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Global Trends in Terrorism

Sir David Veness

My submission in this paper is that the key global trend in terrorism and counterterrorism is that there is a gap between a significant group of threats and the collective response. This group of terrorist threats has grown in scale including numbers, geographic span, innovative methodology, and exploitation of electronic technology. This growth and development is tantamount to the reinvention of terrorism. Central to this growth and development has been the period in which this group of threats has operated and latterly occupied territory in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, the new US administration is thus entirely correct to identify this group of threats as a priority focus.

The opportunity is to further enhance understanding of the current group of threats and to assess what is next in their timeline. There is also the opportunity—indeed the necessity—to define the aims and scope of a collective and comprehensive continuing revision of counterterrorist strategy. To expand the gap thesis, it may be helpful to pose the question: what grounds are there to justify the claim that terrorism has, at least in part, been reinvented?

The most compelling evidence is the global context of contemporary conflict and the role that terrorism plays to make these conflicts more harmful. Terrorism is being used by the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qa'ida (AQ) in Syria and Iraq as a component of military operations. It is a strategic and tactical asset in overlapping civil war and insurgency made more dire and complex by the use of Syria and Iraq as arenas to pursue regional tensions and struggles.

The result is massive harm:

- Death and injury on an enormous scale;
- Human refugee crises;
- Internal population displacement;
- Community breakdown; and
- Phenomenal property damage

The harm caused by terrorism in Syria and Iraq “spills over” to the directly neighboring states. For Iraq, the direct neighbors are Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, and Turkey (6 countries); for Syria, the direct neighbors are Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan (5 countries). In total, nine direct neighbors cross-border. Terrorist attacks connected to Syria and Iraq have been commonplace—notably in Turkey, but also regularly in Lebanon and Jordan.

Spillover has also involved an unprecedented refugee influx to neighboring countries with the further generation of population flows onwards to Western Europe. Spillover also contributes to internal instability in directly neighboring countries—again Turkey is a compelling example where IS seeks to directly contribute to violence between Turks and Kurds and Islamists and secular Turks. Although Syria, Iraq, and the directly neighboring states are among the clearest examples of the negative impacts of terrorism, they are not alone. But they are an essential element of a new counterterrorism strategy.

Patrick Cockburn writing in *The Age of Jihad* points to eight wars being fought in Muslim countries in Asia/Africa: Syria and Iraq are two. The other six are the armed conflict between Turkey and Kurds and civil wars in Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and northeast Nigeria. Terrorism by extremist jihadist groups plays a role in each of these conflicts. The threat of terrorism is also an important element of discord in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, and Kenya in Africa and Pakistan in Asia. The geographic breadth of conflict of which terrorism is a key factor reinforces the analysis that the threat of terrorism has been “reinvented”.

But there is another important evidential aspect to this conclusion. Here we take a different perspective and narrow the lens to view the current threat through the eyes of those presently responsible for protecting Western cities. In my view, they are confronting multiple layers of threat that are unprecedented and represent a major step change from previous terrorist methodology.

What do I mean by layers of threat and why are they important? To begin with, they are indicators of the complexity of the task confronting those charged with public security. Next, they are indicators of threat development and the need for dynamic evolution of counterterrorism. In recent years, a Western city may have typically confronted three attack layers, for example:

- Expeditionary attacks by cross-border terrorists;
- Domestic groups pursuing violent agendas; and
- Attacks upon foreign interests by overseas groups, such as an Embassy attack.

My analysis is that current counterterrorism policymakers and practitioners in Western cities are facing seven layers of threat. The growth from three to seven layers of threat has taken place mainly because of factors external to the cities themselves. This underlines the importance of closer coordination of effort to counterterrorism between CT activities at home and CT endeavors overseas.

What are the seven layers I am highlighting?

Firstly, “core” group attacks. These are important because core group attacks include the risk of spectacular and highly impactful events.

Next are external operations and support structures. The most compelling examples are in Western Europe and Turkey, where IS has clearly positioned resources to mount attacks either by the external teams themselves or in partnership with core group attackers or local extremists. External operations are a major development. They have the potential to be adopted by affiliate groupings as well as core entities—thus proliferating these structures.

Third are the overseas actions of affiliate groups of both IS and AQ on the model that AQAP has pursued previously.

Fourth are local groups in Western nations where the local groups have a lesser degree of linkage than core plots and external operations, but, nevertheless, are pursuing a related extremist agenda.

Fifth is the category that has seen considerable growth and which has the largest scope for future expansion. These are attacks conducted by individuals or small groups who have been inspired or provoked to attack Western targets using whatever means are at hand. Terrorist propaganda commonly by electronic means is the method to radicalize, maybe in a short time period, and further exploit developments in electronic communication, especially of images, acting as a multiplier to optimize coverage and impact. These attacks are simple, they reach out to a very wide range of potential attackers, and they focus on unprotected targets. Regrettably, hostile vehicles in crowded places are becoming a hallmark of this attack category. It is a mistake to dismiss this layer of attack as low impact as the July attack in Nice last year brutally demonstrated.

The sixth stratum is the menace of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (the FTF threat). It is salutary that the FTF threat, which is a significant indicator of changed circumstances, is only one of seven contemporary layers. The FTF threat is enhanced by sheer numbers and its connection to other layers, including core groups, external operations structures, and local groups.

For completeness, there is the insider threat, such as the Turkish policeman who murdered the Russian Ambassador on December 19th, 2016 in Ankara. Insider threats are also of special concern to aviation and transport security.

The seven layers are further complicated by the scale of numbers, innovation, manipulation of mental illness, the exploitation of smuggling routes, and the mass movement of people in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

These complications are crosscutting factors in addition to these seven layers:

- Core groups;
- External structures;
- Affiliates;
- Local groups;
- Inspired/provoked incidents;
- FTF; and
- Insiders.

These seven layers will predictably overlap and interact in both preparation and attack phases. This has been a feature of recent attacks. However, the key lesson for counterterrorism practitioners is that each layer has the capability to prepare and deliver attacks acting in its own right as an independent threat. What then does the new US administration need to know about terrorism and counterterrorism?

Firstly, the terrorist threat is very severe and likely to be substantial and persistent; it applies to both the homeland and overseas national interests; and its recent trajectory has been worsening. The global context of conflict in Asia and Africa and notably Syria and Iraq is important. The caliphate has a timeline and will continue to change, but the concept will not disappear. Presently, the quasi-state with resource access, territory, operational reach and functioning as a laboratory for terrorist innovation, and a magnet for FTFs is diminishing. But, alternative lawless space exists in Syria and Iraq and in affiliate territories and there is also the question of a symbolic or virtual caliphate—a caliphate by other means.

The multi-dimensional threat to Western cities is especially challenging. Innovation is part of the threat and will continue to add new menaces. Further development of inspired and provoked attacks is highly likely, especially as IS pursues revenge as its territory shrinks; this development will be assisted by advances in electronic technology. The terrorist threat has arguably been reinvented and the new multi-layered reality presented by IS and AQ is the starting point for enhanced response.

As regards counterterrorism, there are abiding elements of wisdom which remain relevant:

- Don't make matters worse;
- Don't make avoidable errors;
- Define achievable and positive aims; and
- Operate within the rule of law.

Beyond these basics, counterterrorism needs to be rethought, improved, and enhanced because present coalition and other strategies are not reducing the threat. Elimination of the threat is unrealistic and not a sensible aim. Progress towards reduced instability in Syria and Iraq is a very important component of a rethought strategy. This progress should involve all the neighboring nations and relevant regional powers plus existing coalition partners. The inclusive multinational effort should involve political and diplomatic as well as military components. The intervention of very large-scale Western military forces on a war footing will be counterproductive and will meet predictable domestic opposition within the multinational effort.

The preference for operations by, with, and through local actors remains the best option, but there is clearly scope for considerable improvement in training of local forces and for expansion of the range of specialist and expert reinforcement of local actors. Local forces are the only long-term solution. Demonization of the religion of Islam is to be avoided. It risks conflation of violent and nonviolent entities. The perceived Syrian ground truth is that the West has failed to protect Muslims at a time of dire suffering. Thus, demonization only reinforces negative consequences and supports extremism. Any greater involvement of Western militaries may achieve benefits, but will also add to the threat to Western interests at home and abroad. Revenge attacks are inevitable.

Thus, measures to protect US interests overseas need to be reinforced by an agenda of actions including increasingly robust travel advice, support to the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), realistic appraisal of local security capacity, and review of the actuality of local deployment to protect Western interests, tourists, and aviation among others.

The multinational effort will not be successful unless it is sustained and multifaceted. These elements need to be fundamental to the design of a revised strategy. Deficiencies in counterterrorism need to be addressed in developed as well as developing countries. Contribution to cross-border efforts remains incomplete, for example inadequate support for Europol and Interpol databases. International cooperation needs more proactivity.

To summarize, the creation of an effective revised counterterrorism strategy on an inclusive multinational foundation is a major challenge that must draw upon the widest range of talents and experience. It is an enormously sophisticated and complex undertaking. But, there is immense expertise on this topic in the world's leading intelligence and security agencies. There is a fund of good work already underway in various coalitions, the GCTF, and the UN strategy.

Finally, what does success look like for a revised counterterrorism strategy? There are four achievable aims:

- The adverse impact IS/AQ is limited, especially in Syria and Iraq and affiliate provinces;
- Syria is in transition to less instability;
- Iraq is more stable; and
- There is enhanced counterterrorism in target countries to address both national targets and overseas targets within the target countries.

About the Author

Sir David Veness is an Honorary Professor of International Relations at the Handa Centre For the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews. David served as Under-Secretary General for the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) from its creation in 2005, following a terrorist tragedy in Iraq, until June 2009. This role carries responsibility for the protection of UN staff and operations globally. Prior to this appointment, he was Assistant Commissioner Specialist Operations at New Scotland Yard from 1994-2005. David has a continuing commitment to public/private co-operation in the interests of public security and chairs the Advisory Board of the London First Security & Resilience Network. He was awarded the Queen's Police Medal in 1994, appointed a Commander of the British Empire in 2000, and Knighted in 2004.