

Terrorism as theater: Analysis and policy implications

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Abstract In some regards the production of terrorism resembles the production of culture, especially television and theater. Terrorism is a spectacle produced for viewers, many of whom live apart from the violent staged events. Spectacular theater and the telling of memorable stories are inputs for fundraising and motivating subsequent terrorists. This understanding of terrorist motivation has concrete policy implications.

Keywords Terrorism · Public goods · Focality · Spectacle

1. Introduction

German modernist composer Karlheinz Stockhausen suggested that the 9/11 attacks were “the greatest work of art of all time” (Harris, 2004, p. 4). Not surprisingly, Stockhausen received intense criticism for this apparently positive aesthetic judgment. We might find Stockhausen’s views repugnant, but that should not blind us to his potential insight. We can view the attacks as an aesthetic spectacle. Perhaps the attacks were intended as a thrilling performance art to raise funds and inspire future acts of terrorism. Earlier, Brian Jenkins had coined the phrase “terrorism as theater” (see Coll, 2004, p.138).

I will consider an aesthetic perspective on terrorism in more detail. I will examine terrorism in a rational choice framework (Gambetta, 2005), but borrowing insights from cultural economics. More specifically, I will try to flesh out some of the specifics of a “production function” for terrorism. Aesthetic spectacle will be an important input for motivating terrorists. They must be excited about the prospect of committing both murder and suicide, and this excitement can be very costly to produce. Along these lines, current terrorists may be trying to create aesthetic spectacles to maintain terrorist “firms” as a going concern.

We can think of terrorist spectacles as a non-rival and non-excludable public good (bad for many citizens, of course, but a good from the point of view of the terrorists). Theater,

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a common form of private spectacle, is non-rivalrous in consumption at some margins but usually allows for exclusion. Only a limited number of people see a given play or sports performance, typically those who have paid. Terrorists have no incentive to develop means of exclusion for their spectacles; in fact they often prefer as much publicity as possible. It was never the goal to sell footage of the 9/11 attacks. Rather, the media disseminated the relevant stories and images and the terrorists reveled in the free advertising they received for their deeds and goals.

For this same reason, terrorists often seek out donors for their projects. Since terrorist outputs are not intended to be a private good, terrorists cannot and do not wish to levy a direct charge on their customers. Like many producers of public goods (bads), terrorists will seek out those who believe in the underlying mission and are willing to fund it.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines some general uses for culture in creating spectacles. This material is well-known in some of the humanities literatures, but it frames our discussion in a broader context. Section 3 discusses the motivation and training of terrorists. This discussion also asks whether, in the framework at hand, terrorists should be thought of as rational in the economic sense. Section 4 considers why large-scale terrorist attacks on the United States have been rare since 9/11. Section 5 presents some policy implications.

2. The purposes of culture

Culture as spectacle and motivator is a common theme in cultural studies, history, anthropology, and related fields of the humanities and social sciences. Most prominently, Debord (1995) treats spectacle as a fundamental organizing principle of modern society. Kellner (2003) writes of the growing importance of spectacle in entertainment and modern culture. Jay (1994) treats suspicion toward vision, and sometimes visual spectacle, as a central feature of twentieth century critical French ideology. More generally, a large portion of contemporary cultural studies deals with the production of spectacles through sports and violent movies.

Spectacle also plays a critical role in politics. For instance the United States has taken great care to produce accompanying spectacles for its national ideology. The Fourth of July involves fireworks, large flags are displayed throughout the country, and tales of the Revolution and the Founding Fathers are a staple of grade school education. War victories are marked by monuments, holidays, and celebrations. President Bush, after the initial military fall of Saddam's forces, strode confidently on an aircraft carrier, boasting of his victory to the American public. Presidential inaugurations have become increasingly ornate, multi-day public events.

Other examples – both benevolent and malevolent – are legion. Arguably the Roman Empire used “bread and circuses” to pacify the masses (Veyne, 1990). These spectacles satisfied the populace's desire for bloodlust and provided steady entertainment. Many artworks of the Italian Renaissance were intended as monuments to the prestige and political power of their patrons. Florentine nobles frequently commissioned quality works to advance their political status. A look at Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* shows the Nazi emphasis on charismatic spectacle; Sorel (1999) noted the importance of such myths to fascism more generally. Dictatorships often stage public executions to provide their citizenries with a memorable story and some accompanying visual images. One point of this paper is simply that terrorists must resort to similar measures.

These mechanisms are not limited to politics. In a commercial context, advertisers seek to be associated with the Super Bowl and other sports and entertainment spectacles. It is

well known that a large percentage of advertising, especially on television, is not especially informative. Instead it positions the company to have a more memorable product or story line, thereby channeling consumer attention in the desired direction. In cinema, movies with special effects use marketing campaigns to position themselves as “the movie to see,” or “the summer movie of the year,” etc. In other words, movies and other public events garner attention by positioning themselves as “focal spectacles” in our culture (Chwe, 2003).

The relevant notion of spectacle must involve a performance or event which is out of the ordinary along some dimensions. A fireworks display will try to be bigger and better and try to use more brilliant colors than its competitors. Nazi marches used torches, lengthy excited speeches, and thousands marching and shouting in lockstep, all to create the desired effect. The Romans would have large animals, such as bears and tigers, fight to the death, or fight with humans. The Super Bowl is held only once a year and receives an extensive build-up and marketing campaign. All of these events try to be memorable and to create appeal along some primal or visceral direction. A very good chess game does not usually count as a spectacle. Instead a good spectacle should involve bright colors, high volume, thrills, and perhaps violent destruction or some simulation thereof.

The notion of cultural spectacle is typically ignored in economics, but the microfoundations of its impact are easily understood. Economists have a well-developed account of focal points (Schelling, 1960; Young, 1996), but they have devoted less attention to which particular events or situations become focal. “Spectacle” can be thought of as an investment in focality.

Terrorist spectacles fit all the major criteria for focality. A focal place, person, or event must be highly visible, must possess some unique features, and must be associated with an easy-to-remember story line. Media coverage of terrorist events will support all of these qualities. We find also that “first movers” have focality advantages. Al Qaeda has become a focal group through its ability to pull off the first large-scale terror attack on American soil.

In democratic politics focality is of critical importance. A candidate must first be considered credible to have any chance of winning. Furthermore focality helps define the political spectrum, which in turn determines the dimensions of political competition. Most people choose political views that are relatively simple and straightforward. The political science literature suggests that over 90 percent of the political spectrum can be placed along a single dimension (Poole & Rosenthal, 1996). A successful political ideology therefore must be focal. An ideology that is too difficult to explain, or does not involve memorable heuristics and stories, is likely to fail. Spectacles, performances, and stories all help create this focal quality. Political marketers along all parts of the political spectrum understand these principles, even if they do not articulate them in a systematic theoretical framework. Spectacles and stories are a critical part of marketing.

Terrorists may have at least four reasons to wish to make their ideologies focal. First, they may value propagation of the ideology *per se*. Second, propagation of the ideology may enhance their control over material resources. In particular being focal may ease fundraising. Third, holding or creating a focal ideology may cement political power. Fourth, spectacles may make it easier to motivate subsequent terrorists.

2.1. Motivating subsequent terrorists

Being a terrorist is a scary undertaking. The most highly publicized forms of terrorism today typically involve suicide attacks. Even if the attack is halted, the perpetrator may face a long jail sentence, or possibly execution or torture. Many perpetrators may be maimed or injured if the act does not go as planned. Before any attacks take place, a terrorist usually spends

time in training. While hard data are difficult to come by, terrorist training camps can be dangerous places. The terrorists often are subject to “trial by fire” to test their mettle (as are U.S. Marines), or the camp may be the victim of an attack or bombing raid. Many of the other camp members are would-be terrorists, and many of them are not normal personality types. The camps are not generally in comfortable locations with full hotel facilities.

Motivating would-be terrorists therefore is a major issue. Terrorists do not typically receive high monetary wages, so psychological perks are of paramount importance. Some terrorists are motivated by political or religious ideology, but ideology alone does not serve as a complete explanatory variable. Many people agree with terrorist worldviews yet most of them do not become killers.

Some terrorists are motivated in cell or small group settings. Typically a small group of young men are trained together over an extended period of time. The men are encouraged to feel special and to form especially strong emotional bonds of loyalty and friendship. The men also are encouraged to believe that they reap special benefits from belonging to these elite units. In return for such benefits, they are told that they must be prepared to give their lives for their comrades. When the time comes, and these individuals are “called,” they feel a strong sense of obligation. Obedience is more likely than desertion. Similar bonding tactics are common in standard governmental militaries, whether it be U.S. forces or the Nazi troops in WWII.

These loyalties, however, are developed through a broader understanding of context. U.S. soldiers are fed a steady stream of information about the importance of the conflict at hand, and about the evils of the opposing forces. They are told stories about the enemy and shown filmed spectacles of successful combat or attacks. Morale and cohesion are typically high. Other fighting forces take great care to inculcate similar impressions, again to induce their troops to fight and possibly sacrifice their lives. The small group loyalty is paramount in the moment of sacrifice, but that loyalty can only be produced when the soldiers believe it is toward some worthy political end. When such a broader patriotic context is unavailable, the small group loyalties typically are very weak. Most of the Iraqi forces under Saddam, for instance, did not believe in the legitimacy of his regime. It is no accident that most of them refused to fight. Saddam’s Sunni allies, however, continue to mount dangerous terrorist attacks, at least through 2005. They rely on Iraqi nationalism, anti-American sentiment, and anti-Shiite and anti-Kurd ideologies to motivate the attack perpetrators. More generally, terrorism leads to demonstration and copycat effects, especially among given peer groups (Alexander & Pluchinsky, 1992). This helps explain why Palestinians and Sri Lankan Tamils – two small groups relative to global population – account for about 80 percent of known (recent) suicide attacks (Ricolfi, 2005).

In other cases would-be terrorists are worked up into excited and partially irrational states of mind, possibly on a temporary basis only. Consider the extreme (and not easily verified) view of McDougall (2004):

“Complete isolation and a radically short time lapse between the moment a bomber is tapped and when he carries out the attack are essential to successful suicide attacks. “Studies of Hamas suicide bombers indicate there’s only a 24-hour window between finding the candidate and carrying out the mission,” says Swetnam. “It sounds incredible, but Hamas does the entire process within one day.” Hamas recruiters don’t select suicide bombers from within their own cadres; instead, they pull in a dogmatic and disillusioned young male outside their operation. It takes a deep pool of disaffected males to find the one willing to carry out a suicide mission.” Throughout the night, they’ll keep the candidate in a closed room and bombard him with dogma about his mission as a soldier

of Allah and “rev him up about being a hero,” as Swetnam puts it. “They tell him, ‘Allah only asks once, and he’s asking you now.’” Only in extremely rare cases has a suicide bomber been known to back out of a mission, Swetnam says; one of the few that is known about occurred when his isolation buffer broke down. “He is said to have run into his brother on the way to his assignment, and that was enough to cause second thoughts.””

This account is anecdotal rather than definitive, and it contradicts some other sources in the literature (Ricolfi, 2005). Nonetheless, it remains a useful polar case, as even here context is all-important. Even with a very short recruitment time window, terrorists must find their candidate “employees” within a broader pool of candidates. Those candidates, if they are even willing to consider helping out, must view the terrorist organizers as a focal alternative to the status quo. Furthermore the candidates must consider violent destruction and murder as moral acts validated by some of their peers.

It is possible to generate suicide bombers only in light of a broader political context. The future terrorists already have particular focal stories in their minds, such as how the Americans or Israelis wish to take over the Middle East, steal Arab oil, humiliate Muslims, or convert them to Christianity. The would-be terrorists also have background knowledge of other terrorist attacks. For instance they (might) view Hamas as a provider of public goods, a formidable combatant, and committed to a “glorious struggle” against the Israelis. When the time comes to snatch and motivate the terrorist, the organizers are not starting from scratch. The would-be bomber already has the requisite stories in his mind, and the recruiters need only to push a few mental and emotional buttons to activate a violent response.

Terrorist leaders may have differing motivations than the lower-level troops. Often they organize attacks but do not conduct them personally, as with Zarqawi or Osama bin Laden. They run the risk of retaliation but do not face certain death or capture. These individuals may be motivated by the prospects of glory, recognition as global leaders, the excitement of planning and execution, and perhaps by the prospect of political rents as well. Whether rationally or not, arguably Osama bin Laden expects someday to be the ruler of Saudi Arabia or perhaps a broader Islamic caliphate.

That being said, the terrorist leaders also rely on stories and spectacles. First, the leaders may themselves be motivated by the stories and spectacles, just as terrorist operatives are so motivated in part. Second, we need only assume that the leaders desire power or control over the operatives, for whatever reason. The stories and spectacles will make such control easier, as discussed above. That being the case, the returns to becoming a terrorist leader are now higher, whether or not the stories and spectacles directly motivate the leader as well.

As mentioned above, focal stories may require some degree of isolation. The very notion of focality requires that attention be directed to or centralized upon a small number of events and stories. If too many information sources are competing for attention, and on equal terms, it can be harder for focality to evolve. To provide one example, it is easier to develop focal TV shows from three major networks than from five hundred cable channels. In a political context, a relatively isolated society already presents some obvious focal points. There are fewer information sources and fewer major concerns.

This may help explain why terrorism is relatively easy to produce in the West Bank or parts of Gaza. While terrorist attacks have declined with the building of walls, the supply of potential terrorists from these areas has been significant. Both the West Bank and Gaza are relatively isolated enclaves. The costs of braving checkpoints and moving into Israel are significant. Furthermore many Palestinians feel like outsiders on Israeli territory. Nor are the neighboring Arab countries especially amenable locales for refugee Palestinians.

At the same time, the West Bank and Gaza are relatively poor. They do not attract much global or U.S. popular culture. Many people have access to satellite television, yet the primary sources of Arabic-language programming are incendiary and promote anti-U.S. and anti-Israel points of view. At the same time, the Palestinians live out a daily (or at least regular) theater of conflict. Hostile encounters with Israeli troops are common; the enclaves are struck with missiles or helicopter attacks, and the Palestinians fight amongst themselves.

In economic language, a great deal of theater is being produced “for free” (from the point of view of any terrorist organizer), simply by the course of daily events. Given how much theater and spectacle is already in place, a critical input for terrorist production is available essentially free of charge. We should not be surprised if the supply of terrorists or potential terrorists is especially large.

At the same time, there is a (somewhat) positive side to this story. Terrorists are easiest to produce in areas where terrorist influences are considerable. Yet on these same territories terrorists are more likely to moderate their attacks. Perhaps some Middle East terrorist groups would like to ignite a nuclear device in mid-town Manhattan. But they might think twice about planting the same bomb in Jerusalem. The latter act probably would be easier to pull off, but it also would kill a large number of Palestinians. The resulting fall-out could plague the Arab world more than Israel. The frequency of attacks therefore may be negatively correlated with their scope and scale. Precisely where terrorism is frequent, it becomes more important to target or pinpoint the results of the violence.

This may also help explain why sponsors do not finance successively larger spectacles to promote terrorism. Large spectacles in the United States are hard to pull off; even if terrorist groups are seeking weapons of mass destruction, they do not appear to have succeeded yet. Furthermore they must import the weapons to the United States and train and organize the appropriate group. In those areas where terrorist groups are stronger (e.g., parts of the Middle East), the optimal attacks are smaller scale in nature. Nuking Baghdad would not obviously be a good propaganda move for al Qaeda, even if it were possible.

2.2. Are terrorists rational?

It is commonly debated whether terrorists are rational in the economic sense. Economists use the rationality concept in differing ways, but typically they refer to the use of means to achieve ends. A rational person will have a downward-sloping demand curve and will respond to incentives in a more or less straightforward fashion. Under a Beckerian view, rational terrorists can be deterred just like anyone else (see Berman and Laitin (n.d.) and Landes (1978)). The terrorists have goals they wish to achieve. When the prices of achieving those goals go up, the terrorists will substitute into other ends. Alternatively, changes in relative prices can deflect terrorists from one set of means to another. We therefore have policy levers against terrorists.

Under a second view, terrorists are not rational in this ordinary economic sense. Typically partisans of this claim cite religious belief or extreme devotion to some ideal. Perhaps the terrorists hope to achieve infinite bliss in heaven. If that is the case, and they are operating with infinite expected values, secular incentives might be impotent. We do, of course, see many suicide bombers and terrorists. If loss of life does not deter them, what can?

The perspective of this paper suggests an intermediate stance on these questions. Given how terrorists perceive the world, they are rational. Yet the underlying perceptions may not fit most models of *epistemic* (non-economic) rationality, namely whether beliefs make sense.

Consider first the case for rationality. It does not appear that most known terrorists pursue the infinite bliss of heaven at all prices. Most suicide bombers, for instance, have sinned

during their lives. They frequently drink, smoke, treat their families badly, and commit other examples of misconduct. One of the 9/11 terrorists, is a classic case in point. Before going off to “die for Allah,” he spent his last night with a prostitute.

In other cases terrorists reinterpret religious doctrine to suit their ends. For instance Islam prohibits beheadings, but this kind of killing has become a mainstay of terrorist strategy. The purveyors and their defenders have since attempted to reinterpret religious doctrine to allow for beheadings. Whether or not this attempt is “sincere” is beside the point. Either way, established Islamic doctrine does not bind strictly when terrorists perceive some benefit to acting in a particular way. Suicide itself is arguably “anti-Islamic,” but again doctrine has been interpreted to allow and indeed encourage the practice.¹

These examples, however, do not imply that we can apply standard theories of economic rationality without amendment. Terrorists may treat perceived means and ends as subject to laws of rational choice, but the real question is what kind of perceptions they hold. An individual will become a terrorist in the first place only if he or she buys into some extreme stories about how the world works. These include stories of U.S. imperialism, Zionist world domination, anti-Arab conspiracies, and others. These stories are very different from those held by most mainstream economists. Most economists therefore would not be very good predictors of how Muslim terrorists will behave. In other words, we are operating with different background assumptions. The terrorists have grown up with a different theater, so to speak.

These delusions of terrorists need not be linked to religion in any direct way. (In Iraq many of the suicide bombers are Sunnis and would appear to be relatively secular, as in the cases of Sri Lanka and Japanese kamikaze pilots as well.) For instance the relatively secular Saddam Hussein apparently believed that he might survive a U.S. onslaught against Iraq (Johnson, 2004, chapter eight). Arguably Saddam thought he could stall for time and negotiate a peace settlement, much as he did in the first Gulf War. In contrast, few observers of American politics found such a view plausible, given the rhetoric, views, and plans of the Bush Administration. Both pro-war and anti-war commentators rejected this outcome as feasible. When the reports came out about Saddam’s strategy, his stance was considered shocking in light of the obvious reality on the U.S. side of the equation.

The tendency to misperceive reality is common. We have general reasons to believe that individuals, especially young males, will overestimate their chances of success and engage in excessive risk-taking. These overestimations tend to be especially pronounced in areas of conflict, status competition, and violent struggle (Johnson, 2004). Furthermore leaders of terrorist groups and autocrats are probably self-selected for overconfidence and risk-taking abilities, given the dangers inherent in those pursuits.

Delusions occur at both the level of operatives as well as leaders. For instance interrogations at Guantanamo Bay reputedly yielded talk of the following plot. A group of Muslims would hijack a plane and land it at an American airport. The women and children would be released, but the men would be held and then slaughtered. The hijackers would then deliver a speech about the evil consequences of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. business community would then (supposedly) realize that they were pursuing a disastrous and unprofitable course of action. They would demand, and receive, a change in American foreign policy.

Virtually any American, of course, would dismiss this scenario as nonsense. The demands made by such hijackers would immediately become politically unacceptable, if only

¹ *The 9/11 Commission Report*. (2004): W.W. Norton: New York.

because the hijackers wanted them. A backlash would result, rather than a change in U.S. foreign policy. (9/11, for instance, probably made possible the invasion of Iraq, rather than softening U.S. policy in the Middle East.) The would-be terrorists, in contrast, appeared to believe that U.S. foreign policy was driven predominantly by commercial interests and in a very direct fashion, akin to some of the old 1960s economic conspiracy theories. The point is not whether al Qaeda was ever planning such an operation; rather al Qaeda members considered such an operation to be a viable possibility and perhaps an effective strategy.

We can now see how rationality does and does not play a role. The would-be terrorists might be rational in the sense of responding to perceived incentives. If they are paid more to pull off an attack, the attack will be more likely. Correspondingly, if the attack is harder to implement, they may refrain or postpone their plans. That being said, the perceived benefits of the attack are illusory and indeed the real results would be the opposite of what a better informed American knows to be true. The benefit-cost calculus of the hijackers would not be close to the real benefits and costs.

These points strike at a weak link in the economist's conception of rationality. Economics has much to say about means-ends relationships, but relatively little to say about beliefs. The rational expectations approach suggests that individuals hold the true model of the economy, or some reasonable approximation thereof, in their heads. Such assumptions would rule out the hijack scenario discussed above. But the rational expectations assumption is not a good description of the world, even if it is useful for some modeling purposes. Of course once we reject rational expectations, we have little guidance on which beliefs are rational and which are not, from an economic point of view. That is why an economic theory of terrorism is so problematic, and why it might look to the cultural dimension. With this framework in mind, let us now turn to some implied predictions and policy conclusions.

3. Why so few subsequent terrorist attacks in the United States?

It is a fundamental puzzle why there have not been more major terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. Since 9/11 and the anthrax attacks, no major attacks have occurred on U.S. soil up through April of 2005. To be sure, it is risky to write about why something has not happened. Given publication lags, the stated event may well have happened between the time of writing and publication. Nonetheless it would remain a puzzle why the next set of attacks – even if they have already happened by the time you read this – took so long to pull off.

Surely another attack would appear easy. The attack need not be as elaborate as that staged on 9/11. A simple murder of a few people, in Middle America, would suffice to bring national panic. Imagine a single terrorist showing up at a crowded Peoria high school with an automatic weapon or small bomb. It is easy to imagine dozens of schoolchildren being killed at low cost. Or imagine a single unarmed healthy young man showing up at a nursing home, determined to kill a few people with his bare hands. There are few if any barriers to such an attack. Even if U.S. immigration does its job in screening legal immigrants, it is not difficult to slip an illegal migrant through the Mexican border.

We see at least four hypotheses as to why there has not been another terrorist attack:

- *Theory 1.* Al Qaeda (and other groups?) is very patient and invests much time in planning its attacks. 9/11, after all, was many years in the making.

- *Theory 2.* The U.S. is better guarded. This may include either better safeguards on the ground, the arrest of would-be terrorists, or better intelligence information about forthcoming attacks. Some attacks were in the works, but we have stopped them.
- *Theory 3.* Al Qaeda (and other groups?) is interested only in large, very spectacular attacks. They view such smaller scale attacks as lowering rather than increasing their prestige and profile.
- *Theory 4.* Al Qaeda (and other groups?) considers the current struggle in Iraq to be the top priority. They would rather devote their resources to defeating America on their “home territory.”

All of these hypotheses may contain elements of truth, and more than one of them may apply. I would like, however, to suggest a fifth contender:

- *Theory 5.* Given the costs of producing stories and spectacles, the cost of producing another terrorist attack in the United States is much higher than we commonly think.

Once we conceptualize terrorism as theater, it is easy to see why the costs of mounting a terrorist attack are higher than they might at first seem. The relevant costs are not just the materials or the organizing of resources. Instead the highest cost might be staging and maintaining the “theater” that convinces the operatives to “do God’s will.”

We already have mentioned that motivation is easiest to produce when the would-be terrorists are operating in a relatively isolated environment. In fact if the operatives cannot be kept in a very friendly and controlled environment, this cost might be prohibitive. The United States offers a large number of temptations, not the least of which includes an ongoing life in a wealthy and free society. Furthermore there are few major social or commercial stigmas associated with the practice of the Islamic religion. Arab-Americans in the United States have very high levels of income and high rates of education. Even if a given Arab-American is poor, he or she can aspire to a relatively high level of social acceptance, whether he is Christian or Muslim.

Competing spectacles and “theaters” are staged in the United States all the time, and with great effectiveness. American popular culture has a very strong export presence around the world, in large part because of its universal or general appeal. A resident in America is inundated with an unprecedented degree of sports, entertainment, and violent action. But unlike terrorist spectacle, these images are intended to be fun. Perhaps it is hard to motivate terrorists in the United States because competing ideologies of entertainment are so powerful. Western Europe, in contrast, has a greater expertise in elite high culture than in popular culture.

This may help explain why we have seen numerous attacks in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia over the last few years. Muslim communities in those regions are far less integrated than is the Muslim community in the United States. Unlike the 9/11 strikes, many of those attacks were planned and carried out by long-term residents of the country in question.

Under this hypothesis, 9/11 required a very unusual concatenation of events. Most of the terrorists came over from Europe, where they lived in relatively tightly knit communities. They remain long enough in the U.S. to train and plan the attacks, but not long enough to “go native.” Furthermore the mastermind, Atta, possessed an unusual blend of fanaticism and organizational ability. Obviously the attacks did happen, so it cannot be argued that American culture, or the difficulty of motivating the terrorists, forestalled them. Nonetheless this question of motivation may remain critical; it is no accident that none of the terrorists grew up in the United States.

4. Policy implications

The above analyses have some implications for how to best combat terrorism. Some of these hold for internal policy, others for foreign policy.

4.1. Have an open society that embraces immigrants

An open society makes it harder to have a sleeper cell implanted in the United States for many years. Those individuals will tend to lose their terrorist loyalties. Unlike many parts of Western Europe, it is hard to find isolated “Muslim ghettos” in this country. Even where Muslims are most prominent, such as in Michigan or along the coasts, they do not typically form isolated, closed, or self-sufficient communities.

We should continue to be strict in trying to keep would-be terrorists out of the country. But once individuals are let in, our attitudes and policies should be welcoming rather than hostile. We should emphasize integration rather than subsidizing separate ethnic or religious enclaves. The more integrated the Islamic immigrant community is with broader society, the more difficult isolation will prove. Toward this end we might ease the burdens on starting entrepreneurial small businesses, or otherwise remain committed to flexible labor markets with upward mobility. And while ethnic profiling may sound like it makes economic sense, it may in fact prove counterproductive.

4.2. Allow American popular culture to spread in your territory

Many West European governments, most notably France, are nervous about the spread of American popular culture. Yet American popular culture may ease assimilation of non-European residents. Most of Western Europe is not doing an adequate job of assimilating its Muslim immigrants. This suggests some kind of cultural failure; one obvious solution is to look to cultures that have had more success in encouraging integration. Frenchmen may not like the idea of ceding so much influence to U.S. popular culture. Yet compared to the relevant alternatives, the net effect may be to strengthen French culture rather than weaken it. Arguably Algerians are a greater threat to the French polity than are Americans. If nothing else, the spread of American popular culture will, through force of competition, encourage French culture to become more popular and more inviting to foreigners.

4.3. State sponsors of terrorism may be especially important

The case for targeting state sponsors of terrorism is stronger than is often believed. If an entire state lends its support to terrorism, the odds rise substantially that it will be possible to motivate terrorists within that environment. A state has substantial resources at its command, including the ability to allow the terrorists to train and segregate operatives in unmolested fashion. Censorship can be used to keep out foreign or liberal ideas. The terrorists, through their affiliations with national leaders, might find it easy to rise in status, aiding recruiting. On top of this we must add the ability of states to finance terrorists using the national treasury, or accumulated stocks of weapons.

Al Qaeda, of course, has done its greatest damage under the patronage of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Even if we see subsequent attacks, the operatives may well have been trained during the Taliban era, under Taliban patronage.

The typical argument against targeting state sponsors notes that decentralized terrorist networks can in any case mount attacks. Terrorists do not need the physical resources of a

state to succeed. It is true that the material costs of the 9/11 attacks are estimated at well under one million dollars. But again the more relevant costs may be those of organizing the motivating political theater. For that endeavor state sponsorship may be critical.

That being said, the act of targeting state sponsors brings a corresponding risk. The resulting war may itself create relevant “theaters” to motivate terrorists. This is a frequent criticism of the current war in Iraq. Just as the struggle against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan created one generation of terrorists, so may the Iraq war create another generation. War participants train in the use of explosives, learn how to organize attacks, and develop cohesive inner circles with high morale. State sponsors may be important, but failed states may be the greatest danger of all. If interventions bring failed states rather than successful reforms, that is all the more reason to be wary of activist policy.

4.4. Media issues

For constitutional and moral reasons, I do not favor restrictions on freedom of the press. Nonetheless the arguments of this paper may suggest some utilitarian benefits from such restrictions. Terrorist attacks are, of course, a public bad for many individuals, most of all the immediate victims and their families. Terrorism also erodes the legal order and freedoms of the more prosperous and successful nations. We therefore would like to restrict terrorism. Since terrorists wish to receive publicity, limited press coverage of terrorist attacks may limit the motives for such attacks and thus discourage terrorism.

While this argument can in principle work, I am skeptical of its relevance for the present day. First, restrictions on media coverage would encourage terrorists to make their acts more public and wider in scope. It may be possible to limit media coverage of a suicide bomber in Iraq. It would be impossible to limit media coverage of 9/11 or a chemical weapons attack on a major sports stadium. Second, effective censorship has proven increasingly difficult, especially in the age of the Internet. Even if the mainstream media did not cover a terrorist attack, other sources would. This includes both blogs and foreign newspapers with websites. The end result would be more rumor, more misinformation, more exaggeration, and perhaps more panic. The mainstream media, for all their views, are a relatively non-sensationalist source of information. Their net influence is probably more calming than inflammatory.

For these reasons, I reject media censorship for utilitarian reasons as well. Nonetheless how the media present and frame terrorist attacks can be of critical importance. This suggests a major role for voluntary action – in the form of non-profits, blogs, letter writers, and media watchdogs – in influencing how the media portray terrorists. On the supply side, arguably it is best if the media portray terrorists as feeble and impotent creatures, rather than as potent monsters and worthy opponents of the United States government. This will tend to make those terrorists less focal. Of course such images may conflict with optimal policy vis-à-vis U.S. voters. If we view terrorists as soft, we may underestimate the terrorist threat. Optimal efforts to influence the media therefore involve balancing these two concerns.

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