DEMOCRACY, URBANIZATION AND TERRORISM: WHAT HISTORY CAN TELL US, Arnaud Blin

Terrorism not a novel phenomenon

The general perception of terrorism today is that the phenomenon is new, or at least that its contemporary form, as embodied by Al-Qaïda or its so-called networks, is fundamentally novel. What is surprising is not how different contemporary terrorism might be from its previous manifestations but how similar it actually is to earlier forms of terrorisms. Not only does Al-Qaïda bear obvious similarities with the Zealot sect of the 1st century or the Assassins of the 11th and 12th centuries but it is strikingly close to the type of terrorism that appeared during the second half of the 19th century and which, since the 1860’s and the first anarchist movements, has never ceased to plague our long march towards liberty and democracy.

The city at center stage

Very early on, do we find many of the characteristics of modern terrorism, with the large city as a central strategic point where one could extend the work done by traditional guerrillas in the countryside or, more likely, where one could practice urban guerilla when one did not have the means to confront a traditional army. These earlier forms of terrorism, while bearing many similarities to contemporary fundamentalist movements, were also close, in terms of objectives, to the numerous groups who, in the 19th and 20th centuries, we have labeled armies of national liberation. For, in the end, terrorism can be confined to two major categories, those whose objectives are limited to gaining independence or political power at the national level and those who have more grandiose revolutionary objectives.

The city is also synonymous with industrialization and modern capitalism. For revolutionaries of all sorts, the city is where all the impurities of the modern world are concentrated. The deconstruction and the reconstruction of society thus falls on the city. It is in the city that bomb throwers of all kinds will enact their propaganda by deed. It is here that the great national newspapers will magnify their attacks. It is here, the terrorist hope, that panic will strike the masses and lead them to revolt. It is in the cities that political leaders, members of royal families or famous industrialists will fall victim to their attacks. It is in the cities that the mere sound of the bomb will resonate best. It is in the city that the anonymous “bourgeois” will be killed, just because he belongs to a hated social class. It is in the city finally, that this shady figure, the agent provocateur will blur the frontier between terrorist and anti-terrorist.

Terrorism is essentially a psychological war between those who control the entire physical might of a given society and those who have no means at all, and even less legitimacy. For the latter, the city thus constitutes for all practical purposes the only theater where such a confrontation is possible. In an activity where symbolism and representation is essential, the city is the biggest symbol of all. For that matter, the big city is the ultimate symbol. For the revolutionary, it is the symbol of everything that needs to be purified and eliminated. For the government, it is the symbol of its power and its legitimacy. Thus, the largest and most visible cities have always been the center stage for terrorist and counter-terrorist activities.

Today, the terrorist equation has not varied much. With Al-Qaïda, as with the others, the modern megalopolis of the industrialized world remains the symbol of everything it loathes and seeks to change. New York, London, Madrid or Paris were at the center stage of the great terrorist waves of the 19th and early 20th centuries and 100 or 150 years later, still have to fend off terrorist
attacks. And while we often hear that the novelty of contemporary terrorism is that it is a trans-
national phenomenon, this has always been so. Early on, and particularly during the 1880’s and 90’s
anarchists from various countries moved about, planting bombs or instigating attacks in foreign
countries, profiting, as today, from the great movements of large immigrant populations

For Ben Laden, as for the early revolutionaries, the metropolis of the industrialized world is
the symbol of all evil. And as such, it remains logically the main target of the terrorist. The city
dweller constitutes the anonymous human face of modernization, urbanization and liberal
democracy and thus represents an even greater evil than the head of state who is but a tool of the
all-powerful citizen. In the fight between government and terrorist, public opinion has in essence
become the main point of contact of the protagonists. The sky scraper, where thousands of
individuals work to finance their modern life of consumerism, and the train or metro, where
workers move freely about, represent the physical symbol of the economic might and individual
freedom that Al-Qaïda seeks to destroy

In effect, post-industrial-modernization is even more linked to cities than industrialization
and the rich modern democratic state is more urban today than it was yesterday. Alas, if the city is
where democracy is born and where it prospers, it has also shown a great resilience to terrorist
attacks. Londoners, New Yorkers and Madrileños, while initially shocked, have shown a
remarkable collective capacity to confront terrorism. The sense of belonging to a great urban
community is perhaps as strong a sentiment as nationalism has shown to be in the past. And with
the erosion of the nation-state, this sentiment will probably grow in the future.

Democracy in the face of terrorism

Modern democracy, whose main characteristic is to defend and promote individual freedom
has logically been a target of terrorists ever since it started to develop in the 19th century.
Democracy is notoriously slow to react to events and its hands are often tied by its essential duty
not to infringe on civil liberties. From the onset, terrorists have been very agile at exploiting this
apparent weakness, setting traps that government leaders, as exemplified recently by George W.
Bush and Tony Blair, very readily fall into. But democracies can become ruthless when challenged
to the core, one reason for the aforementioned leaders to present the terrorist threat as an existential
one threatening democracy and Western civilization. These characteristics, in essence, have defined
the perpetual fight that democracies have mounted against terrorism for a century and a half.
Looking back at this protracted conflict, it seems evident that terrorism as such cannot be eliminated
but that it can more or less be contained. Or, more to the point, that terrorists cannot be
exterminated but that the consequences of terrorism can be limited. Provided, once again, that one
act accordingly with some degree of intelligence.

Looking back in history, it seems clear that most governments have the utmost difficulty in
reacting to terrorism, at least initially, all the more so when they are democratic. Paradoxically, a
solid democracy almost never succumbs to terrorism. Not because its governments react
appropriately, since they rarely do, but because its citizens react positively to the psychological
pressures brought upon by terrorists. For, on the one hand, terrorists seek to shock the public to the
point of breakage while the public, in turn, seems to get more resolved as terrorists get more
destructive and abominable. And while terrorists seem to gain enormous momentum with their
initial tactical successes, they also tend to lose it rapidly with time, as successful attacks are
increasingly difficult to organize. On the contrary, the initial popular reaction to a terrorist attack is
shock, fear, and dismay followed, with time, by a resolve and will to resist.
The importance of maintaining civil liberties

Which means that in the end, while democratic countries sometimes, albeit rarely, yield to terrorism, they tend to survive through the assault and menace. On the other hand, generations of terrorists live and die, usually early, only to see new generations emerge whose goals generally remain as unattainable as those of the generations that preceded them. The fact that terrorists do sometimes succeed probably offers that glimmer of hope to those who try. Thus, it is essential for established democracies faced with terrorism to make sure, first of all, that they do not themselves undermine their own democratic structures in the name of the fight against terrorism. Indeed, it is very tempting to eat up at civil liberties when faced with terrorists who exploit these to their violent ends. Thus, while the traditional work of the police, perhaps the military, in infiltrating terrorist groups is vital, as is the need that services within countries and between countries communicate with each other, it is just as important that governments and parliaments make sure that democratic institutions are not encroached upon in the name of anti-terrorism. Knowing that a zero-risk against a terrorist attack is impossible to achieve, the best that one can do, aside from reducing that risk as much as is humanly possible, is to minimize the political consequences that a terrorist attack can generate.

The need to spread the fight against terrorism

In short, Democracy needs to adapt to a new environment. Its first task is to re-define its strategies and determine who implements them. Terrorism is a multiform chameleon that preys on democracy. In order to fight it, democracies need to enlarge the number of actors who participate, from the citizen all the way to the higher rungs of the state. The state itself needs to define clearly the roles of the executive, judiciary and legislative bodies for this type of conflict while the citizen needs to better understand the nature of the enemy. Terrorism might be the ultimate strategy of chaos but democracy is, in effect, the ultimate process of stability, and the best antidote to terrorism.