Cities against Terrorism: Final Conference, Brussels. 10-11 September 2007

The “War on Terror” in Historical Perspective

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Reasons for ignoring history

11 September 2001 was interpreted as ushering in an entirely new era. Terrorism was now:

• on larger scale than ever before;
• more international;
• more fanatical (e.g. suicide attacks);
• using modern technology;
• might acquire nuclear weapons.

New measures and approaches were needed.
A city-based phenomenon?

- Impact of terrorism is largely in cities.
- The main reason for this is that terrorists want both victims and witnesses, and also the presence of media.
- The responses of city-dwellers and city administrations is critically important.
Lack of reference to history: 1
statements by governments

- Bush speech to Congress 20 Sept 2001
- UK *Strategic Defence Review: A New Chapter* (July 2002)
Lack of reference to history: 2 publicists/journalists

- David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror*, 2003

Lack of reference to history: 3 historians

A puzzle: even historians writing about the war on terror neglect the history of terrorism

General argument of presentation

• History, literature, and law are relevant as guides to understanding and policy-making *vis-à-vis* terrorism.

• Terrorism is a threat to democracies.

• Prevailing ideas about the connection of terrorism and democracy are flawed.
Illustrations from turn-of-the-twentieth-century novels

1. LONDON
1920 AS IMAGINED IN 1893

illustrations from turn-of-the-twentieth-century novels

2. NEW YORK SKYSCRAPER UNDER FICTIONAL ATTACK IN 1910

Ten propositions on terrorism: 1-5

1. Its relationship with democracy is complex.
2. It often has unintended consequences.
3. It can become endemic in societies.
4. Counter-terrorism sometimes works.
5. Underlying grievances must be addressed.
Ten propositions on terrorism: 6-10

6. Legal frameworks must be respected.
7. Treatment of detainees is a key issue.
8. Terror is a problem of error as much as of evil.
9. Similarities between terrorists & opponents.
10. Past terrorist campaigns ended in a wide variety of ways.
1. Complex relation with democracy

- Terrorist movements have often operated in democratic countries – sometimes because of imperfections in the democratic system such as the tyranny of majorities over minorities.
- **Britain** faced a long terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland, and now sees the worrying emergence of home-grown Islamic terrorists.
- **Sri Lanka**, which has had universal adult suffrage since 1931, has faced a particularly serious terrorist threat from the Tamil Tigers.
2. Unintended consequences

• In 1919-68, 56 heads of government or state were assassinated, yet the impacts were low.

• Major but unintended consequences. Gavril Princip’s role in triggering WWI.
3. Terrorism can become endemic

- Middle East
- Latin America
- Balkans
- Ireland

Main threat is not to “the West”, but to the societies from which terrorists come.
4. Counter-terrorism sometimes works

- Malayan Emergency, 1948-
- Philippines, 1948-
- Italy and Germany in 1970s

Over 90% of the action is police work.
5. Underlying grievances must be addressed

• Counter-terrorist policies that have succeeded have generally involved a political package. This raises the Q of appeasement. Policies are often different from what terrorists demanded.

• Not to make changes gives total control of the political agenda to terrorists.
6. Legal frameworks must be respected

Sir Robert Thompson:

“The government must function in accordance with law. There is a very strong temptation in dealing both with terrorism and with guerrilla actions for government forces to act outside the law … Not only is this morally wrong, but, over a period, it will create more practical difficulties for a government than it solves.”
7. Treatment of detainees is a key issue

- Vera Zasulich shoots General Trepov, governor of St Petersburg, capital of Russia, in 1878.
- Torture in Nasser’s jails in Egypt helps explain emergence of Islamic terrorism.
- Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo.
8. Terror is a problem of error as much as of evil

• As a description of a movement, the term “evil” is too simple. Causes of this mode of action are complex.

• A main hazard of treating it as evil is that the people from whom the terrorists come know the situation is more complex.
9. Similarities between terrorists & opponents

• A belief in struggle of good vs evil.
• Tendency to be ahistorical.
• Belief that new weapons and tactics can give an opportunity to strike directly at adversary’s power.
10. Past terrorist campaigns ended in a wide variety of ways

• Terrorists shoot themselves in the foot.
• Terrorists become aware of lack of gains.
• Governments reduce support.
• Amelioration of conditions weakens support for terrorists.
• Holding of multi-party elections.
• Shared awareness of stalemate.
“Victory against terrorism will not occur as a single, defining moment. It will not be marked by the likes of the surrender ceremony on the deck of the USS Missouri that ended World War II. However, through the sustained effort to compress the scope and capability of terrorist organizations, isolate them regionally, and destroy them within state borders, the United States and its friends and allies will secure a world in which our children can live free from fear and where the threat of terrorist attacks does not define our daily lives.”
How terrorist campaigns end: six elements

1. Terrorists shoot themselves in the foot.
2. They realise that they are not advancing.
3. Governments abandon their support.
How terrorist campaigns end: six elements

4. Amelioration of conditions.
5. Holding of genuine multi-party elections.
How terrorist campaigns end: conclusions

- Sometimes they wind down, or fade away, rather than end.
- Combatants may be retrained.
- Redefining the terms of any “war on terror”.
- The role of civil liberties in the “war on terror”.