Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

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CHANGING TERRORISM IN A CHANGING WORLD

The last decade has seen extraordinary changes in the international security environment. Decades of Cold War assumptions and strategies have been overthrown, and new debates have emerged on how to explain and address today's more diverse and ambiguous risks. Yet much of the discussion on terrorism remains tied to images drawn from previous epochs. Recent experience, from the bombings of the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the World Trade Center, the federal building in Oklahoma City, and Khobar Towers to the use of chemical weapons in the Tokyo subway and Hamas suicide attacks in Israel, has galvanized public and expert attention, and reminds us that terrorism is capable of starkly affecting U.S. citizens and U.S. interests. It also suggests troubling new dimensions, including the potential for terrorist action on U.S. territory and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical, biological, and radiological.

The old image of a professional terrorist motivated by ideology or the desire for "national liberation," operating according to a specific political agenda, armed with guns and bombs, and backed by overt state sponsors, has not quite disappeared. It has been augmented—some would say overtaken—by other forms of terrorism. This new terrorism has different motives, different actors, different sponsors, and, as Bruce Hoffman discusses in Chapter Two, demonstrably greater lethality. Terrorists are organizing themselves in new, less hierarchical structures and using "amateurs" to a far greater extent

than in the past. All of this renders much previous analysis of terrorism based on established groups obsolete, and complicates the task of intelligence-gathering and counterterrorism.

Three points are worth noting as background. First, this study was undertaken for the U.S. Air Force at a time when the attack on the Khobar Towers military housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, was fresh in the minds of policymakers, the military, and the public. The Air Force was concerned about understanding the current and future terrorist threat to deployed forces and vigorously addressing the problem of "force protection." Although some aspects of our study treated the problem of close-in defense against terrorist risks to the Air Force, the bulk of our effort was broader, tracing the recent evolution of international terrorism against civilian and U.S. military targets, looking ahead to where terrorism is going, and assessing how it might be contained. We use the term "contained" because, unlike some other security challenges such as nuclear deterrence or the defense of borders, absolute prevention of terrorism is not a realistic objective.

Second, our research was conducted against the background of a wider national debate on aspects of international terrorism, especially the threat of weapons of mass destruction as a prominent "transnational risk." The Defense Science Board and others have examined these risks in detail over the past few years, and recent congressional and National Security Council initiatives have also made this their focus.[1] In addition, it has become fashionable—with some reason—to consider the risk of information-based terrorism. Our study touches on each of these issues, but with less emphasis on the proliferation of technologies and techniques *per se*, and more emphasis on how changes in the sources and nature of terrorism may encourage—or discourage—the use of unconventional terror.

Third, we have been struck by the limited scope of most analyses of contemporary terrorism. Perhaps because the study of the behavior of specific groups was the hallmark of most terrorism research in the recent past, expert analyses of terrorism tend to be just that—analyses of terrorist phenomena with little attempt to characterize

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[1]See Defense Science Board, *Summer Study Task Force on DoD Responses to Transnational Threats*, Vol. 1, *Final Report*, Washington, DC, 1997.

the overall nature of the terrorist threat to national security or national objectives. We have therefore tried to place terrorism and counterterrorism in strategic perspective (for example, how the terrorist instrument may relate to other forms of conflict, or its application as an "asymmetric strategy" by less-capable adversaries). In conceptualizing counterterrorism strategy, we have applied a strategic planning framework used successfully in other RAND studies outside the terrorism field.

Unlike many countries around the world, and unlike some of our allies, the United States has not faced an "existential" threat from terrorism, that is, a threat to our survival and basic way of life. The viability of the United States as a society and as a political system has not been, and very likely will not be, threatened by terrorist acts, however lethal. That said, terrorism affects our national interests directly and indirectly, and can constrain our international freedom of action. The potential for enormous increases in lethality and disruption as the result of unconventional terrorism reinforces the importance of counterterrorism as a part of our national security strategy. The stakes go beyond the protection of American lives and property and our capacity for global engagement, and involve the reasonable expectation that the government will keep its citizens from being terrorized.

The bulk of the research for this study was completed prior to the August 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, and the consequent U.S. strikes against terrorist-related targets in Afghanistan and Sudan, but reference has been made to them in the analysis where it seemed useful to do so.

STUDY APPROACH AND STRUCTURE

We build on a large body of previous RAND research on terrorism and political violence,[2] and make extensive use (especially in

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[2]Some diverse and notable past RAND studies include: Brian Jenkins, *Future Trends in International Terrorism* (P-7176, 1985), *The Other World War* (R-3202-AF, 1985); *New Modes of Conflict* (R-3009-DNA, 1983), *The Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism* (P-7119, 1985); Konrad Kellen, *On Terrorists and Terrorism* (N-1942-RC, 1982), *Terrorists—What Are They Like? How Some Terrorists Describe Their World and Actions* (N-1300-SL, 1979); and Bruce Hoffman, *Recent Trends and Future Prospects of*

Chapter Two on terrorism trends and future patterns) of the RAND-St. Andrews Chronology of International Terrorism, documenting incidents from 1968 to the present. The three papers in this volume were chosen because they give a good sense of the project and its key findings. Although the papers are broadly complementary, the reader will note some useful differences of perspective (most notably, the emphasis on terrorism's lethality in Chapter Two, and on its disruptive as well as destructive potential in Chapter Three). We have not attempted to eliminate these differences, which, in any case, serve as further contributions to informed debate.

Chapter Two, by Bruce Hoffman, charts trends and future patterns in international terrorism against civilian and military targets, and their implications. It also offers some broader observations on terrorist risks to the United States and the utility of military responses. The chapter describes the rise of new types of terrorists, changing motivations, and the traditionally incremental character of terrorists' tactical innovations (and suggests that most—but not all—terrorism will continue to follow this pattern). The author identifies the key factors behind the increasing lethality of international terrorist acts, despite a steady decrease in the overall number of incidents worldwide.

In Chapter Three, John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt, and Michele Zanini take up the controversial question of terrorism in the information age. They go beyond the discussion of "information warfare" by terrorists to assess the significance and organization of information-age terrorism and possible responses. Adopting a "netwar" perspective, they argue that future terrorism will often feature disruption rather than destruction, especially in a "war paradigm" where unconventional terrorism may be an attractive alternative to direct confrontation with the United States. Their chapter includes a revealing analysis of the information competence of terrorist organizations in the Middle East, and suggests that the more active and lethal of these make extensive use of information techniques and are increasingly organized as networks rather than hierarchies. The authors go on to

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Terrorism in the United States (R-3618, May 1988), *Recent Trends and Future Prospects of Iranian-Sponsored International Terrorism* (R-3783-USDP, 1988), and *"Holy Terror": The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative* (P-7834, 1993). For an extensive list of RAND studies in this area, see RAND's Terrorism and Low-intensity Conflict bibliography (SB-1060).

propose ways in which the United States and the U.S. Air Force can equip themselves to address this modern form of terrorism, including opportunities for new information-intensive approaches to counterterrorism.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter Four), I seek to place terrorism and counterterrorism in strategic context, with special emphasis on the new dimensions of terrorism discussed in the previous chapters. I offer a typology of terrorist risks to U.S. interests, and discuss the changing geopolitics of terrorism. New regional and functional sources will compel us to look beyond the traditional centers of terrorism in Europe and the Middle East, and come to grips with terrorism as a transnational phenomenon, occupying an expanded place on the conflict spectrum. The discussion draws on the comparative experience of Israel, France, and Britain in addressing their own terrorism challenges. Finally, the chapter offers a framework for conceptualizing national counterterrorism strategy, with "core," "environment shaping," and "hedging" dimensions, and with special attention to the role of air and space power in relation to each.

Chapter Four's conclusions point to a strategy—and national capabilities—tailored to dealing with the very challenging problems of individuals, small nonstate actors, and networks in addition to the identifiable state sponsors that have been the traditional objects of air power in the service of counterterrorism. Counterterrorism strategy will be global, of necessity, but will also have to address the growing problem of homeland defense—a neglected dimension of American strategy.