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Reflecting Upon the ICT25 Shabtai Shavit World Summit on Counterterrorism

Brian Michael Jenkins
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I want to begin by again thanking the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) for inviting me to give the closing keynote address at its recent Counter-Terrorism Summit. My comments on September 18 were no more than a preliminary sketch of observations offered in anticipation of later expanding my thoughts in writing. This is not an attempt to summarize the entire conference, which provided a vast display of up-to-date information and analysis, prompting further thought. These are my personal reflections.

A Conference in the Midst of a War

This summit was held in the midst of what has become Israel's longest war, a war that has involved military operations on multiple fronts—Gaza (less than 40 miles away from the conference site), Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, the Red Sea, Iran, Qatar. That the ICT and Reichman University, despite the distractions, disruptions, and organizational and logistics challenges, were able to carry this conference off so smoothly was a major feat. I congratulate them.

More than 130 speakers and just about a thousand participants from 50 countries attended the sessions. It seemed that fewer were there from Europe and the United States than in the past, in part reflecting the security situation, in part reflecting personal decisions or political discretion.

That, in my view, was a shame. Attendance does not require or manifest agreement, and it provides opportunities for the frank exchanges and lively discussions that have characterized past summit meetings. These discussions are more than ever useful at this time. As often has been the case, Israelis themselves are fiercely debating these matters. More foreign perspectives are valuable. And based upon my own experience, being there instead of boycotting, facilitates being heard.

As is typical of past ICT Summits, the four-day program was densely packed, intense—at times heart-rending. By my count, there were 29 individual keynote addresses, three one-on-one

dialogues, nine panel discussions, and 10 workshops. I had to admit that by the time it came for my closing remarks, I was physically, mentally, and emotionally worn out.

Soldiers, diplomats, heads of intelligence services, police chiefs, political leaders, military analysts, and subject experts offered assessments of the current situations in Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, Iran, Syria, Europe, Australia, and the United States. They addressed an array of issues from international law to economic warfare and terrorist financing.

The Issues

A handful of issues clearly dominated concerns, but there were others that percolated more subtly through the discussions—less obvious, but important indicators of change. My list includes: the emergence of guerrilla proto-states; hostage situations as a strategic issue; the persistence of ideological extremism and religious fanaticism as the driving forces of political violence, but diversification of the actors; the worldwide rise in antisemitism; the blurring definition of terrorism; the growing role of cognitive warfare, and; the changing nature of armed conflict

Analysts tend to overuse clichés like “paradigm shift” or “inflection point,” but I believe we are at such a moment in the phenomenon of terrorism, and that it will require a strategic re-think.

From Urban Guerrillas to “Proto-States”

The adversaries in the current conflicts are not the small, clandestine groups of urban guerrillas that the world confronted fifty years ago. Some are “proto-states” like Hamas, Hezbollah, and Ansar Allah (the Houthis).

Islamic State’s caliphate, which for a short period ruled a territory across Syria and Iraq roughly the size of the United Kingdom, was an earlier manifestation. The latest contender is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HST), which took the field in Syria’s civil war as an offshoot of Al Qaeda, survived battles with Islamic State and military offensives by the Syrian government and Russian forces to eventually overthrow and replace the Assad regime. It is now seeking to shed its label as a foreign terrorist organization and obtain formal recognition as the government of Syria. (Unlike Islamic State and HST, al Qaeda under Osama bin Laden never sought to declare a caliphate or control territory.)

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Instead of hit-and-disappear terrorist spectaculars, proto-states control territory and populations. They have administrative structures that collect taxes, provide basic services, including health care, social welfare, education, and law enforcement. They field large, battle-hardened militias, capable of conducting battalion-level ground operations, and they are armed with modern weapons including missiles.

Although it fought mainly as a guerrilla and terrorist force, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was also capable of larger-scale military operations, but it lacked the substantial arsenals of rockets, drones, and missiles possessed by Hezbollah, the Houthis, and to a lesser degree, Hamas. These have enabled contemporary groups to conduct aerial attacks.

Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis are also members of an Iranian-led alliance, which provides financial support, training, and weapons. Alliances among terrorist groups and state-sponsored terrorism occurred in earlier decades as well, but large-scale transfers of advanced weapons like missiles or precision guidance systems is a more development. Iran's role may reflect that country's unique political trajectory and worldview, but what we see now may also be a precedent for less constrained assistance to proxies as a component of future warfare.

The evolution from small clandestine groups to proto-states alters counterterrorism, putting it beyond purely law enforcement and closer to the domain of counterinsurgency, even conventional war. The current conflicts involve conventional military operations on the ground, in the air, and in maritime environments, and they can have strategic consequences beyond the conflict zone, for example, the interruption of shipping through the Suez Canal caused by Houthi missile and drone attacks on commercial maritime traffic in the Red Sea.

Countering proto-state actors requires the mobilization of national resources to conduct sustained large-scale military operations, which can also change the public perception of the adversary from terrorist outlaw to formal belligerent. This does not legitimatize their employment of terrorist tactics, but it can add a gloss of legitimacy to their armed struggles.

Hostage-taking—from terrorist tactic to strategic weapon

The topic of hostages repeatedly came up during the conference—in the moving testimony of a former hostage and relatives of current hostages, in a one-on-one dialogue between two experienced hostage negotiators, in a two-hour workshop which saw a lively exchange of views that continued at a dinner late into the night, in the daily newspapers as we met, and in numerous conversations in the hallways outside the auditorium.

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The planned mass abduction carried out on October 7, 2023 elevated hostage-taking from a terrorist tactic to a strategic level. Not only did Hamas murder more than 1,200 Israelis, but it seized 251 hostages, including the remains of Israelis killed in the attack.

The scale of the Hamas attack predictably provoked a ferocious Israeli response, which the possession of hostages did not prevent. However, Hamas's leaders may have believed that the presence of hostages might at least tactically constrain Israeli military operations, and Israeli forces did alter tactics to a degree. Holding hostages as human shields, plus the protection provided to Hamas's fighters by its tunnels, would increase the organization's chances of riding out the expected Israeli offensive with its forces relatively intact. (Civilians in Gaza, who had no access to the tunnels, would bear the brunt of the attack—their deaths served the strategic interests of Hamas.)

Surviving a brief onslaught, as they had on previous occasions, Hamas may have further calculated that growing public concern in Israel about the well-being of so many hostages would prevent a protracted military campaign? That would lead to a ceasefire, piecemeal hostage releases, and prolonged negotiations as was the case of Gilad Shalit who was held for five years. This in turn would guarantee Hamas's long-term survival. It had worked before.

After the release in late November 2023 of 81 Israeli women and children, who might not have survived lengthy captivity, there were no releases in 2024 and seven releases in 2025, each of between three and four hostages. Hamas made no further releases after February 2025 with the exception of one Israeli-American hostage following negotiations between the United States and Hamas.

On the Israeli side, while no government could be seen to abandon hostages, it quickly became clear that their fate would not determine Israeli strategy, which initially aimed at preventing further Hamas attacks and deterring Hezbollah from joining the fray, and then destroying Hamas once and for all. This realization intensified the understandable desperation of the hostages' families to persuade Israeli leaders to prioritize bringing the hostages back, even if it meant accepting a ceasefire and the likely survival of Hamas. Public pressure increased after Hamas halted releases in early 2025.

Israel's political leaders and others argued that public protests elevating the hostage issue encouraged Hamas to hold on to them and continue its armed resistance. Only escalating military pressure would persuade Hamas to release all of its remaining hostages. Suspicions remained

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that any Hamas promise to return all of the hostages in return for a ceasefire would be broken and instead Israel would be again faced with partial releases and further negotiations that would drag on for months of years.

The division over the whether the release of hostages or the destruction of Hamas should be the paramount objective created a perverse paradox. As one of the participants in the workshop discussion noted, public pressure to end the war and bring the hostages home "hardened Hamas' stance and gave it hope of surviving in power in Gaza, prolonging the hostages' captivity."

Indirectly, the hostage issue influenced Israeli strategy as well. The absence of further hostage releases and the dwindling number of remaining living hostages increased pressure on the Israeli government to demonstrate that the terrible sacrifice had been worthwhile by destroying Hamas. Nothing less than unconditional surrender, disarmament and expulsion would be acceptable. If Israel accepted anything less than total victory, why had it not done so earlier when it might have saved the lives of more hostages?

As a postscript, in return for a ceasefire, Hamas was persuaded to agree to the release of the hostages, living and deceased. It promptly returned the surviving hostages, and eventually all but one of the remains of 28 others. That process brought relief to the hostage families, but also underscored their anger.

Familiar Causes but New Configurations of Actors

Political extremism on both the left and the right, along with separatism and deeply embedded religious and ethnic hatreds, drove terrorist tactics in the 1970s. Political ideologies reflecting extreme religious beliefs appeared in the 1980s and have dominated counterterrorism since the 1990s.

These engines of terrorist violence have remained much the same. Most of the earlier nationalist separatist conflicts have been settled. The Palestinian armed struggle continues, but with a more Islamist orientation. Antisemitism has significantly increased. Although their combined share accounts for a smaller share of today's total volume of violence, ideological violence also continues. Whether the far-left or the far-right accounts for a greater share of that violence depends on whose keeping score and what they count.

What *has* changed is the composition of the actors. We have already touched upon the emergence of proto-states allied with each other and state sponsors. States are also more openly

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employing mercenary groups as proxies or contracting criminals in murder-for-hire killings of foreign foes and domestic dissidents living abroad.

Merchant vessels may be contracted by a state to drag their anchors to damage undersea cables. Houthis attack merchant vessels in the Red Sea, in part to support Hamas and punish Israel. The effects on international maritime commerce and Egypt's Suez Canal revenue are devastating, but the attacks may also be part of a protection racket. Some states use cybercrime, employing both special units and criminal gangs to attack foreign enemies and for financial gain. Some states use arbitrary or wrongful detentions of foreign nationals as a means of diplomatic coercion. The adoption of these tactics blurs the lines between state and non-state actors, between open and clandestine warfare, between military operations, transnational crime, and terrorist campaigns, between terrorist tactics and military operations.

The Atomization of Violence

At the other end of organizational spectrum from state and proto-state actors, we see the atomization of violence. The internet and social media made it possible for extremist groups to remotely radicalize, recruit, inspire, and instruct terrorist volunteers. Volunteers appear to be getting younger, and they radicalize faster. Like all true believers, they can slide easily from one belief system to another.

Recruiting by exhortation led to self-selecting terrorists who embrace violence-supporting ideologies as conveyers for their individual discontents. Beyond these actors are untethered *terrorists-errant* who carry out attacks ostensibly on behalf of various causes but who, with Go-Pro cameras, live-streaming, and social media screeds, appear to be competing in a deadly online video game for the highest body count. Marginal figures in life, they become mass murderers with manifestos, in search of infamy. *I kill therefore I am.*

We also have seen an increase random social aggression, unconnected with ideology or traditional criminal activity—unprovoked assaults like stabbings, vehicle ramming attacks, people being pushed off subway platforms, hit with hammers, attacked for no discernible reason—as well as minor encounters that can instantly escalate into deadly violence. These often occur in public venues—public buses, trains, metro stations—places where strangers come together. Unruly behavior on board airliners and road rage have also increased.

The motives behind these addled attacks and angry outbursts are murky. Mental illness, drug addiction, or drunkenness figure in many of the cases. Social tensions, political divisions, violent

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rhetoric have further eroded the norms of courtesy and comity. The upswing in mad behavior was especially notable during the pandemic, but preceded Covid-19, and has remained high since. Medieval historians noted that plagues left behind societies that were on edge, quick to violence.

Wars of Religion

Faith-driven violence is not a new phenomenon. From the 7th century until well into the 19th century, the Middle East and Mediterranean region were theaters of almost continuous warfare between Islam and Christendom. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Europe was wracked internally by vicious wars resulting from differences within the Christian faith.

Although eclipsed by the tens of millions killed in two world wars, conflicts driven by religion continued through the 20th century. A million people died during the partition of India between Hindus and Muslims. Historic hostility between Protestants and Catholics led to the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. Sri Lanka's civil war resulted in part from religious differences between its Buddhist government and Hindu and Muslim separatists.

The rise of Islamist fanaticism in the late 20th century fueled terrorist campaigns and wars that spread from Southwest Asia through the Middle East and across northern Africa. These have continued into the 21st century. At the same time, Sunnis and Shias attacked each other. Minority religious communities—Yazidis, Assyrian Christians, the Druze, Bahai, Christians in South Sudan––were slaughtered. Both Christians and Muslims targeted the Jews.

It is hardly surprising then that the topic of faith-inspired violence is a recurring theme at conferences on counterterrorism. However, in his opening remarks to the 2025 Summit, Professor Uriel Reichman, the founder of Reichman University and chair of its board of directors, departed from the usual territory of violence between the Abrahamic religions to offer a history of the deep division between the supporters of Israel's democratic state and its increasingly powerful religious far right.

Israel's contemporary zealots believe that "Greater Israel" is an exclusive Jewish inheritance and that its settlement by Jews is divinely ordained. They oppose any political compromise that would cede land to the Palestinians. Those who would compromise on this issue betray fellow Jews.

According to this extremist view, that category included Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin who signed the Oslo Accords in 1993—his assassination in 1995 was therefore permissible. Prime Minister

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Ariel Sharon, who withdrew Israeli forces and forcibly removed Israeli settlements from Gaza in 2005, was also a target of Jewish extremists.

These same messianic beliefs, Professor Reichman warned, were behind recent government efforts to reduce Israel's independent judicial authority, and were driving Israeli strategy in the war in Gaza, which the extremists want to resettle. The internal battle for Israel's future will transcend the current war.

The controversial role of radical political religion arises in other countries in the form of Christian nationalism, which often overlaps with white supremacy and cultural extremism. We see examples of this in Europe, Russia, Canada, and the United States. It also can be source of political violence, although this is a topic of intense debate.

The Rise of Antisemitism

Speakers from Europe, America, and Australia addressed the dramatic rise of threats and attacks on Jewish community targets during the Gaza War. Antisemitism had already reached a high point in 2022, but since October 7, 2023, we have witnessed a significant escalation in antisemitic rhetoric and violence.

Antisemitism is an old and persistent prejudice, easily inflamed and accelerated by today's social media algorithms. Israel's bombing of Gaza, which quickly followed Hamas's terrorist rampage, ignited a global reaction. In the war of images, Gazans had the home-court advantage. Thousands of cell phone cameras recorded the destruction caused by Israel's aerial campaign even as Israelis were still reeling in shock from the Hamas attack.

Arguments of strategic necessity and the challenges of urban warfare had little effect on the narrative battles that accompanied war in Gaza. My personal view is that Israel appeared as unprepared for the information war as it had been for the original Hamas attack, and despite its sophisticated psychological warfare capabilities, it never caught up.

Some of the response to the horrors of war appeared spontaneous, but some of it revealed longer-term shifts. While those who had always opposed to Israel's existence on ideological grounds remained obdurate in their views, the inherent sympathies that benefitted Israel in the past had eroded. Knowledge of the Holocaust was fading, especially among younger people—one could even joke about gas chambers. Israel was no longer perceived as the underdog defending itself against Arab aggressors, but was portrayed as the oppressor of Palestinians.

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Muslim immigration had changed demographics, politics, and collective perceptions in the West. University campuses had become strongholds of pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli sentiments. Arab financial donations to American universities have increased significantly since the 1970s and have increased influence and shaped attitudes. Hard-left groups have allied with pro-Palestinian organizations.

Pro-Palestinian protesters allege that their efforts are being smeared as antisemitic in order to discredit their cause. One need only look at the thousands of Israelis protesting weekly against its government to conclude that objections to Israel's policies, in particular, its strategy in Gaza, are not all antisemitic. But there is a critical difference. If the protests in the West are premised on the principle that Jews do not have the right of statehood, then that falls within the domain of antisemitism. And it is noteworthy that hostility toward Israel is often manifested in threats and attacks directed against the local Jewish community.

Pro-Palestinian protests have also attracted the support of white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, not out of solidarity with the Palestinians, but as opportunities to further their own agendas. While protesters against Israeli policies are not responsible for the attitudes and actions of undesirable allies, their own rhetoric often slides into antisemitism. "From the river to the sea" is an example.

Fractured Societies

The resurgence of religious wars and the pro-Palestinian protests reveal another aspect of how the world is changing. Israel, the United States, countries in Europe, the United Kingdom, as well as many others across the globe are deeply divided internally. Social cohesion has declined. Few countries can claim to have a united population, and some of those making such claims are authoritarian states where manifestations of dissent are suppressed.

This change, which is the result of complicated forces beyond the scope of these comments, alters the social and political landscape of armed conflict. Deep political divisions make it more difficult to mobilize national will and apply national power. It guarantees that any action will be challenged domestically. Brief operations may be possible, but these have limited effect. Sustained campaigns may be impossible. Fractured societies are also more vulnerable to disinformation and influence campaigns, which further undermine commitment.

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The Blurring Definition of Terrorism

Battles over the definition of terrorism dominated early policy debates in the 1970s. Combatting terrorism in the international environment in the form of airline hijackings, attacks on diplomats, or terrorists going abroad to carry out terrorist attacks, required international consensus on a definition. This was a contentious topic.

Many viewed legal efforts to outlaw terrorist tactics as an extension of the universal principles codified in the Geneva Conventions governing the conduct of war. Others agreed that the laws of war should be extended to cover wars within states as well as interstate warfare mainly in order to protect non-state combatants. But governments of former colonies that had recently gained independence and whose leaders had been the targets of repressive colonial antiterrorism laws, also wanted to protect allies still fighting for independence.

They argued that the definition of terrorism could not be applied to the tactics of those opposed to "colonial, racist and alien regimes." In other words, the debate was not about defining the concept of terrorism or agreeing on what constituted terrorist tactics, but about excluding certain actors on the basis of their cause. Opponents of this view argued that this would normalize terrorism.

Hoping to keep data collection out of the political realm, I argued at the time that terrorism should be defined by the quality of the act, not the identity of the perpetrator or nature of the cause. Defining and outlawing specific terrorist tactics gained ground as reflected in a growing corpus of international conventions. But the assertion that *terrorism* itself was a construct created to support imperialist and colonial oppression never disappeared. It resurfaced following the October 7 attack in Israel when pro-Palestinian groups claimed that Israel was a "settler-colonialist state" and therefore has no right to self-defense against the people whose land it occupies—in other words, those fighting for self-determination can use *all available means.*

Over the years, there also has been a continuing tendency to expand the definition of terrorism. Some of this reflected public pressure. Many people see charging mass shooters with multiple counts of murder as inadequate. Whether or not the killers are motivated by ideology or seek to alter government policy, they should be treated as terrorists. It does not alter the criminal penalties, since mass murderers are guilty of multiple homicides, but it reflects moral outrage.

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Governments themselves contribute to blurring the definition by combining "targeted shootings" with terrorist attacks. Of course, motives make little difference to police responding to such events, but including them as terrorist attacks muddies the definition.

Governments themselves further muddy the definition. Government agencies may apply the definition of terrorism more broadly to heighten the issue and obtain more resources. Labeling criminal gangs as terrorist organizations may be seen as a way to reduce constraints on law enforcement. Creative prosecutors in the United States have sought to add terrorist charges to ordinary crimes in order to threaten defendants with harsher sentences and thereby obtain easy plea bargains.

The shift in the focus from combatting terrorist tactics to countering terrorist groups further compounded definitional limits. Does designating a group as a terrorist organization mean that everything it does henceforth is an act of terrorism? Insurgent groups may use terrorist tactics––for example, taking hostages to exchange for imprisoned comrades, but if the insurgents engage government forces in open combat, is that now also a terrorist attack? It would not be except for the application of the label terrorist to the group.

We also see states adopting terrorist behavior, for example, using arbitrary or wrongful detentions of foreign nationals as a mode of coercive diplomacy, or sending assassins or hiring criminals to murder foreign foes and dissidents living abroad. This is not a new phenomenon, and such acts were included in our original chronologies of terrorism regardless of whether they were carried out by states. As international norms erode under continuous assault by countries determined to change the international order, these events appear to be increasing or at least increasingly blatant.

In the broadest sense, it also seems that states have adopted, if not the tactics, a basic concept of terrorism, that threats and actual violence are intended primarily to provoke psychological effects aimed at the people watching. Kinetic warfare—guns and bombs—are not obsolete, but much of today's warfare is performative to underscore threats or discourage resistance.

While these developments complicate research, counterterrorism analysts should avoid *intellectual purism*, narrowing their focus to the point of ignoring broader developments. For example, alliances between terrorists and transnational criminal organizations or state actors, who may employ terrorist tactics themselves, do not change the definition of terrorist tactics, but clearly affect the political landscape and complicate counterterrorist efforts.

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By defining precisely defining terrorism in the 1970s, we imagined that we could isolate and contain the phenomenon. That clearly has not worked. Terrorist tactics have not become legitimate, but concepts of terrorism and terrorist tactics have been normalized. Terrorist tactics are crimes, but cannot be viewed solely as criminal acts. Terrorism is a also a mode of armed conflict and must be viewed within the broader context of warfare.

Warfare Itself is Changing

Israel is in the 24th month of a long and bloody war that has involved ground warfare, aerial attacks, and maritime operations on multiple fronts. The conflict began with a massive terrorist operation—the second deadliest attack in the annals of terrorism. It has involved states and proto-states, partners and proxies. It has provoked protests and terrorist plots worldwide. It has dislocated international commerce. This is a scale of armed conflict far beyond the traditional realm of terrorism.

We are entering an age of warfare where terrorist campaigns, guerrilla warfare, conventional warfare, clandestine sabotage of infrastructure, cyberwarfare, cognitive warfare, influence operations, economic warfare and measures other than war can no longer be regarded as separate domains. It is a domain that strategists have been exploring for decades, but that has only recently begun to penetrate Western military thinking. Having been involved in almost continuous asymmetric and hybrid warfare for most of the past hundred years, Israel should be a leading forum in understanding this phenomenon.

Our discussions at this conference have proceeded from the Abraham to Artificial Intelligence, from elusive foes to virtual armies to the intangible enemies created by AI. During the last four days, we have discussed many of these modes of conflict—terrorism and counterterrorism, hostage situations, biowarfare, cyberwarfare, lawfare, economic sanctions, and cognitive warfare.

While it makes sense to assemble subject matter experts and specialist practitioners to address each of these topics, it means treating them as separate components. That mirrors how government addresses them.

Governments have separate organizations for military operations, which come under the purview of a ministry or department of defense. Clandestine operations usually are the purview of intelligence services. Cyber warfare and influence operations are often divided among several

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government agencies. Sanctions and economic warfare reside in another entity, soft power in yet another.

Assembling the components into a grand strategy remains an *ad hoc* process that may involve territorial battles on bureaucratic frontiers. This forum can more easily transcend the boundaries to freely explore the new state of warfare. It is worthy of discussion at next year's summit.

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