

Assessing terrorism outcomes and impacts

Casey Brunelle says that analysing acts of violence against soft targets, this series will contribute to the need to adapt a strategic understanding of the root causes and underlying symptoms that have made global terrorism the influential actor it is today

In a world defined by increasingly complex globalising inputs and outputs, it has become easier to consider seemingly 'small-scale' events solely in terms of their effects on the ground.

However, the globalising nature of such events makes understanding outcomes and impacts essential for situational awareness within the realms of political, economic, and military action. In short, the importance of dissecting a single activity in terms of its first, second, and third order effects within a holistic and strategic area of relevance is more vital today than it ever has been before.

Take the example of contemporary global terrorism. While militant Salafi jihadism certainly possesses no monopoly on the outsourcing of terrorism as a means and an end to securing geopolitical change, the common strategic and theological foundations within this movement make groups such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) the prime targets for national and international counter-terrorist policies. These respective networks' shared abilities to influence public opinion through interconnected technologies and instantaneous communications further amplifies their areas of operations significantly beyond their physical presence.

In the aftermath of such traumatic events – most recently the November 2015 Paris attacks and March 2016 Brussels

Emergency workers outside Maalbeek Metro Station after a suicide bomb attack in March. The author says that to play into the hands of such terrorist groups – by responding to attacks with an equivalent form of hate, xenophobic paranoia, and institutionalised discrimination – is both an ignorant and irresponsible policy prescription

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bombings – it is all too easy to succumb to the irresponsible and largely ignorant diagnoses of some political pundits, that these heinous acts of violence perpetrated by a small group of individuals might be used to justify inflammatory and xenophobic rhetoric (or a hyper-reliance on conventional, costly, and ultimately ineffective security countermeasures).

Both within and beyond the West, citizens of such nationalist conservative camps might see this response as being not only understandable, but also necessary, in order to deter the threat of terrorism and punish those who advocate such violence. In truth, however, these long-term socioeconomic shifts serve to propel the same narrative that paints terrorism, for many disenfranchised persons of any religion, nation, or class, as a seemingly legitimate alternative to firmly entrenched core grievances. In essence, these long-term socioeconomic outcomes produce exactly the desired effects of those who plot, calculate, and weigh the pros and cons of potential terrorist attacks.

This two-part series will focus on the importance of examining acts of terror in terms of their assessed first, second, and third order effects. By analysing premeditated acts of mass violence against civilian soft targets, it is hoped that these

articles might contribute to the urgent need to adapt a strategic understanding of the root causes and underlying symptoms that have made global terrorism the influential actor it is today.

Within the first hours and days following a terrorist attack against civilian soft targets, (eg places of entertainment and leisure that hold no operational military or political value), it is common for both political pundits and public opinion to denounce those first suspected of carrying out these strikes as 'barbarians' or 'savages'. This is a quintessentially common reaction, both within and beyond the West.

The importance of this denunciation, however, when originating in Western liberal democracies, is that it reinforces the strategic objectives of the terrorist group(s) that carried out the attack. While the plotters dictate the input and assess the output of such a potential strike, it is their calculated assessment that determines which style of attack, on which target, will yield the greatest relative gains for their respective agenda (ie outcomes and impacts). These gains are dependent on the terrorist group's ability to anticipate and manipulate political discourse and public opinion within that specific area of operations.

There is already a substantial amount of social and political reflection on instances of far right wing factions within North America and Europe that exploit acts of violence as a means to justify their already firmly entrenched ends. By way of example, take a political party advocating the targeted surveillance of Muslim communities or even the closing of immigration to Muslims (or any other minority group).

With every terrorist attack that takes place, both within and beyond

this party's specific jurisdiction, pundits within this party will use those attacks as an after-the-fact justification for their original assessment. Inflammatory discourse within the political institution thrives on unknown ends legitimising long-held means. This is a dynamic that many high-ranking extremist plotters are aware of and seek to exploit beyond the first order effects of a single attack.

On the other side is the purported need to understand the core grievances and known methods of redress that such terrorist groups embody. For example, it is an easy, overly simplistic, and myopic assessment to suggest mass bombing of entire countries half a world away in order to deter, prevent, or punish those who advocate similar acts of violence. It is vital, however, for stakeholders of any discipline to encourage constructive debate on the core grievances and known external factors that permit such violent mind-sets not only to exist, but to thrive in this globalised era.

All too often, the line between understanding and justifying such dynamics is deliberately blurred in order to reinforce the ultranationalist and xenophobic dogma that is increasingly being witnessed in Western liberal democracies and their global counterparts. There is much in the way of intelligence assessments and academic study to conclude that the reinforcement of this dogma by populist pundits plays exactly into the hands of the command and control echelons that plot terrorism.

Much like scientific behavioural analysis in the case of law enforcement, a perceptive and forward-thinking framework within the social sciences has an inherent need – and instrumental demand – to foster discussion on the root causes and underlying symptoms of terrorism in the modern age. It is through such positive discourse that governments, humanitarian organisations and academia might disprove many of the myths of terrorism, so that they may elicit a holistic, but also context sensitive approach that deconstructs and redresses the grievances that terrorist groups seek to exploit in order to achieve their goals.

The urge to denounce those willing to commit acts of heinous violence against civilians is certainly a tempting – if not understandable – response. Generally speaking, the largely subjective effects that materialise in the third order effects of terrorist attacks (that of the social realm) are by far the most important and relevant to the planning processes of most terrorist groups' command and control groups.

Calm, collected, forward thinking

This considered, there is an urgent need for upper echelons of government to fulfill the role that is required of them – that of a calm, collected, and forward-thinking voice that inherently opens itself to positive debate and unrestricted accountability (while implementing the most effective policies to keep their respective jurisdictions safe from harm). To do otherwise is to play into the hands of such terrorist groups in responding with an equivalent form of hate, xenophobic paranoia, and institutionalised discrimination – is both an ignorant and irresponsible policy prescription.

More pointedly, an action of hate-driven violence by a terrorist group cannot be met with an equal reaction by an elected government. Fighting fire with fire is a mantra long-since predated, and higher thinking at all levels of policy and operations is needed in order to make real and sustainable gains in counter-terrorism measures.

■ Part II will prescribe a framework for assessing terrorist attacks in terms of their calculated planning processes.

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