

Future Trends and Prospects for Terrorism after 11 September 2001  
by LTC Koh Soon Heng Eric

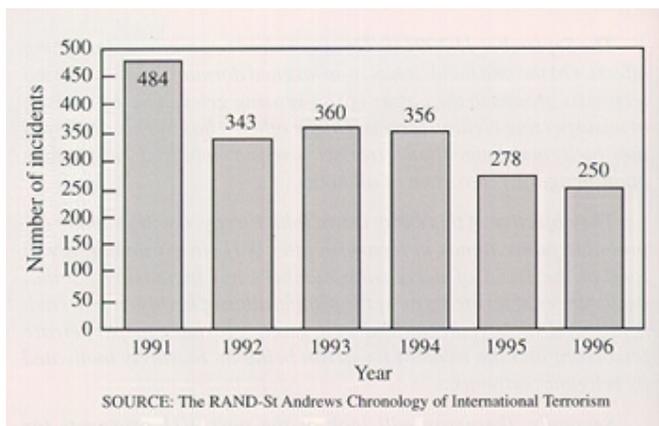
*The September 11 2001 (9/11) attacks had two major cross cutting effects. On the one hand, it has re-awakened dormant or demoralized terrorists groups to the power of showcasing grievances by striking at unsuspecting civilian targets. On the other, it has openly displayed the cruelty and danger that terrorists pose and mobilized wider public opinion against terrorism of all kinds.*

*The objective of this essay is two fold. Firstly, it will examine the probable future trends in terrorism after 9/11. In particular, it will look at the trend of decreasing numbers but increasingly lethal occurrences of terrorists acts; the proliferation of highly empowered, small and loosely organized cell groups formed to perpetrate terrorism; and the trend of terrorism being increasingly motivated by religious extremism.*

*Secondly, the essay will look at the post 9/11 prospects for terrorism. It will examine the issue through the nature of terrorism's appeal; it will consider terrorism's relevance as a tactic to wage war and finally, it will deliberate terrorism's growth potential in terms of its resilience and capabilities.*

### **Future Trends of Terrorism**

9/11 has set an unprecedented standard for terrorism of the future. It has showcased a level of planning, professionalism and tradecraft rarely seen among the majority of terrorists and terrorist movements. It is reasonable to assume that the leaders would have predicted a military response by the US and as such, would have made contingencies to survive it so as to be able to perpetrate future terrorism when the time is right. As to what forms this new wave of terrorism might take thereafter, there is no obvious predictable scenario and the vulnerabilities which terrorists can exploit are still by and large many. This section will however, examine three trends of terrorism in the near future.



### **Decreasing Numbers, Increasing Lethality**

In a 1999 RAND research piece, it was propounded that terrorism of the future will follow a trend of decreasing numbers but increasing lethality.<sup>1</sup> It showed that the total number of terrorist incidents worldwide has declined in the 1990s (see fig. above), but the percentage of terrorist incidents with fatalities has correspondingly increased<sup>2</sup> in that period. This was largely attributed to a handful of so-called terrorist "spectaculars" which were engineered to be dramatic and highly lethal so as to capture the attention of the media and public alike. Furthermore, with the public and media becoming increasingly desensitized to the continuing spiral of violence, terrorist acts had to be more innovative and destructive in order to achieve the same effect that a less ambitious or bloody action may have had in the past. 9/11 substantiates this inverse relation and terrorism after it can only spiral upwards in violence if it is to retain or challenge 9/11's level of media and public interests.

Since Osama Bin Laden surfaced in the 1990s, terrorism experts have noted that his apocalyptic vision of the US and its allies internationally debilitated by radical Islam is not amenable to political negotiation. What drives him to kill is essentially religious hatred (to be discussed subsequently). Older groups like the PLO or the IRA are generally constrained by nationalist or irredentist goals that are negotiable. They present their demands clearly, and generally take responsibility for their acts in order to make it clear to their adversaries that the bloodletting will stop when those demands are met. What motivates their violence is the desire to obtain a political result, whereas what Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda wants is only to express their wrath and cripple their enemy.<sup>3</sup> A powerful motive that sees no boundaries and limits to destruction, its success is measured by the level of pain and humiliation that can be inflicted on the adversary.

### **Displacement of Power to Small Groups**

9/11 has underscored the trend that the initiative and power to destroy, disrupt and force nations to divert vast resources to protection against attacks is descending to smaller groups with grievances that may be impossible to fully satisfy. These small groups of fanatics have become in this age, an increasingly potent force to be reckoned with.<sup>4</sup> 9/11 has also highlighted the ease in this information-age, with which perpetrators can gain training and operational knowledge, and with which technology can be exploited to breach communications gaps to plan, coordinate and execute terrorist acts. All these make for conducive breeding of a complex terrorist network with small cell-like structures which are capable of independent operations and extremely difficult to trace and detect. Moreover, since this more amorphous and perhaps even transitory type of group will lack the footprints or modus operandi of an actual, existing terrorist organization, it is likely to prove more difficult for law enforcement to build a useful picture of the dimensions of their intentions and capabilities.<sup>5</sup>

Technology has also enabled terror organizations to reduce sizing and signature. Today, the means and methods of terrorism can easily be gleaned from the Internet, obtained from bookstores and mail-order publishers. Terrorism has become accessible to anyone with a grievance, an agenda, a purpose, or any idiosyncratic combination of the above. Relying on commercially obtainable bomb-making manuals and operational guidebooks, the amateur terrorist can be just as deadly and destructive and even more difficult to track and anticipate than his professional counterpart. The absence of a central command authority may result in fewer constraints on the terrorist's operations and targets, and when combined with a religious fervour, fewer inhibitions about indiscriminate casualties.<sup>6</sup>

### **Religiously Motivated**

In the videotapes released shortly after the US and UK began their operations in Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, Bin Laden and his lieutenants cited the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and US enforcement of sanctions and the no-fly zones against Iraq as reasons for the attacks, and threw in implicit Western backing for Hindus against Muslims in Kashmir for good measure. Presumably, the idea was to rally popular Islamic support, incite more localized Arab terrorist operations and weaken the US coalition with moderate Muslim states. To some extent, the gambit worked. Popular protest increased throughout the Islamic world, notably in Pakistan, the Palestinian territories and Indonesia.<sup>7</sup>

Religious fundamentalism will remain and continue to gain impetus as motivation for post 9/11 terrorism. The hard lesson for the US in 9/11 was learning that terrorism becomes transcendental when perpetrated by an adversary who is not bounded by political, moral or practical restraints. A religious fanatic who embraces the belief of sacrificing his or her own life because he is carrying out the will of God and waging a Holy War is unlikely to be inhibited by the prospect of causing large-scale carnage<sup>8</sup>. 9/11 showcased the capability of religious fanaticism to bring a world power down literally to its knees. As long as there still remains tremendous justified anger in the Islamic world at US foreign policy, groups like Al-Qaeda, albeit with aims and methods that are rejected by the majority, will still retain a world-wide passport under the cover of religion to shelter their terror networks and will continue to press on with their mission of death and destruction.

The Arab and Islamic reaction to Al-Qaeda's attack and to the initial US military response also highlights the degree to which the US has become estranged from these societies. Although many Arab and Islamic leaders were quick to condemn the attack and to reject Bin Laden's call for a new jihad, Arab and Muslim opinion remains sharply critical of US policy in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> These attitudes make it more difficult for moderate Arab governments to support the war against terrorism and make it more likely that the US campaign against Al-Qaeda will create new sympathizers.<sup>10</sup>

### **Prospects of Terrorism**

The US has been a leading target of international terrorists. However until recent years, few of these attacks took place within the US, partly because traditional terrorist groups found the prospect of operations in the US too difficult, politically counterproductive, or simply unnecessary.<sup>11</sup> 9/11 has however, marked the crossing of this threshold for significant international terrorism to be carried out successfully within US soil itself.

The plan demonstrated a level of imagination, sophistication and audacity to hit the US hard and where it mattered most, their pride. This new terrorism is increasingly networked; more diverse in terms of motivations, sponsorship, and security consequences; more global in reach; and more lethal. As a result, much existing counterterrorism experience may be losing its relevance as network forms of organization replace the canonical terrorist hierarchies, or as state sponsorship becomes more subtle and difficult to expose.<sup>12</sup> This section will attempt to discuss some of the prospects for terrorism in the light of 9/11.

### **The Appeal of Terrorism**

Mainstream revolutionary writings may view violence as a means of struggle, but terrorists regard violence as an end in itself that generates identity or damages the enemy's identity.

Terrorism appeals as a weapon for the weak to wage war against an ostensibly superior force and the US continues to be that target more than any other country.<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon is attributable as much to the geographical scope and diversity of America's overseas commercial interests and the large number of its military bases on foreign soil as to its stature as the lone remaining superpower. Terrorists are attracted to American interests and citizens abroad precisely because of the plethora of readily available targets; the symbolic value inherent in any blow struck against perceived US "expansionism", "imperialism" or "economic exploitation"; and, not least, because of the unparalleled opportunities for exposure and publicity from the world's most extensive news media that any attack on an American target assures. As 9/11 has shown, the changing motivations and agendas of terrorists have raised the symbolic value of direct attacks against targets on US soil. State sponsors, bent on revenge (e.g., Iraq or Libya), would take this episode as a special merit in supporting operations within the US. Similarly, movements with transcendental objectives, whether religious or political, may place greater emphasis on acts to shake the confidence and security of US citizens at home. 9/11 has also exposed the US to be a fertile environment for fundraising and associated political activities.<sup>14</sup>

An unintended offshoot of 9/11 is that in its eagerness to attribute responsibility, the US has made Osama Bin Laden into an icon of power for the terrorist world to rally upon to do battle against the perceived forces of injustice and corruption. He has re-written the history of both terrorism and probably of the post-Cold War era, which he arguably single-handedly ended on 9/11. At a time when the forces of globalization, coupled with economic determinism, seemed to have submerged the role of the individual charismatic leader of men to beneath far more powerful, impersonal forces, Bin Laden has cleverly cast himself as a David against the American Goliath: one man standing up to the world's sole remaining superpower, who is able to challenge its might and directly threaten its citizens. To his followers, who may well be growing in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Bin Laden has proven to be the fabled right man; possessing the vision, financial resources, organizational skills and flair for self-promotion to weld together the disparate strands of Islamic fervor, Muslim piety and general enmity towards the West into a formidable global force.<sup>15</sup>

### **Terrorism Continues to be Relevant**

The Gulf War and subsequent operations in the Gulf, Bosnia, and elsewhere can be seen as confirming the political will of the US and its allies to use force in support of regional order. It has also given rise to the perception that the US and the West (including Israel) have developed an unassailable capacity for conventional warfare. Although there is no evidence as yet to link Al-Qaeda to a sponsor state, it is clear that states sponsoring small bands of terrorists that could covertly (and successfully) carry out acts such as 9/11, can easily destabilize its neighbour or rival states and at the same time, escape identification, retaliation, and sanctions. Terrorism therefore, could be employed as an adjunct to conventional warfare, and as a form of asymmetric strategy to outflank and also to force a shift in the nature of conflict against the US and its allies. Accordingly, terrorists may in the future come to be regarded by the globe's rogue states as an ultimate fifth column, a clandestine, cost-effective force used to wage war covertly against more powerful rivals or to subvert neighbouring countries or hostile regimes.<sup>16</sup>

Leading terrorism analysts tended to agree previously on the general ineffectiveness of terrorism as a weapon against well-established democracies (some exceptions should be noted<sup>17</sup>). They saw little to indicate that terrorism or the threat of terrorism had been successful in changing US policy on issues such as support for key allies or the use of force, much less questions of territorial integrity or domestic public policy. 9/11 had however, altered perceptions overnight

and left the US with the unenviable task of reviewing its foreign policies to accommodate coalition-building efforts to support its war against terrorism. For the terrorists sponsor states that have remained at large, this could be seen as a victory if the US reaction was anticipated and imbued into their overall grand strategy. For example, let's say hypothetically that the fictional country of Ruritania instigated the attacks of 9/11 just so that Al-Qaeda and the Taliban would be implicated. Knowing that the US would want to make Bin Laden accountable and apprehend him to assuage the American public's anger, and understanding that the Taliban would be steadfast in denying the Americans of this, Ruritania could have presupposed that in the ensuing war between the US and the Taliban, Ruritania's role in supporting US to stage into Afghanistan would become important. The situation thus provides Ruritania with an advantageous position to bargain for a lifting of US sanctions, to regain its stature in the international community and to re-establish much-needed links to rebuild and develop its economy.

9/11 has also revealed a gaping hole in US's, and for that matter, the world's counter-terrorism capability. The problem is more complex and systemic than a deficiency of any single agency or component of national security structures. Indeed, it goes beyond the US and implicates the intelligence and security services of many of its allies in Europe and elsewhere. But most importantly, it manifestly underscores the conspicuous absence of an overarching national strategy. The variety of agencies and programs concerned with counterterrorism still remain painfully fragmented and uncoordinated; with overlapping responsibilities, and lacking clear focus. The national security architecture is fundamentally a Cold War-era artifice, created to counter a specific threat from a specific country and a specific ideology. That architecture, which is oriented overwhelmingly towards military threats and hence to gathering military intelligence, was proven anachronistic with 9/11 carried out by non-state/non-military adversaries. Moreover, the focus of counterterrorism policy in recent years has also been too weighted towards the "high end" threats from biological and chemical weapons and was based mainly on planning for extreme worst-case scenarios. This was assuming that any less serious incident involving a different less sophisticated weapon could be addressed simply by planning for the most catastrophic event.<sup>18</sup> Which ultimately implies that terrorists groups will still be able to exploit ample loopholes in the system to avoid detection and being attributed in the process of prosecuting their terrorist wars internationally.

### **Terrorism's Growth Potential**

Much to its own detriment, the world continues to be disarrayed and ineffectual in prosecuting terrorism with toothless legal instruments. All this while, well-networked terrorists learn to capitalize on system flaws and handicapped laws to remain just ahead to overcome the countermeasures and to beat the system. As in the case of the ongoing trial of the Frenchman Zacarias Moussaoui, who was indicted by the US for his alleged role in conspiring in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the American legal system was thrown into in a dilemma when he applied to have his state-appointed lawyers sacked and to conduct his own defence instead. To agree to his request would imply giving the accused the biggest stage to mouth his propaganda, and also, access to classified documents, including intelligence and names and addresses of the witnesses against him.<sup>19</sup> Terrorism as a whole has evolved and grown more resilient with each new terrorist generation learning from its predecessors through the mistakes made by former comrades who have been killed or apprehended. Press accounts, judicial indictments, courtroom testimony, and trial transcripts are meticulously culled for information on security force tactics and methods and then absorbed by surviving group members. Having learned about these techniques, often from testimony presented by law enforcement personnel in open court, the terrorists consequently are able to undertake the

requisite countermeasures and exploit flaws in the judicial system to avoid detection or apprehension.<sup>20</sup>

The events of 9/11 may have also presented a stronger impetus for old and new terrorists to cross-fertilize. From Al-Qaeda's perspective, backing outfits such as Hamas and the IRA could be attractive as a means of diverting resources from the heightened international law enforcement and intelligence effort to thwart its operations, as well as to help its operations to disrupt and economically impair Western societies. Alternatively, with a mass casualty keynote now emphatically struck and Al-Qaeda's operations compromised by heightened counter terrorist campaign, Al-Qaeda could choose to bide its time until the next major attack with a protracted low technology terrorist campaign on US soil. This would serve to distract law enforcement efforts from planned mass casualty attacks to Bin Laden's vision and further corrode US public support for those efforts. For these purposes, groups like Hamas, the IRA, ETA and the Tamil Tigers would make excellent accessories to tutors, and there are quite plausible circumstances in which some of them could be inclined to contract out.<sup>21</sup>

An also related issue of growth is the promotion of terrorists groups to the WMD status. A principal finding of the bipartisan task force convened to look into US non-proliferation programmes with Russia<sup>22</sup> when the Bush Administration took office was: "the most urgent unmet national security threat to US today is the danger that weapons of mass destruction or weapons-useable material in Russia could be stolen, sold to terrorists or hostile nation states, and used against American troops abroad or citizens at home." This threat has emerged primarily because, after the Cold War, the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal and stockpile were no longer held behind prison walls. Couple this with Post-Soviet transformation to a more free, chaotic and frequently criminalized society, the potential for terrorists groups to lay their hands on WMDs from the black markets and go nuclear becomes a very real possibility. This would radically alter the bargaining clout they will command if bargaining is intended; and raise terrorism to a new level of fear and apocalyptic destruction.

## **Conclusion**

The events of 9/11 have signaled a new era in terrorism. The uncanny success of Al-Qaeda to plan and perpetrate the attack had laid exposed, a US and a world that was handicapped in predicting and preventing a colossal tragedy willfully carried out to showcase extremist grievances. Although significant steps led by the US and the coalition have been taken to root out this evil manifestation since then, much success is still desired of the counter terror effort. With Osama Bin Laden still at large and making a mockery of the US and its coalition partners' effort to hunt him, it is inevitable that he will be an inspiration for a new generation of terrorists that shuns secular terrorism for fundamentalism and mass destruction to continue prosecuting its war against the perceived powers of oppression. It is likely that terrorism will continue to follow a trend of decreasing numbers but insidiously destructive and dramatic acts to touch the nerves of distant powerful leaders and to hog media limelight. Perpetrators of this new terrorism will also be highly empowered, networked and technically proficient to operate either independently or for anonymous states, operating in small cell-like structures to avoid detection. The terrorist cause will most likely be motivated by religious extremism and will also be one that is not inhibited by human carnage.

Albeit an unwelcome thought, terrorism does seem to have an optimistic future in the near term. The US faces a long war against a small, elusive and dangerous adversary that holds the

initiative in the time, place and method of attack. The employment of terrorism by these groups becomes relevant in prosecuting a war against a much more formidable opponent, yet succeeding on an asymmetric front. State sponsors can also exploit surrogate fighters to commit terrorism to elicit subtler and self-serving political objectives. To aggravate the counter-terror effort further, the international community is not able to collectively agree upon legal instruments capable of bringing to bear, justice on the guilty nor is it able to mete out punishments strong enough to deliver the message of deterrence. Finally, the threat of a nuclear terrorism looms ever larger as a post Cold War opening of the Soviet black market becomes a shopping haven for terrorists seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

Although the above does not bode well for the future of the free world, this however, is the reality that we have to come to grips with in order to better appreciate the adversary and anticipate its actions. A better understanding of the nature of the new terrorism would be the first step in gaining the initiative against this clear and present danger.

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### **Endnotes**

1 Ian O. Lesser et al., *Countering the New Terrorism*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1999), pp. 10-13.

2 484 international terrorist incidents were recorded in 1991, 343 incidents in 1992, 360 in 1993, 353 in 1994, falling to 278 in 1995 and to 250 in 1996 (the last calendar year for complete statistics). Although the 1996 total was the lowest annual tally in 23 years, it was at then, one of the bloodiest years on record. A total of 510 persons were killed: 223 more than in 1995 and 91 more than in 1994. The RAND St. Andrews Chronology of International Terrorism.

3 Jonathan Stevenson, "Pragmatic Counter-terrorism", *Survival* vol 43 (4), Winter 2001(IISS Quarterly), p. 35.

4 Brian Michael Jenkins, *Terrorism: Current and Long Term Threats*, Rand Testimony series (Rand, 2001), p. 9.

5 Lesser, op. cit., p. 22.

6 Ibid, pp. 21,22.

7 "The Propaganda Front", *Jerusalem Post*, 10 Oct 2001, p. 8.

8 Paul Wilkinson, "The Strategic Implications of Terrorism", in *Terrorism & Political Violence. A Sourcebook*, edited by Prof. M.L. Sondhi (India: Har-anand Publications, 2000), p. 23.

9 Meeting in Qatar on 10 Oct 01, the Organization of the Islamic Conference "strongly condemned the brutal terror and expressed its condolences to the US people and the families of the victims." But it also declared that "international initiatives toward achieving security and stability must include the achievement of security and justice for the Palestinian people. "

10 Stephen M. Walt, "Beyond Bin Laden: Reshaping US Foreign Policy", *International Security*, Vol 26(3), Winter 2001/2002, p. 71.

11 Lesser, op. cit., p.88.

12 Ibid, p.85.

13 Followed by Israel, France, Great Britain, West Germany, the former Soviet Union/Russia, Turkey, Cuba, Spain, and Iran. The RAND-St. Andrews Chronology of International Terrorism.

14 Lesser, op. cit., p. 89.

15 Bruce Hoffman, *Rethinking Terrorism In The Light Of A War On Terrorism*, Rand testimony series (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), p. 4.

16 Lesser, op. cit., pp. 94, 95.

17 Likely exceptions include the apparent success of IRA and Palestinian terrorism in compelling policy changes and gaining a seat at the political table.

18 Bruce Hoffman, *Preparing For The War On Terrorism*, Rand testimony series (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), p. 4.

19 "A Request with a sting", *Today*, 13 May 2002, p. 1.

20 Lesser, op. cit., p.25.

21 Stevenson, op. cit., pp. 37, 38.

22 Chaired by former Senate majority leader, Howard Baker and Llyod Cutler, a former counsel to the president in January 2001.



LTC Koh Soon Heng Eric is currently S3 at a HQ Singapore Infantry Brigade. A Commando officer by vocation, he previously held the appointments of a project head under HQ Commando and OC at the School of Commandos. He attended the 2<sup>nd</sup> Defence Technology & Systems Course and 33<sup>rd</sup> Command and Staff Course in 2002. LTC Koh obtained a BSc (Information System and Technology) from NUS in 1989.