

The 2nd Annual Richard A. Clarke National Security and Counterterrorism Scholarship Competition

Counterterrorism: Seeking Successful Policies at the International Frontier

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Introduction

“Terrorism has become a central feature of modern life for much of the international community,”¹ observes David Brown. The innocent times parents and grandparents describe have ceased to exist, as the age we live in becomes shrouded with insecurity, uncertainty and fear. With the countless number of public attacks, one can never be sure of safety on public transport (eg: Central London bombings in 2005), at leisure (eg: Aurora incident in 2012), or even in schools (eg: Beslan school siege in 2004). Governments across multiple nations have attempted to strengthen security and form alliances in order to fight terrorism globally, and some have made commendable progress in combating these grotesque incidents.

This paper aims to assimilate some of the more successful counterterrorism initiatives undertaken, and analyze their effectiveness with respect to implementation in the US. The paper also attempts to make counterterrorism policy and strategy recommendations.

Definition of terrorism

Before moving into the corpus of the monograph, it is necessary to make note of the definition of terrorism, and the difficulty with defining it. “Terrorism is hard to define because it means different things at different times. We can agree that terrorism is a problem, but we cannot agree on what terrorism is.”² In the words of Laqueur, “Terrorism constitutes the illegitimate use of force to achieve a political objective by targeting innocent people.”³ To put the discussion into perspective, the more official definition by the US State Department reads “The term terrorism means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience. The term international terrorism means terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one

country. The term terrorist group means any group practicing, or that has significant subgroups that practice, international terrorism.”⁴ It is with these ideas in mind that counterterrorism strategies and their levels of success are addressed in this paper.

Stories of foreign success

The following section provides a brief overview of terrorism and counterterrorism in France, Germany, Spain, Singapore, the United Kingdom and China with respect to the evolution of counterterrorism strategies over the past couple of decades.

France

With the proliferation of news items available on various news websites, addressing what the US can learn from France’s counterterrorism strategies, one can easily draw premature and presumptuous conclusions about the latter country’s success in fighting terrorism. Albeit unreasonable, a thorough investigation reveals that these conclusions would not be erroneous.

“Many commentators on terrorism begin their account of its modern history with the French Revolution, and the brief but bloody reign of Maximilien Robespierre in the late 18th century”⁵. Etymologically speaking, the concept of terrorism originates in France, coined from the French word ‘terrorisme,’ first used in 1798⁶.

“The French have a long and intimate acquaintance with terror”⁷ through the Algerian Revolution, which lasted from 1954 to 1962, in which Algeria gained independence from French colonization. In 1963, France established the Cour de sûreté de l’État, or the Court for State Security, distinct from the existing legal system, to try the “felonies and misdemeanors against

national security”⁸ during the Algerian War⁹. This system was eradicated in 1982, considered inefficient and irregular in judging treason and terrorism.

In the mid-1980s Paris was jolted by a new wave of terrorist attacks¹⁰. The perpetrators belonged to three separate groups: (i) a radical leftist party comprising native French, similar to the Italian Red Brigade and German Red Army Faction in beliefs and actions, (ii) regional separatist groups campaigning for the autonomy of specific regions, and (iii) international terrorist groups, of mostly Middle Eastern origin¹¹.

With “arguably the oldest terrorism in history”¹² France’s counterterrorism success can largely be attributed to experience. France today has a pool of specialized judges and investigators adept at dismantling and prosecuting terrorist networks¹³. *Time* magazine substantiates this by stating “French authorities have made their country inhospitable to terrorist networks...”¹⁴.

Most recently, France has passed legislation that fights “lone wolf”¹⁵ terrorism, where radical extremists train themselves. This new policy is a response to Frenchman Mohamed Merah’s eight-day killing spree in Toulouse and Montauban this past March. The 23-year-old is believed to have adopted radical beliefs and adequate training during recent travels to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and across the Middle East¹⁶. The new laws make it illegal for people to “travel abroad to ‘indoctrination and weapons-training camps for terrorist ends’ or to regularly visit websites that incite or praise deadly terrorism.”¹⁷

Germany

Germany has had a long and unpleasant history with terrorism. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Red Army Faction (RAF), also known as the Baader-Meinhof group, formed and

executed a series of terrorist attacks. Their actions were dubbed “the invention of modern terror”¹⁸ on an informative website about the group, and the period of their attacks is referred to as the German Autumn. Born out of left-wing social revolutionary philosophies and backed by a political agenda, their objective was to “protest what they perceived as fascist-leanings and otherwise oppressive, middle class, bourgeois values of West Germany”¹⁹. The group described itself as a “communist and anti-imperialist ‘urban guerrilla’ group engaged in armed resistance” protests against fascism²⁰. “At the height of the [RAF’s] popularity, around a quarter of young West Germans expressed some sympathy for the group. Many condemned their tactics but understood their disgust with the new order”²¹, which validated the government’s search for RAF sympathizers. The RAF was disbanded after German reunification in the 1990s.

At about the same time, right-wing terrorism became prominent too, in the form of small militant groups, independent of political affiliations, and espousing Nazi ideologies.

One of the tragedies that is most prominent in public memory is the Munich Massacre of 1972, perpetrated by the Palestinian group, Black September, on the Israeli Olympic team²². It was a time when German security was heavily scrutinized, and a special force, the GSG9 group was formed. Due to historic reasons, this unit reported directly to border security instead of the military.

The 1990s witnessed a surge in concerns over national security, especially in terms of refugee asylum and immigration. Whether or not Germany was becoming a safe haven for terrorists was a point of contemplation. The fears were mostly regarding radical Islamist groups from the Algerian War, the Kurdish PKK, Chechnian groups, Chinese Uigur and radical Palestinian groups.

Counterterrorism strategies have evolved significantly since the early encounters with terrorism. From the initial capture-and-isolate policies in the early years, to establishing special assistance units and amending penal jurisdiction, Germany has modified counterterrorism strategies to meet the changing patterns of terrorism. After 2001, counterterrorism policies were reformed to include the following five points:

- The destruction of terrorist structures by putting terrorists and terrorist groups under severe pressure by means of investigations²³;
- Prevention of terrorism from developing by controlling extremism through banning radical organizations and putting immigration and borders under strict control²⁴;
- Enhancing international cooperation and data exchange on suspect immigrants and terrorists²⁵;
- Protection of the public and the sensitive infrastructure through permanent monitoring and threat analyses and by providing intensive security measures²⁶;
and
- Removing the causes of terrorism by contributing to missions aimed at creating international peace and stability²⁷.

Spain

Spain is no stranger to terrorism and various forms of political extremism at home and abroad. Since the 1960s, Spain has been struggling with internal political violence, especially from Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), a nationalist group aiming to preserve the Basque language and culture of the Basque region of País Vasco in northeastern Spain and southwestern France.

They also sought the establishment of an autonomous Basque state and independence of the Euskadi people²⁸.

“The Spanish government sees itself as a leader in the effort to combine effective counterterrorism measures with full respect for internationally recognized human rights”²⁹. Spain responded to the September 11 tragedy by dismantling numerous speculated al-Qaeda cells in the country, through the arrests of individuals who had been under police surveillance for years³⁰. After the deadly Madrid bombings of 2004, which comprised a series of 10 coordinated explosions targeting commuters in the city center, the major political parties pointed fingers at ETA³¹. However, it turned out that it was actually al-Qaeda that had executed the horrific attacks, which introduced an international dimension to Spain’s counterterrorism efforts³².

On one hand, Spain has been criticized for its controversial counterterrorism strategies, which are accused of “[violating] fundamental guarantees under international human rights law”³³, of “[providing] inadequate safeguards against ill-treatment in detention”³⁴ and of “[violating] the right to a fair trial”³⁵. Conversely, the contentious measures employed to combat domestic terrorist threats have proven to be significantly effective³⁶. A comprehensive study by Evan Perkoski illustrates the relative success of these proceedings.

Perkoski chose to analyze the ETA attacks between 1988 and 1992, which was a time of political stability, and marked Spain’s first attempts at counterterrorism on a national level. Additionally, he points out that ETA crimes reduced significantly during this period, which, by default, implies the success of a number of the initiatives taken, and has positive implications for policy development in other countries. The following is a summary of his major findings:

- The use of violence to combat terrorism is not an effective strategy. It is either insignificant, or enjoys a short-term decrease in terrorist incidents. Eventually, violent means increase terrorism by the same amount that they initially decrease³⁷.
- Restricting the actions of terrorist groups through arrests and increased security is one of the guaranteed methods of reducing terrorism. Terrorists' operations are weakened through the absence of their detained accomplices and marginalization of the group; the arrested accomplices may also provide useful information to dismantle the group³⁸.
- The policy of prisoner dispersion, which mandated the relocation of ETA prisoners to prisons across Spain, resulted in lower attack hazards³⁹. This has implications for antiterrorism efforts worldwide.

In his conclusion, Perkoski admits that although his study “is certainly not a definitive guide to combating terrorism... Spain’s interaction with ETA should be used as a general framework for creating effective counterterrorist policy in the future.”⁴⁰

Singapore

Although Singapore is fortunate not to have had as many terrorist attacks as other countries on this list, their government has come to know of the presence of terrorist cells of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which are believed to be affiliated with al-Qaeda⁴¹. Singapore arrested many members of JI, especially in the months following 9/11. The arrests, coupled with Singapore’s thriving economy and strong support for the US, provided JI with a strong motive to retaliate and attack Singapore⁴².

Given a chance to interrogate the detained JI members, the Internal Security Department (ISD) discovered that the plots to attack were based on religious ideology. This prompted the government to reach out to the Muslim community. Two approaches to tackle this volatile situation were developed: the direct and indirect approach.

In the direct approach, respected members of Singapore's Muslim community formed the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), whose primary goals were to "study the JI's ideology, offer expert opinion in understanding JI's misinterpretation of Islam, produce necessary counter-ideological materials and to conduct public education for the Muslim community on religious extremism"⁴³.

Although the responses to RRG's counseling varied, there have been positive results, which can be considered a measure of success. "Three detainees were released and placed under restriction order, while three others who were under the restriction order did not have their restriction extended due to their positive response to the counseling"⁴⁴.

The government also undertook an indirect approach to further the counterterrorism initiative. Through this strategy, Singapore acknowledged that most of the JI detainees were usually the sole sources of income for the family, and so to ensure that the families did not suffer from poverty or lack of education, various Muslim organizations donated funds to support them⁴⁵. In addition, family members were given counseling by professionals, to try and minimize the likelihood of them joining the JI.⁴⁶ The government also took great caution in addressing the issue of Islamic militancy publicly, and communicated that it was the fake, manipulated version of Islam that was being condemned, so as to not risk hurting the sentiments of the Muslim population⁴⁷. The government called on Singaporeans to be united, and formed the Inter-Racial Confidence and Harmony Circle at community levels, schools and work places to promote better

inter-racial and inter-religious understanding between different communities to forge friendship and trust.⁴⁸

United Kingdom

When thinking about the United Kingdom and terrorism, the 2005 London bombings come to mind. Four British Muslims bombed underground trains and a bus in London during rush hour⁴⁹.

In recent years, the UK has amended counterterrorism policies to counter the impending threat from al-Qaeda, its affiliates, associated groups and terrorists acting as lone wolves. Northern Ireland also poses a threat,⁵⁰ so in 2009, the UK shifted the focus of existing counterterrorism policies to fight extremism and religious fanaticism⁵¹. Conservative Muslim leaders who preach intolerance and segregation were to be held accountable by law for abusing their status and people's trust⁵².

The 2011 report on the UK's counterterrorism strategy, CONTEST, continues to be dedicated "to stop terrorist attacks", "to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism", "to strengthen [UK's] protection against a terrorist attack" and "to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack", namely the concepts of Pursue, Prevent, Protect and Prepare. An entire section of the report is spent discussing security for the London Olympics, and no disturbances or threats disrupted the Olympic Games this year. Hence, the security measures taken have been effective, especially in the Protect aspect. The new counterterrorism strategy aims to reduce the risk to the UK and interests overseas from terrorism⁵³.

China

China has continued to face various forms of Islamic extremism since the 1970s, mostly from ethnic minority groups such as the Uigurs and other Turkic ethnic groups in Xinjiang who do not identify themselves with the Han Chinese. These groups are responsible for what is termed the East Turkistan Independence Movement (ETIM), whose activities are linked to 200 violent activities, 162 deaths and 440 cases of injuries. These groups are thought to have received financial and military support from al-Qaeda and the Taliban⁵⁴, with Osama bin Laden himself quoted as saying, “I support your jihad in Xinjiang”⁵⁵

ETIM’s network of terrorist organizations in Central Asia meant that China had to cooperate with other countries. Organizations such as the Shanghai Five and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) allowed China to join forces with five member states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Russia in their fight against terrorism. Domestically, the National Anti-terrorism Coordination Group (NATCG) and Secretariat led by Hu Jintao were set up to counter the threat of East Turkestan. The measures taken by these domestic anti-terrorism forces were four-fold: early warning and prevention, quick response, crisis control, management and mass education, and mobilization system⁵⁶. The final item on the list is significant because it involves adding anti-terrorism to the curriculum and requires universities to set up counterterrorism research centers.

While continuing to eradicate terrorism at home, China is also keen to maintain its secular outlook. Concerning minority groups, the People’s Republic of China on National Regional Autonomy states that “Organs of self-government in ethnic regional autonomous areas protect the right to freedom of religious belief of the citizens of all ethnic groups. While there is some tolerance afforded to religious practices, the Constitution also stipulates that it is illegal to

conduct activities that would split the country along ethnic or religious lines, or to engage in separatist or terrorist activities.⁵⁷”

The Chinese government continues to support the Muslim population financially in Xinjiang and other provinces by setting up religious facilities and restoring religious sites of historical significance. “Within Xinjiang itself, there are over 23,000 mosques and 29,000 Muslim clerics supporting the religious practices of the Muslim population. With regard to the country’s Muslim population, official records show that since 1980, over 45,000 Muslims were allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁵⁸”

Policy recommendations

The following are a few suggestions as to how the United States can borrow ideas from some of the successful counterterrorism programs described in this paper.

- According to Jeremy Shapiro, a fellow at the Brookings Institution research center who specializes in Europe and national-security issues, the United States could follow France’s footsteps for building public support for its counterterrorism strategies. Shapiro claims that the Bush administration provoked public skepticism by denying suspects their day in court and having a network of secret prisons⁵⁹. If treated as a yet another resource, public support can be a valuable asset to a government, especially from a counterterrorism point of view.
- In lieu of the previous recommendation, the United States could opt to increase the spending on public diplomacy in order to enhance their global image. “The United States spends on public diplomacy less than one quarter of 1% of what it spends on defense⁶⁰”. Projecting a positive image to the world is vital because

true representation of American efforts to eliminate terrorism, and not Muslim ideologies, would make it difficult to induce hatred and negativity in potential terrorists.

- The dispersion policy Spain implemented to ensure that prisoners were unable to communicate with each other and their families, by detaining them in distant prisons, rendered substantial success. If the United States put similar policies into effect to isolate suspected terrorists from their communities, it would deter their efforts to continue plotting devious attacks.
- Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group was a unique way to deal with Muslim terrorists without hurting Muslim sentiments. Trying to understand the terrorists' mindsets and providing psychological and emotional support to the families of the detainees is an investment with long-term benefits, something the US would undoubtedly benefit from as well. This program has already caught the attention of Dr. Bruce Hoffman, who pointed out the usefulness of the RRB's efforts in understanding the terrorist mindset: "To effectively counter that [the legitimizing of violence by terrorists through theological and religious arguments] we need to deliberately harness theological counter-arguments. In this respect we see our allies in Singapore, for example, as part of their effort, ...not necessarily to rehabilitate the al-Qaeda or Jihadist terrorists in their prisons, but to understand their mindset, have actively enlisted moderate clerics as a way to get insight and then to use the information from that cleric, those clerics to construct very effective information and psychological operations. That is an element that we have not, I think, paid sufficient attention to."⁶¹ Although Dr. Hoffman does not

believe in rehabilitating terrorists, there are definitely advantages for sending renowned and respected Muslim figures to attempt to rectify their misconstrued concept of religion. I believe this strategy is worth a try, even if on a small-scale, experimental basis.

- Finally, China's initiatives to maintain healthy relationships with Muslim communities within the country by building more mosques, encouraging Muslims to go on pilgrimage, and by restoring sites of historical or spiritual significance, are noteworthy. By employing similar means, the United States would be able to enhance ties with the Muslim world.

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