stated in its (brief) discussion of the phenomenon: 'Potential adversaries may choose to adopt alternative weapons and unconventional (or asymmetric) strategies, perhaps attacking us through vulnerabilities in our open civil society.' However, it was noted by thoughtful observers that merely identifying theoretical vulnerabilities did not mean that adversaries would necessarily attack them. Indeed, the focus on

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Western societal vulnerabilities had something of the Western perspective about it and failed to consider adequately how such societies might look to their adversaries. Furthermore, the Western advantage derived from the RMA digitisation of battlefield systems might also turn out to be an 'asymmetric revolution'. Thus the concept of asymmetric warfare began to be deprived of any useful meaning, as terrorism had been before it. However, the thinking behind the asymmetric conflict debate of the 1990s crucially informed the debate on the 'new terrorism' and appeared to offer proof that the threat of asymmetric warfare from substate groups was a real one.

The superterrorism debate was rooted in the assumption of the worst case asymmetric theories for the use of chemical and biological terrorism. By the 1990s, terrorism analysts had begun to discern a trend away from an ever-increasing number of terrorist incidents, with the data suggesting the opposite: the State Department's annual survey of international terrorism identified 348 terrorist attacks in 2001, down from the 666 recorded in 1987.[10] Instead, observers identified a new threat from religiously motivated, mass casualty terrorism in which the need for a 'body count' transcended any constraints which had held back earlier terrorist campaigns—fewer but increasingly deadly incidents was the prediction. Traditional terrorism had relied on the bomb and the bullet as the weapons of choice for over a century, and had managed to cause casualties in the low hundreds, but now the New Age of Terrorism heralded by the attack by Aum Shinrikyo had arrived. Drawing together the strands of religion as a motivation, the propensity to use suicide attack as a tactic and the proliferation of WMD as a potential means, superterrorism now posed, it was claimed, a high-consequence, if still low-probability, threat. Such superterrorists could employ chemical, biological or even nuclear (radiological) weapons, would probably be supported by state sponsors and could potentially threaten casualties in the thousands and upwards.

However, proof of the increased willingness to cause mass casualties was based on a small sample of attacks or attempted attacks during the 1990s, including the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, the attack on the Tokyo underground in 1995, the bombing of the Murrah federal office building in Oklahoma City, also in 1995 (killing 169), a series of 13 simultaneous car bombings in Bombay, the attack on US military facilities in Saudi Arabia at Khobar Towers (killing 19 and injuring 500), the bombing of two American embassies in East Africa in 1998 (killing 224 and injuring over 5,000), and the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000 (killing 17 and costing the US navy $170 million). Sceptics pointed out that most of these attacks still employed bombs and conventional explosives to achieve their effects, and that the incidents identified included an act of domestic terrorism in the United States by a Gulf War veteran and an attack by a Japanese cult in Japan, as well as religiously motivated Islamic extremism, and that the data were too limited to allow significant conclusions to be drawn.

Contrary to the fears of the superterrorism lobby, it was also argued that

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state sponsors might be reluctant, given the unstable nature of virtually all terrorist organisations in history, to entrust their most precious military research output to those elements over which they had the least direct control. The emphasis fell on the state sponsors simply because they were the most easily identified elements in a terrorist plot and fitted in with the focus of existing Western national security structures. Furthermore, the claimed religious motivation could be said to be masking political objectives in most, if not all, of the attacks. The willingness to commit suicide and to take significant numbers of lives did not necessarily make the terrorism different from what had preceded it; rather, it represented a change of tactic in pursuit of the same ends. The use of WMD by superterrorists was such a low-probability event, it was argued, that it would be better to focus on high-probability risks. Indeed, a tendency to exaggerate and distort the real threat was revealed in the wilder reports of the capabilities of the Aum Shinrikyo cult and its alleged crossing of the technological threshold by acquiring biological weapons capability in the 1990s—a claim that was shown to be false. Terrible though the death of twelve people from the use of sarin gas (a chemical not a biological weapon) was, it did not represent quite the technological watershed as which it has sometimes been presented.[11]

Nonetheless, the superterrorism idea began to take hold, and in a notorious interview on prime-time television in 1997, the US Secretary of Defense William Cohen held up a five-pound bag of sugar to demonstrate how much anthrax it would take to kill the population of Washington DC. The result was to focus attention on the low-probability end of the spectrum of threat—not least as the mass casualty terrorism that had been predicted failed to materialise before 11 September—and also to blur two complementary, but actually distinct, strands in American threat assessments: how to deal with rogue states and what were the future challenges of terrorism. The national security apparatus of the United States and its allies was culturally and administratively structured to deal with state-based threats when thinking about international challenges. The superterrorism debate allowed the focus to turn increasingly to the most dangerous scenarios for state-assisted mass casualty events. Terrorism, when it was thought about outside of this context, was regarded primarily as a criminal activity at the national level, which occasionally spilled over into attacks against Western interests. It was rarely seen as a strategic threat outside of the state-sponsored realm. In fact, it was in this period that the ability of the 'new' terrorists to organise, communicate and travel globally, effortlessly moving through Western societies, using many of the information age's advances to plan 'old' terrorist attacks, grew and was practised.

Postmodern terrorism

Overall, the distinction between old and new terrorism was perhaps overdone; most significantly, the focus on rogue state support for superterrorism

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appeared to be disproved by the al-Qaeda example when the assault on the United States began. As the editor of this volume has pointed out, Afghanistan was an example not so much of state-sponsored terrorism as of a terrorist-sponsored state.[12] Adopting the methodology of old terrorism, al-Qaeda used surprise, planning and training, coupled with a willingness to commit suicide, to cause thousands of casualties, eschewing the complexities of developing technologically demanding chemical and biological substances and the proven difficulties of effective dissemination. Its interest in mass casualties had been demonstrated in earlier attacks and plots, including the 1996 plan to hijack a number of US aircraft over the Pacific; but the attacks remained resolutely symbolic, if also demonstrative, perhaps even representing expressive violence. The capacity of global reach terrorism to cause thousands of casualties had been proven, but the inevitability of the use of non-conventional weapons had not. The example of 11 September may just as easily push terrorism in the opposite direction, towards a strategically more effective series of painful and repeated humiliations of American and Western presences around the world. The 'white powder' episode in America which followed 11 September was all the more perplexing as a consequence, and appeared to prove nothing other than the potential for Western societies to be dislocated by psychological challenges and the relatively limited physical effect such attacks could have compared with, say, a thousand-pound truck bomb of home-made explosives.

That the residual threat of mass effect and mass casualty terrorism, by whatever means, is available to the groups concerned, however, has been demonstrated by the events of 2001, and the need for appropriate preparedness on the part of target states is clear. 'Traditional terrorism' has been revealed to remain a likely weapon of choice for most terrorists and an enduring long-term danger. Terrorists still need certain sanctuaries, and while there may indeed be al-Qaeda elements in as many as forty or fifty countries, the chances of their having laboratories producing unconventional weapons is slim. The greatest dangers have been revealed to be the existence of lawless grey areas and regions around the world where literally thousands of activists can be trained unhindered over a number of years; the inability of intelligence agencies to cooperate effectively in the sharing of already acquired intelligence material; and the extent to which Western states can become transfixed by high-consequence, low-probability threats to the detriment of prudent action against high-probability, lower-consequence threats. Instead of terrorism, we should perhaps think in terms of 'terrorism*s*' and free ourselves from the tyranny of the search for an all-embracing and universally acceptable definition.

Modern states are actually not particularly well equipped to fight, or even capable of fighting, transnational and stateless terrorism. If convenient state sponsors cannot be identified, how will the fight be taken to the enemy if it chooses not to reveal itself? The majority of the world's advanced militaries are still configured for interstate conflict and, inasmuch as they consider other

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challenges, these have been labelled as support to civil authorities in the UK (where terrorism is perceived as a crime), or operations other than war in the United States. Strategic terrorism may require a rethink of many of these approaches well beyond what has been undertaken to date. What is clear is that states acting independently (even ones as powerful as the United States) are incapable of fighting such threats alone, however much they would like to believe otherwise. The challenges of modern terrorism require unprecedented cooperation between civil and military agencies, intelligence-sharing by competing providers and allies, and careful consideration of which civil liberties need to be sacrificed and which do not. They also require a move away from a focus on the type of conflict that the West is most comfortable concentrating on, simply because it fits existing models for understanding conflict and a preoccupation with mass casualty terrorism, and instead a continuous and careful analysis of the groups concerned, their contexts, and the range of tactics and techniques open to them. While certain individual terrorists may indeed see the need to match or even exceed the threshold of violence and destruction presented on 11 September, as the arrest of a suspect allegedly plotting to attack the United States using a radiological explosive device of some sort suggested, many others will seek again to surprise their target by the tactics and methodologies they adopt. Terrorists have over the past thirty years proven themselves generally operationally conservative, but also highly adaptable and able to innovate.

Terrorism in all its forms is, by its very nature, an asymmetrical response to superior force, and terrorists have always used their capabilities as force multipliers—usually through the exploitation of terror. The generation of fear, in effect the use of purposeful violence as a form of psychological warfare, can now be carried much further, enhanced by the modern media and the proliferation of mass media as much as by the proliferation of weapons. The old terrorist tactics of creating psychological effect in the target societies beyond the direct victims, communicating with supporters and encouraging a repressive response by the targeted remain central to their campaigns. The use of suicide terrorism does not necessarily mean this has changed and, while new technologies have improved significantly the capacity of substate groups to cause mass casualties and therefore cannot be ignored, it is more likely that weapons of mass effect, coupled with traditional tactics and weapons, will continue to be used, even by those terrorists on the 'super' end of the spectrum. Crucially, however, the capacity for strategic change remains debatable, since the strategic objectives sought by al-Qaeda and bin Laden have not, as yet, been advanced by the events of 11 September—indeed, so far the opposite is the case. Difficult though it is to accept, the vast majority of all terrorist violence, even suicide attacks, remain totally purposeful and, although rarely successful, are undertaken with ends in mind. The potential of terrorists to achieve strategic effect in the future may to a large extent, then, depend on how America and its allies react to these challenges, rather than on what the terrorists themselves do.

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Notes

1 Although fewer than 1,000 people required medical treatment.
2 Michael Radu, 'Terrorism after the Cold War: Trends and Challenges', *Orbis*, Spring 2002, pp. 275–87.
3 It is significant to note that the State Department includes in the definition of non-combatants 'military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed and/or not on duty', and that it regards as acts of terrorism 'attacks on military installations or on armed military personnel when a state of military hostilities does not exist at the site'. *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, Washington DC, US State Department, May 2002, p. xvi.
4 Conor Gearty, *The Future of Terrorism*, London, Phoenix, 1997, p. 11.
5 Maximilien Robespierre, quoted in Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, London, Gollancz, 1998, p. 16.
6 What claim to be remnants of the Red Brigades recently assassinated an economics professor who was advising the right-wing government in Italy on labour market reform.
7 Rohan Gunaratna, 'Suicide Terrorism: A Global Threat', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 20 Oct. 2000.
8 These ideas have been developed by, among others, Bruce Hoffman of Rand Corporation.
9 Stephen Sloan, 'Terrorism and Asymmetry', in Lloyd J. Matthews, ed., *Challenging the United States Symmetrically and Asymmetrically*, Carlisle Barracks, PA, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 1998, p. 180.
10 *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, p. 171.
11 See Milton Leitenberg, 'The Experience of the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo Group and Biological Agents', in Brad Roberts, ed., *Hype or Reality? The 'New Terrorism' and Mass Casualty Attacks*, Alexandria, VA, Chemical and Biological Arms Control Institute, 2000, pp. 159–72.
12 Lawrence Freedman, 'The Third World War?', *Survival*, vol. 43, no. 4, Winter 2001–2), pp. 61–88.

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