

Has the Threat of Mass-Casualty Terrorism Been Exaggerated?

SQUADRON LEADER M. J. GUNN, RAF

On the morning of 11 September 2001, less than three days after the first draft of this viewpoint was completed, terrorists destroyed the twin towers of the New York World Trade Center (WTC), and severely damaged the Pentagon building in Washington DC, by flying three hijacked passenger aircraft into the buildings concerned. At least 5,000 people died; it was thought at the time that the final toll would reach 20,000.¹

This viewpoint reflects these events, but its arguments remain essentially unchanged. The threat of mass-casualty terrorism has not been exaggerated. It is considered that the question arises because many commentators have perceived the threat to be overstated, but that this perception is flawed, mainly because the concept of mass-casualty terrorism itself has been largely viewed from a 'Western' or 'industrialized' perspective. The tendency for authors writing about mass-casualty terrorism to concentrate on the arguments surrounding the terrorist use of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) is ascribed to this essentially 'US-centric' viewpoint. The reality is that many people effectively live with mass-casualty terrorism on a near-permanent basis. However, this is generally manifested as low-technology and conventional terrorism, and if it does not impact upon a 'core' country in terms of World Systems Theory,² it is paid scant regard by the policy-makers.

Ideally, mass-casualty terrorism should be accurately defined, but this is essentially impossible. A review of just four recent books reveals that more than 50 working definitions can be derived, none complete or comprehensive, but all offering guidance.³ Bruce Hoffman identifies certain characteristics to derive the definition of terrorism as the 'deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change'.⁴ The inclusion of 'religious, social or economic' after 'political' might be considered helpful, and

Sqn Ldr M. J. Gunn, RAF, Initial Command and Staff Course (RAF) Number 242 (September 2001).

together with 'the peacetime equivalent of war crimes',⁵ will provide the guidance for this essay. As with terrorism, what constitutes 'mass-casualty' is dependent upon experience, situation and perception. For some, a busload of 50 children would qualify; others might prefer a parliament of politicians. The threshold number is actually immaterial, particularly if the casualties number thousands; it is the impact on the victims, their communities and the target audience, if there is one, which matters. The precise duration of the 'attack' also cannot be prescribed; let it qualify if it can be viewed as a coherent action or series of actions, discrete from a *long-term campaign*.

This viewpoint considers the concerns about mass-casualty terrorism, the nature of the threat and the potential victims, the problems of risk, differing perspectives and the self-interest factors that arise, and, in concluding, the future.

The key to the past and current debate in the US about mass-casualty terrorism is the divergence between perception, potential and experience. The bomb attack against the WTC on 26 February 1993 spurred the US public to demand government action, a demand greatly reinforced by both the Aum Shinrikyo Sarin attack on the Tokyo underground on 20 March 1995, and, within a month, the destruction of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 19 April.⁶ From a US perspective, experience and perception had been suddenly aligned. The threat was very real; 168 Americans had died without warning, and the erroneous initial assumption was that, like the WTC attack, the culprits were foreigners.⁷

Within two months Presidential Decision Directive 39 (PDD-39) had been issued detailing future US counter-terrorism policy.⁸ Thus Western perception in 1995 was that the threat was high, the potential means to execute mass-casualty terrorism were expanding, and that the terrorists were ready to use those means. There was growing concern over the security of Russian nuclear material⁹ and warheads, exacerbated in 1997 by the late Lt. General Lebed's bizarre comments about 84 nuclear demolition charges, 2-kiloton 'suitcase bombs', being unaccounted for.¹⁰ The terrorist use of WMD was a core concern for the US, as shown by the dedication of an entire section of PDD-39 to the subject,¹¹ but six years on no mass-casualty terrorist WMD attack has materialized.¹²

Concern more recently, for some like Sprinzak, has lain in the great cost of the programmes set up to defend against any such attack, which he regards as unlikely, and the vested interests behind these programmes, which will be discussed later.¹³ However, global experience shows that WMD, while still a credible threat, are not yet the weapons of choice for mass-casualty terrorism. Schmid lists 12 mass-casualty attacks since 1973,

all involving over 100 deaths, in which the blade, the gun and the conventional bomb prevail.¹⁴

Outside the developed nations, in the semi-periphery or periphery as Onwudiwe describes it,¹⁵ the blade is arguably the most used agent of terror. The greatest act of mass-casualty terrorism in the last decade, the Hutu slaughter of between 500,000 and 800,000 Tutsis and others, took place in a three-month period in 1994, and mainly used machetes.¹⁶ The Armed Algerian Islamic Group, the GIA, specialize in mass-casualty attacks where the victims have their throats cut, sometime killing hundreds in a one-night attack.¹⁷ The Mozambique-based group RENAMO, the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge all used mass killings, bordering on genocide in the latter case, and many more examples can be found, not least in the Balkans.¹⁸ Thus for much of the world's population, the threat of mass-casualty terrorism has been a reality for many decades, even if hidden behind a veil of insurgency or guerrilla warfare.

However, the developed world has tended to only address the threat in terms specific to its own experience and fears. The 1993 WTC and 1995 Tokyo and Oklahoma City incidents demonstrated to the entire developed world that Rwandan-scale slaughter could conceivably come its way courtesy of the terrorist. WMD were seen as the greatest potential threat, and many authors concentrated on trying to determine the probability of terrorist WMD use, against the USA in particular. Cameron concluded that 'Mass-destructive terrorism is now the greatest non-traditional threat to international security, and of these, nuclear terrorism poses a real danger.'¹⁹ However, there was still the conventional threat to worry about, and it was perhaps neglected.

What really needed clarification was 'The Threat': to whom; from where; and in what form. In almost any country, an individual or small group with modest resources could, through a high-risk or suicide attack using conventional automatic weapons and commercial or improvised explosives, kill dozens or even hundreds. Laqueur cites a 1980 study on the potential use of anthrax in a domed stadium, suggesting 60,000 to 80,000 casualties could arise.²⁰ A less technical terrorist group might opt to employ military mortars against the stadium, and machine-gun the panicking survivors as they exit the ruins. A lorry toppled from a bridge into the path of a high-speed train, whether a Japanese Bullet or French TGV, could kill many hundreds. Osama bin Laden was apparently content to kill over 200 Kenyans and Tanzanians in August 1998 in the US Embassy bombings for the sake of also killing 12 Americans.²¹

Some threats, such as the Irish Republican or Basque separatist ones, are reasonably obvious, roughly quantifiable and have discernible aims.

Some consider that these groups are at least partially rational and have little interest in using WMD or causing mass casualties.²²

Falkenrath et al. also speculate on the likely 'profiles' of non-state actors who might seek to use acquire and use WMD. Religious extremists, Shi'ite, extreme or revolutionary terrorists and a variety of more exotic choices all feature on the list.²³ As Foxell argues, many of the constraints applicable to terrorists pursuing a domestic agenda do not apply to groups like militant Islamacists driven by religious zeal.²⁴ Such groups or individuals might well also accept any reasonable chance to create mass casualties using conventional means. Assuming that only a small proportion of terrorists are even remotely likely to be able to acquire and effectively deploy WMD,²⁵ it seems reasonable to suggest that most terrorists wishing to effect mass casualties will use primarily conventional means.

For a state actor such as Iraq, chemical weapons developed for war can be used against the domestic population, as was the case at Halabjah in March 1988,²⁶ but giving them to terrorists for use beyond one's own borders would create immense risks for the sponsor state, far greater than for the 'traditional' forms of sponsorship.²⁷ As discussed above, in parts of the less-developed world the blade or the gun are more than adequate for the job.

When attacking developed, industrialized nations, those bent on mass-casualty terrorism will probably exploit what they see as weaknesses within the social, recreational, technological and structural fabrics of the targeted societies. The freer the society, the more open it is to terrorist attack by any means; the more powerful and globally-involved the society, the greater the likelihood that it will be targeted by external forces, particularly if it is a Judaeo-Christian society. Perceived strengths may be exploited. In what now appears as a mixture of remarkable prescience, glaring complacency and conventional thinking, Heymann, wrote in 1998:

And even if we could protect all 7000 federal buildings from vehicular attack, attack from the air would remain possible. And the federal buildings are only a tiny fraction of total attractive targets for bombing.

One particular type of target has enjoyed unique protection. At considerable expense, we have become very successful in protecting air traffic in the United States against hijackers. The attractiveness of commercial airplanes as targets suggests that we should be providing similar protection against bombs in checked luggage, even if the cost would be substantial.²⁸

Thus it can be argued that almost every country, society or group faces a threat of mass-casualty terrorism, either as the direct target, or as the host of a target group. The difficulty now is to determine how the real risk can be identified, and to examine the reasons why it may be deliberately distorted.

Determination of the 'real risk' is fiendishly difficult. The very nature of terrorist activity makes it difficult to acquire good intelligence about it. One can examine all the conceivable or possible methods of mass-casualty action, look at who has the potential to use or sponsor these methods, determine the likely targets and estimate casualties, and then attempt to derive a 'probability of attack' or 'risk' matrix. Unfortunately this process can only ever be an inexact one, in part because the motivation and viewpoint of the potential terrorist can rarely be determined precisely. Failure to include a factor such as willingness to commit suicide attacks could entirely invalidate the process.

Marlo suggests, from a US perspective, that intelligence gathering will have to concentrate on 'unofficial cover operations and clandestine collection' (spying) if it is to be effective in tackling terrorism.²⁹ Sprinzak, however, believes that 'The number of potential suspects is significantly less than the doomsayers would have us believe. Ample early warning signs should make effective interdiction of potential superterrorists easier than today's overheated rhetoric suggests.'³⁰ He is probably correct about the first point, but tragically wrong on the second.

Even if agreed risk and threat tables could be derived, they would be open to interpretation and manipulation by the politicians and lobbyists. Sprinzak suggests that keeping the perceived threat of superterrorism high is in the financial interests of many people, including defence contractors and counter-terrorism experts.³¹ US government-sponsored research has highlighted the considerable effort required to develop and sustain a nation-wide capability to recover from a mass-casualty attack involving chemical or biological weapons, and the potential cost of doing so.³² Extrapolate this to the entire developed (and then developing) world, and it is clear that Sprinzak has a point. If there had been a lot of political capital to gain, or money to be made, from protecting Rwandans or Algerians from machete-wielding terrorists, might there not have been more effective responses to these acts of terror?

Government agencies are not immune from the 'gravey-train' mentality. In the USA the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation and National Security Agency all effectively compete for resources to counter the terrorist threat, and if the cake can be made bigger by keeping the politicians' threat-perception high, all the agencies stand to gain. It just requires the threat to be (mainly) to Americans.

It is vital, however, to understand that just because it may be in the interests of some to exaggerate the threat of mass-casualty terrorism, it does not follow that the threat has in fact been exaggerated. The perception of the magnitude and nature of the threat can become misaligned with reality because of the direction taken by the public debate, driven as it may be by vested interests and domestic or international politics. As with a geological misalignment, sometimes it requires a massive shock to restore balance. If Oklahoma City was a magnitude 5 shock on a logarithmic scale, what happened in the USA on 11 September 2001 probably rates a 7, and it could easily have been greater. However, in human terms, the slaughter in Rwanda in 1994 deserved at least a 10 on this arbitrary scale, yet in reality it barely rattled the windows in Washington DC, Brussels or Tokyo.

So, whither from here? Possibility has become dreadful reality for America, yet it could have been much worse, even without going down the WMD road, which itself may now appear more attractive to the extremists. Far from being exaggerated, the threat of mass-casualty terrorism has been underestimated in the West, and its most probable manifestation misidentified. Elsewhere, its slow but unrelenting grind has continued, not going entirely unnoticed, but perhaps, for what it has meant for the lives of millions, unappreciated by world leaders. It is now clear to those leaders that terrorists can combine simplicity with ingenuity to great effect, and that some, maybe many, are willing to die for causes espousing mass-murder, whether for revenge, jihad or reasons unfathomable to the rational mind. The challenge now should be to look for ways to remove or reduce the threat of mass-casualty terrorism to the global population, not just to those in the developed world.

NOTES

1. CNN broadcast, 13 Sept. 2001.
2. Ihekwoaba D. Onwudiwe, *The Globalization of Terrorism* (Aldersnot: Ashgate, 2001) pp.1–27.
3. *Ibid.* pp.28–37; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (London: Gollancz 1998) pp.13–44; P.B. Heymann, *Terrorism and America: a common sense strategy for a democratic society* (London: MIT 1998) pp.3–13; J. Stern, *The Ultimate Terrorists* (London: Harvard UP 1999) pp.11–19.
4. Hoffman (note 3) p.43.
5. Heymann (note 3) p.4, quoting Schmid.
6. C. Quillen, 'Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13/1 (Spring 2001) p.50 of pp.47–65.
7. Nacos (1995) p.x (Preface to the paperback edition).
8. Quillen (note 6) p.51, Stern (note 3) p.132.
9. Cameron (1999) pp.2–19.
10. Stern (note 3) p.90.

11. Quillen (note 6) pp.51-2.
12. The WTC and Pentagon attacks on 11 Sept. 2001 apparently did not use any chemical, biological or nuclear materials. However, passenger aircraft might now be considered potential WMD.
13. Ehud Sprinzak, 'The Great Terrorism Scare', *Foreign Policy* No. 12 (Fall 1998) pp. 110-24.
14. Alex Schmid 'Terrorism and the Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction: From Where the Risk?' *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11/4 (Winter 1999) p.107.
15. Onwudiwe (note 2) pp.4-7.
16. Benjamin Valentino, 'Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide', *Security Studies* 9/3 (Spring 2000) pp.1-59.
17. Laqueur (1999) p.132; Schmid (note 14) p.107.
18. Valentino (see note 16) pp.32-7.
19. G. Cameron, *Nuclear Terrorism: A Threat Assessment for the 21st century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1999) p.162.
20. Laqueur (note 17) p.64.
21. Schmid (note 14) p.107; Onwudiwe (note 2) p.123.
22. R. Falkenrath et al., *America's Achilles Heel: Nuclear Biological and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack* (London: MIT 1998) p.169.
23. Ibid. pp.214-15.
24. J.W. Foxell, 'The Debate on the Potential for Mass Destruction Terrorism, The Challenge to US Security', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11/1 (Spring 1999) pp.94-109.
25. Claridge (1999) pp.139-42.
26. Laqueur (note 17) p.58.
27. Hoffman (note 3) pp.185-96.
28. Heyman (note 3) p.93.
29. F.H. Marlo, 'UMD Terrorism and US intelligence Collection', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11/3 (Autumn 1999) pp. 53-71.
30. Sprinzak (note 13) p.114.
31. Ibid. pp.117-18.
32. Committee on R&D Needs for Improving Civilian Medical Response to Chemical and Biological Terrorism Incidents et al. (1999) pp.vii-viii, 189-94.

Copyright of Defence Studies is the property of Frank Cass & Company Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.