Reconceptualizing the Threat: Challenges to the Analysis of Terrorism

Closing Remarks to the World Summit on Counter-Terrorism

Mr. Brian Michael Jenkins
September 2023

About the ICT

The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is one of the leading academic institutes for counter-terrorism in the world. Using a multidisciplinary arpproach, the ICT work to facilitate international cooperation in the global struggle against terrorism.

As an independent think-do-tank, the ICT focuses on themes realted terrorism, counter-terrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability, risk assessment, intelligence analysis, national security, and defense policy.

Serving as a joint forum for international policymakers and scholars, the ICT draws upon the experiences of a comprehensive and international network of individuals and organizations with unique expertise on terrorism and counter-terrorism research, public policy analysis and education

In addition to publishing research papers, situation reports and academic publications for worldwide distribution, the ICT hosts a number of international seminars, workshops and conferences to discuss and educate followers on global and regional issues of security, defense, and public policy in order to better facilitate the exchange of perspectives, information and proposals for policy action.

Licensing & Distribution

Reichman University

International Institute for Counter–Terrorism (ICT)
With the Support of the Jusidman Foundation

Speeches & Conferences
September 2023
ict.org.il

Reconceptualizing the Threat:
Challenges to the Analysis of Terrorism

Mr. Brian Michael Jenkins

Abstract

In closing remarks at the ICT's 22nd World Summit on Counter-Terrorism: *Securing Tomorrow: Enhancing Counterterrorism Efforts in a Changing World* hosted in Memory of Mr. Shabtai Shavit (Z"L), Mr. Brian Jenkins discussed the continued challenges in the analysis of terrorism, the emerging threat horizon, and potential avenues that states, academics, and international organizations can do to respond to these threats.

Keywords: Terrorism, Counterterrorism, World Summit, Conference

Presented: 12 September 2023

Fellow colleagues, comrades-in-arms, dear friends, I want to share with you my personal thoughts about the challenges that oblige us to reconceptualize how we view terrorism and therefore how we think about counter-terrorism strategies.

The many years of experience and research that this assembly represents offer valuable perspective and insight, but the coils of history can also constrict our thinking. As the threat evolves we need to continuously reflect, review our assessments, and recalibrate our response.

As many of you know, I have worked in this field for more than fifty years--and I was commissioned in the army ten years before that. During this time, I have witnessed first-hand the ebbs and flows of political violence and armed conflict. I am convinced that we are presently navigating different currents.

I don't need to remind this audience that the threat continues. The apprehension and anger displayed here are understandable.

But the face of terrorism itself is changing. For the past 25 years, the threat posed by the jihadist terrorists has dominated the world's attention. Jihadists are currently scattered and under continuing pressure, but jihadist fronts still operate in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The most recent arrest of a homegrown jihadist allegedly planning attacks in the United States occurred just one month ago.

Beyond the jihadist threat, we confront a growing threat from White nationalist, neo-Nazi, and other extremists. These represent the violent edge of a broader social and political conflict. Democracies are on the defensive worldwide.

The boundaries of terrorism are blurring. We see the emergence of untethered terrorist actors motivated as much by their personal problems as by ideology, competing with each other for body counts and status—these are mass murderers with manifestos and live-streaming cameras. In my country, mass shootings are at an all-time high. Some people assert that all mass shootings should be considered acts of terrorism.

Ordinary people today seem to be on edge, quick to violence—a trend that precedes but was exacerbated by the pandemic. Below the threshold of terrorism, we are seeing a growing phenomenon of random social aggression—acts of violence that have no nexus to political ideologies or traditional crime, but that fall in the realm of generalized thuggish behavior.

At the other end of the spectrum, some organizations that originated as small extremist groups have survived to become proto-states. They have acquired vast arsenals of rockets and advanced missiles—and more recently drones, the effectiveness of which is being demonstrated in the war in Ukraine. The acquisition of the trappings of statehood has not, however, been accompanied by greater adherence to traditional norms of state behavior. Hezbollah is a prime example.

Despite decades of counterterrorism efforts, terrorism as a strategy and set of tactics to achieve political objectives has become normalized. This does not mean that terrorism is accepted as a legitimate mode of political expression, but the idea of ending terrorism no longer practically exists. Terrorism will be a component of future armed conflict and accompany political combat, as it has been for millenia.

Attitudes toward terrorism and counterterrorism are changing.

In Europe and the United States right now, terrorism has been eclipsed by great power competition. This makes it difficult to sustain vital counterterrorism intelligence efforts, operational capabilities, and supporting research programs. A return to Cold War cleavages will complicate international cooperation against terrorism.

Many would argue that the post-9/11 counterterrorist campaigns to degrade the operational capabilities of the group responsible, prevent further large-scale terrorist attacks, and contain home-grown jihadists have been in large measure successful. Yet the war in Afghanistan ended in catastrophe. Actions in Syria, Libya and Iraq have not fared much better.

A revisionist history is being advanced. It portrays counterterrorism as a malevolent campaign targeting ethnic and religious minorities. Clearly, we can identify prejudices, strategic errors, avoidable excesses, and, in my view, some egregious abuses of authority. These remind us that alarm and overreaction can corrode our commitment to the fundamental values, which are part of our arsenal. But counterterrorism was not an evil enterprise.

Unfortunately, the lesson some may learn is that counterterrorism should be avoided altogether as politically dangerous, dangerous to institutional survival, and dangerous to individual careers. That takeaway itself would be dangerous.

Old debates have reemerged. We face a new generation of people who would justify terrorist violence by noble objectives—that the end justifies the means. We have been here before.

The achievement of the last quarter of the 20th century was to obtain a degree of consensus that terrorism was defined not by the identity of the perpetrator or the nature of the cause, but by the quality of the act. That principle, which was the foundation for international cooperation against terrorists, is again under challenge.

Some suggest that terrorist violence may be ethical and responsible if it, for example, targets nations or corporations that are seen to be contributing to climate change that imperils humanity.

Given some of the nightmare scenarios of global warming, the concept of omnicide—that is, efforts to prevent widespread suffering by the deliberate self-extinction of human life on earth—is seen by some as a humane imperative—think of a global Masada.

State terror and state-sponsored terrorism are not new. But the increasing role played by unacknowledged military formations, semi-autonomous enterprises, sponsored militias, mercenaries, and proxies takes armed conflict into a gray area where responsibility is harder to prove, and rules are harder to enforce. This facilitates terrorist tactics. Iran's IRGC, a host of militia formations in Iraq and Syria, Russia's "little green men," the Wagner Group and other private armies, are examples. How to respond to these groups is a growing challenge.

Genocidal plots cannot be excluded. While thus far the world has avoided nuclear terrorism, the COVID pandemic reminds us that advances in science and technology eventually could lead to the creation of contagious pathogens that target specific races or ethnic groups. Some are promoting a conspiracy theory that the COVID virus was designed to kill Whites or Blacks while sparing Jews and Asians.

To suggest that Jews and Asians are somehow the beneficiaries of plague feeds the more dangerous assertion that Jews and Asians are the authors of genocide. Some extremists already believe that Jews are behind a plot to replace the White race.

We all know that terrorism can be a contentious topic. I also know that the people in this room represent political beliefs that run the spectrum. Therefore, I am aware that some of the things I am about to say may be controversial.

In my view, today's most serious national security threat does not derive from terrorism in its traditional form. The greatest and potentially existential threat comes from the deep social and political divisions and current domestic turmoil seen in both Israel and the United States.

Mutual respect in political discourse has been replaced by the intimidation of political opponents and increasingly belligerent rhetoric. The terms "treason" and "tyranny" appear frequently. The political winds carry whiffs of violence.

Many Israelis and Americans fear our countries are headed for civil war. If not civil war, then escalating turmoil with the real prospect of political violence.

Addressing the situation is more difficult when the enemy of the state is us.

These domestic divisions pose a more dangerous and more insidious threat that

cannot (and probably should not) be addressed through the narrow lens of counterterrorism. Indeed, given current circumstances, even using the term terrorism may be counterproductive.

In fact, today's domestic political extremists seem less likely to resort to traditional terrorist tactics on a widespread or systemic manner—there is no need. They have larger constituencies, they have access to sympathetic media, and they can even count on a measure political support.

We must also recognize the limits of what counterterrorism can achieve. Counterterrorism cannot end prejudice, bigotry, or hatred; counterterrorism cannot resolve religious differences. These are deeply embedded in society and must be addressed by the nation as a whole.

The challenge we faced in the 1970s--that we continue to face today--is how to protect society against the violence caused by the diffusion of destructive power to extremist states and extremist groups as well as to individuals whose grievances or political appetites cannot always be satisfied. When that threat includes our own fellow citizens, the challenge is even greater.

The motto of Reichman University is "freedom and responsibility." These words apply equally to the field of counterterrorism. How--as democracies dedicated to free and tolerant societies-- we deal with the fanatics, the irreconcilables, the would-be tyrants--and remain democracies— remains our fundamental challenge.