



The Georgetown Security Studies Review (GSSR)

ISSN: 2474-8552 (Print) 2474-8560 (Online)

Journal homepage: <http://www.georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/>

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To cite this article: Paul R. Pillar, “Terrorism and Current Challenges for Intelligence,” *The Georgetown Security Studies Review*, Special Issue: What the New Administration Needs to Know About Terrorism and Counterterrorism, 108-111.

To link to this article: <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Pillar-Terrorism-and-Current-Challenges-for-Intelligence.pdf>

Published online: 24 February 2017

View entire issue: <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/GSSR-What-the-New-Administration-Needs-to-Know-About-Terrorism-and-Counterterrorism.pdf>

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Terrorism and Current Challenges for Intelligence

Paul R. Pillar

Most of the principal challenges confronting intelligence as far as counterterrorism is concerned have been around for a long time. The biggest challenge is the inherent difficulty of discovering plots that involve small numbers of people who do their planning and preparation in secret and are highly conscious of operational security. Another challenge involves inflated and unrealistic public expectations, especially the expectation that with enough intelligence gathering skill and dot-connecting acumen, any such secret plots ought to be discovered. Related to this are public perceptions that plot-discovery is what counterterrorist intelligence is all about, and the unmeetable zero-tolerance standard that the public and its political representatives tend to impose on counterterrorism. Yet another challenge is the inherent tension between security measures taken in the name of counterterrorism and the values of liberal democracies, especially regarding such things as surveillance and privacy but also involving personal liberties.

If the focus is instead on what is new, and on the implications of current trends and prospective developments, the challenges for counterterrorist intelligence can be found in three areas. One concerns the evolution of the threat. A second entails the evolution of public opinion and public values. The third involves, especially for the United States, implications of the advent of the Donald Trump Administration.

As for the threat, the main ongoing development is that the mini-state created by the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS, is well on the way to being extinguished. ISIS has lost a large proportion of the territory that it seized in its dramatic offensives a couple of years ago. In Iraq, it is in the process of losing control of its biggest prize, the city of Mosul. In Syria, its adversaries are gearing up to recapture the *de facto* ISIS capital of Raqqa. However good for other reasons are these conventional setbacks to ISIS, the intelligence challenge comes from the ISIS problem assuming a form that is harder for intelligence to follow than it has been to follow the state-like entity in Iraq and Syria.

Extinguishing the mini-state will not mean the end of ISIS. What will ensue will be more dispersed and inchoate than the mini-state, and in those respects will be a more difficult target for intelligence. This follow-on threat will likely include an insurgency in Syria and Iraq. Even more challenging for intelligence to monitor will be totally clandestine cells, which do not even have the kind of visible presence or signatures that an insurgency has. Worse still as an intelligence target will be the ISIS idea continuing to inspire independent actors who, such as the

San Bernardino shooters, invoke ISIS without having any apparent organizational connection to it. It is a question for further scholarly research as to how much military setbacks on Middle Eastern battlefields lessen the inspiration power of a group in the minds of already radicalized individuals in the West. There might not be much lessening. The San Bernardino perpetrators evidently shopped around for a group name to invoke before settling on ISIS; they could have just as easily conducted their attack in someone else's name instead.

As for public opinion and the values expressed in public opinion, we have seen in the United States in the 15 years since the 9/11 attacks the same sort of swinging of a pendulum of public sentiment as has been seen previously, as time passes since the last major terrorist attack. As the salience of the last past attack lessens, the public becomes less willing to make compromises to privacy and liberty in the name of security and counterterrorism. Of particular importance in this regard has been increasing antipathy among Americans toward bulk collection and analysis of data, especially telecommunications data. This is exactly the kind of intelligence material that is most useful when the main task is not to monitor a known threat such as a named, organized group or quasi-state but instead to identify one emergent threat out of a vast amount of innocence. This is the task of finding those who are not part of any larger organization but who establish themselves as terrorists only when they conduct their first, and perhaps only, attack. The intelligence task is a job akin not only to finding a needle in a haystack, but of trying to determine which pieces of hay in the stack will turn into needles.

The already growing American resistance to some forms of intelligence collection useful in counterterrorism is related to one of the implications of Donald Trump's Presidency. Trump scares many people, not necessarily just with regard to practices directly applicable to counterterrorism, but rather more generally in the sense of unease about ways in which the power of the state might be used to infringe on individual rights and liberties. It is no accident that George Orwell's *1984* went to the top of the Amazon bestseller list at about the time of Trump's inauguration. An atmosphere has been created in which public and political resistance to techniques such as bulk collection of telecommunications data is apt to be all the stronger.

Trump also is promoting unrealistic expectations of what can be done in counterterrorism, thus playing on what already was an unfortunate public tendency. In his inaugural address, he referred to "radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth." That objective is impossible to achieve. This rhetoric contrasts with that of the two previous administrations, each of which wisely tried to talk down unrealistic expectations—even when political opponents crassly exploited their remarks. The unrealistic expectations now being promoted set the Intelligence Community up for more consternation

over “intelligence failures,” which in turn will lead to more disruption through reorganizations rather than the community being allowed to get on with counterterrorism and its other work.

The new Administration also is resurrecting the subject of secret prisons and coercive interrogation methods. This issue will be a significant distraction from the intelligence agencies’ core functions even if none of what is now being talked about gets implemented. To the extent there is implementation, the distraction will be all the greater. There also will likely be a blurring in the public eye between the controversial matter of handling detainees and the normal intelligence functions of an agency such as the CIA. If the former is seen as bad, some of the opprobrium is apt to be transferred to the latter. This will mean more public and political pressure to restrict what is legitimate intelligence activity useful in counterterrorism.

Trump, and even more so some of his subordinates, have looked at terrorism primitively as part of a war between the West and Islam. This is a badly mistaken conception that is counterproductive as far as counterterrorism is concerned, particularly by playing into the propaganda of extremist groups that try to depict just such a war. Both of the last two administrations realized this, as reflected in the care they exercised in their choice of vocabulary. The counterproductivity is a problem for counterterrorism in general, but there are identifiable consequences for intelligence. Insofar as there are more violent radicals and more terrorism, arising from whatever the Administration is saying and doing, that means more of a load on intelligence resources. In some other respects the war-with-Islam concept means additional diversion of intelligence resources from work on real terrorism. The Administration and its supporters in Congress are talking, for example, of designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Even if failure to meet the statutory requirements as an FTO means the designation is never made, the review process for considering the issue will consume much time and attention of the bureaucracy, including the intelligence bureaucracy.

The Intelligence Community has an obligation to assess how policies of the Administration are likely either to increase or decrease terrorism. This kind of assessment, undertaken at a strategic and long-range level, is just as much a part of counterterrorist intelligence as is the tactical uncovering of plots (despite the common public conception that it is all a matter of plot uncovering). It always is hard to confront the boss with an assessment that says his policies and pronouncements are not working. Given Trump’s mental posture and thin skin, this is apt to be an even greater challenge for the Intelligence Community during his administration.

That leads to a final point, which concerns the overall bad relationship between this president and the intelligence agencies—probably the worst that the country has seen at the

beginning of any presidency for almost fifty years. One of the Intelligence Community's biggest challenges will be to get this president to listen to what it has to say about the roots and drivers of terrorism. The president is not, to be sure, the action officer when it comes to responding to most counterterrorist intelligence—a point not sufficiently recognized amid criticism leveled at President George W. Bush about what he did or did not do in response to a briefing he received about the al-Qa'ida threat in August 2001. It is more strategic judgments, about how certain sorts of policies and statements about the Muslim world help or hurt counterterrorism, which will be important for the president to absorb.

About the Author

Paul R. Pillar is Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Center for Security Studies of Georgetown University and the Brookings Institution. He retired in 2005 from a 28-year career in the US Intelligence Community. His senior positions included National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia, Deputy Chief of the DCI Counterterrorist Center, and Executive Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence. He is a Vietnam War veteran and a retired officer in the US Army Reserve. Dr. Pillar's degrees are from Dartmouth College, Oxford University, and Princeton University. His books include Negotiating Peace (1983), Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy (2001), Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy (2011), and Why America Misunderstands the World (2016).