Terrorism and counter-terrorism: a choice between two evils

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I began working on terrorism with Jean-Paul in the fall of 2002. True to form, he explained to me in the space of an afternoon how we would request funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We received financing a few months later. Unlike the majority of researchers in the field, Jean-Paul knew, based on his years of expertise, that to understand terrorism one has to also consider counter-terrorism and vice versa. This is what made his project unique.

In the somber wake of the September 2001 attacks, two basic intuitions pushed Jean-Paul to reflect further. The first was that a new form of terrorism—savage, almost apolitical and fuelled by bloodlust—had spawned. The second was that this "new terrorism" had given rise to an uncontrolled reaction prepared to tread on the most basic democratic principles. We would be forced into a Hobbesian choice between terrorism and the opposing terror.

Rather than become prophets of doom, it was time to resurrect our collective critical judgment. The end of the first decade of the 21st century saw this new terrorism wave recede significantly. On the other front, our open civil society did its best to resist repeated attacks from its domestic enemies—however these attacks continue to increase in number and it would be naive to think the battle is won. Therefore, more than ever, these notions must persuade us to (re)introduce moderation in our analysis of the problem and, most particularly, in the way we respond to it.

Charybdis: The New Terrorism

After the 9/11 attacks, it was difficult to find an exact definition for what many experts in the field had already qualified as the "new" terrorism. On one hand, it became clear that the massive losses following the collapse of the World Trade Center were not anticipated by the masterminds behind the plot. On the other hand, the hundreds lost in the attacks
on the airliners, undoubtedly the most vulnerable targets in modern society, was not a new phenomenon. Canada had already experienced the most well-known tragedy in the history of aviation terrorism with the loss of Air India Flight 182 in 1985. Would this mean then that new terrorism dates back to 1985?

To complicate things even further, most if not all of the acts associated with new terrorism arose from one particular context: the battle waged by Osama bin Laden against a vague enemy generally understood to be the countries in the Western World. Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda was, and continues to be a monster of many definitions, two of which are in total opposition. One is the classic organization that functioned until 9/11. The other is the “viral” ideology, the only one to endure past Operation Anaconda in March 2002, where foreign mujahedeen were permanently disbanded by the allied forces in Afghanistan. Of course to this day some still claim to be part of al-Qaeda. Dozens of individuals and groups emerged to swear allegiance to the mountain-bound sheikh (who would eventually be found in a Pakistani suburb). From that point on, this international terrorist “brand” continues to lure many rebels with varied causes. It is also seductive to authorities attempting to simplify the anti-terrorism struggle for public consumption.

Most media, politicians and so-called experts all blithely disregard this crucial distinction. Yet once the central organization disappeared, it should not have been surprising that transnational attacks were replaced by classical terrorism centered on local grievances and targets. Our current misconceptions about homegrown terrorism also stem from this confusion.

With those caveats, there were still good reasons to accept the “new terrorism” theory. Most terrorism databases, assuming we can trust these unrefined tools, have shown two trends. Towards the end of the 1980s, there was a steep decline in the total number of terrorist attacks. Starting in 1995, this was accompanied by an increase in the number of deaths per attack. We thought we had witnessed the emergence of an evolution in terrorist activities which slowly began to distinguish themselves from the protest violence of the 1960s and 1970s, where brutality was held to a minimum and the message was repeated ad nauseam (Leman-Langlois and Brodeur, 2005). From then on, it appeared that violence was only limited by the available means, which some referred to as “bit by bit genocide.”

This new concept of terrorism still has a number of flaws which become more apparent in retrospect. Firstly, when bin Laden’s organization disappeared, the number and scale of the attacks diminished greatly (other than in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the situation is unique, and does not fit most definitions of “new terrorism” anyway). Second, the adamant, religious and bombastic aspects of the “cause” have been greatly exaggerated. It turns out we underestimated what the leaders of these movements had to say and placed too much emphasis on the caliphate’s religious metaphors and the 1492 debacle. Actually, bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and others also made far more tangible requests, including these three main ones: withdrawing the West’s military presence from Holy Lands; ending unconditional support to Israel; and ending the support to corrupt regimes that oppress Muslim people. Current events demonstrate that this third objective is now taking place independently of al-Qaeda. We must, therefore, avoid falling into the trap, useful in some political spheres, of believing that the new terrorism is driven by unrealistic and irrational demands that we can indeed we must categorically ignore. The same misinterpretation also leads to the conclusion that the violence the terrorists subscribe to is so detached from the wild and unclear objectives they aim to accomplish.
that it can only be considered nihilistic, or at the very least fanatic to the point of being out of reach of any rational argument. In short, that the only solution is an all-out war against it. Yet, in reality there are clear objectives and a rationale for action. This is why it is important to analyze terrorism and counter-terrorism together, because one is destined to influence the form and the content of the other. It should be understood that this argument by no means justifies violence — it is merely an attempt at presenting a complete picture.

9 We are clearly terrorized by the distorted image of the fanatical terrorist with insatiable and incomprehensible demands who kills for the sake of killing and by the most excessive means possible. In his last public presentation, at the end of March 2010, Jean-Paul addressed this very issue with the question, “Why does terrorism terrorize?” By observing the different types of terrorism throughout the world, the mission was to discover the conditions that make the State’s reaction sometimes rational, sometimes disproportionate and always thrown off by panic—which is the case with the US and, on a smaller scale, Canada. The several hundred billion dollars spent (during a decade of budget cuts) to protect Canada from an intangible threat is a good example.

10 In the US, 9/11 was quickly seen as an unprecedented assault on US territory (the smaller attacks in the past such as the Oklahoma City bombing or the 1993 World Trade Center bombing were quickly forgotten). One reason the US is an exceptional example is the magnitude and audacity of the attacks. But there is more to the story. The government deliberately initiated a large scale reorganization of administrative entities in response to a singular perception (one that has proven completely wrong) of the terrorism threat. To paraphrase J. Simon, the US are now "governed by terror," by politicizing terrorism, a process familiar to crime policy analysts. The new missions and practices of these administrative entities have, in turn, generated an abundance of information about terrorism, which is the expected retroactive outcome of any increase in control activities. In a way, this artificially inflated threat made the spectacular increase counter-terrorism activity look proportional and rational.

11 In short, to understand how the terror amplification machine works, it should be viewed as the perpetual "recycling" of various events and trends (Brodeur and Leman-Langlois, 2005). The impact phase, the attack itself, is followed rather quickly by an echo phase, of an undetermined length and scope but heavily influenced by the mediagenic lure of the physical damages (the more images the more persistent and abundant the echoes will be). The attack echoes are sent out by all groups or entities possessing sufficient power or popular legitimacy.

- Media recycling: the distorting mirror of the media makes unique events look like trends because it systematically and exclusively reports on them. Acts of terrorism, uncommon in our society, quickly invade television news and spread on the web. This omnipresence produces two main effects: it disproportionately inflates the importance of rare events and produces a heuristic, an anchoring story that makes associated risk levels appear to be more significant (Pidgeon, Kaspersen and Slovic, 2003).
- Administrative recycling: several administrative entities took advantage of the terrorist threat by attempting to obtain new budgets and more favorable regulatory frameworks. Several new ad hoc funds were allocated to police organizations, public transportation organizations and intelligence agencies. Each of these expenses legitimizes the pursuit and inevitably puts the threats and the “echo” effect back on stage.
• Industrial recycling: following each terrorist attack most governments began spending on preventing similar attacks (OECD: $20 billion per year). The first to benefit from this financial windfall were the companies involved in producing goods, services and information centered on providing security.
• Political recycling: several politicians and political parties have repeatedly used certain terrorist acts or terrorism in general to justify a mass of new politics, laws, budgets, and to show their electorate they are the best at managing crises. Some politicians, George W. Bush for example, explicitly used terrorism to divert attention from other problems having nothing to do with terrorism, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005.
• Strategic recycling: in 2006 the Royal Canadian Mounted Police distributed key chains with a handy built-in light and a toll-free number where one was encouraged to report threats to national security. Vancouver and Gatineau police organizations also conducted campaigns to convince public transportation passengers to be aware and to monitor packages and suspicious behavior. Whether or not these measures actually contributed much, they definitely constitute permanent, repeated echoes.

In sum, the most recent evolution in contemporary terrorism is most likely the way it is confronted by the authorities in power (private or public), who give precedence to the political risks and what I would call a “retrospective futurology.”

Scylla: The New Counter-terrorism

Preventing terrorism, like preventing any other activity, implies that we can predict the future. In criminology we often do just this by examining data describing the past. By combining many numbers and theories that establish an approximate stability we can evaluate the overall risk that an event will repeat itself. This new preoccupation with what Zedner (2007) called “precrime” owes its popularity largely to the risk management model, which was implemented in government agencies at the end of the 1980s. Risk management brought with it the actuarial tools to predict danger, as well as various spatial analysis applications for crime prevention and repression.

The same desire to predict exists in terrorism. In fact, the desire is more present because in “ordinary” criminology we are satisfied when crime statistic appear to have decreased by level judged to be “significant” (meaning “not caused by coincidence” and not necessarily “important”). In terrorism, the far more ambitious objective is the complete absence of any attack. However, terrorist acts are so rare in Western societies that the statistical tools mentioned above cannot be applied. Despite these two facts, the pursuit of a prediction model was not abandoned; however the prediction methods were changed.

At the end of 2001, the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) put in motion a far-ranging datamining project with the culturally naive name of “Total Information Awareness.” Using the input of countless high-tech contractors, the project would create a system that could detect patterns of terrorist activity by searching most of the world’s databases (including all of the ministries and governmental agencies, credit card and airline companies, retail stores, internet providers, etc. in the world). By bringing together all of this banked information, we would be able to catch terrorists plotting their attacks.
Notwithstanding the ethical objections this project raised (the reason Congress would eventually shut it down. Note that it has since been picked up by the National Security Agency), Jean-Paul attacked it from a logical standpoint by demonstrating that its chances of pinpointing a terrorist were not higher than to pick a random citizen (Brodeur and Leman-Langlois, 2006). Firstly, it must be noted that there is no theory of terrorism—nor of a particular type of terrorism—that measures consistency or characteristics over time, establishes a limited list of psychic sequences or specific behaviors. And DARPA did not even consider this problem—not a single terrorism expert was included on the list of contractors. This was deemed unnecessary since, from the start, the program was created to recognize past events in the future. Using a sequential analysis of known terrorist acts, it attempted to identify a mirror image of these sequences in the data banks it examined. This sequential breakdown was founded on two assumptions: 1) that all the information is available on a sufficient number of past events; 2) that the facts of the observed sequences are pure empirical objects that do not require theories. Both assumptions are incorrect.

The system’s second fundamental error, its deductive approach, implies that the future can be predicted by sequences of the past. This is a surprising presumption, considering the entire program was invented as a result of the 9/11 attacks, which are vivid examples of the classic “outlier.” In any case, this rather elementary use of deduction regards terrorism as ahistorical, autonomous and relatively unaffected by the measures we take to counter it.

This observation of ineffective predictive methods should not be mistaken for a form of pessimism. Although there are impediments to traditional police strategies, such as those that try to improve police collaboration with national security agencies (Brodeur, 2000, 2010), in most cases “low-tech” investigatory strategies are still relevant and indeed more powerful (Leman-Langlois and Brodeur, 2005, Brodeur and Leman-Langlois, 2008b). The reason is simple: despite the super-villain image portrayed by the media and politicians, terrorists are still human beings with human behaviors (Brodeur, 2009). Once we gain an understanding of their motives and their comprehension of political action, a number of law enforcement techniques can be adapted to confront the terrorist.

This being said, such adaptations involve risks and deserve special attention. It cannot simply be a purely administrative change or a recycled version of conventional practice. The case of Maher Arar, one of particular interest to Jean-Paul, is a good example. By applying the standard procedures employed against organized crime, the investigation of “subjects of interest” in relation to terrorism resulted in several perfectly innocent Canadians, including Arar, being deported and thereby sentenced to torture (Leman-Langlois et Brodeur, 2006). The same bungling continues to happen daily in Canada with suspects being held under “security certificates” justified by partial, often false, and largely misinterpreted information. Mohammed Mahjoub, for example, has been detained in Canada for more than 12 years based on “evidence” that runs the gamut from vague to false. Since the government of Canada recently reaffirmed their support for the legal use of data obtained during torture, this kind of example can only become more commonplace.

Jean-Paul explained this continual distancing from the rule of law, citing the domination of a certain political rhetoric making terrorism an act of war rather than a crime (Leman-Langlois and Brodeur, 2009). This war, possessing the same metaphorical character as the war on poverty or the war on cancer, was quickly made quite real with the war in...
Afghanistan, after which came the strategies and, most importantly, the legitimatization of militarized counter-terrorist actions. Yet, the objective of a war is to annihilate an enemy, not to place a citizen under arrest.

Conclusion

Between the twin threats of extreme terrorism and equally extreme counter-terrorism, citizens find themselves in a difficult position. Some observations are less than reassuring. For instance, when we choose security instead of freedom, we probably expect security strategies to actually be effective. This has not been the case. The US, which remains our model in the field, has so far managed to increase the number masterfully “foiled” bogus plots (Aaronson, 2012). The increase in human and technological surveillance capabilities has resulted in alienating citizens, to the point where some hundred Canadian community organizations have signed a non-cooperation agreement that states their refusal to communicate with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (People’s Commission Network, 2012). As it stands, our collective choice, extreme counter-terrorism, is not worth its price tag.

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ABSTRACTS

Jean-Paul Brodeur’s research on terrorism spanned two distinct, yet inseparable aspects of the matter. The first concerns the inner workings, the objectives, and the methods of groups identified as “terrorist,” which of course must be measured against the actual results produced. The second includes the regulation, the organization, the funding and the consequences of the strategies, organizations and programs created or modified in order to face the apprehended terrorist threat. A decade after 9/11, one must conclude that the latter has produced more, and altogether greater, dangers for Canadians and Westerners in general.


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