

**Salzburg Global Forum November 2012,
Session on 'Afghanistan and Central Asia'**

COUNTER-TERRORISM – SPEAKING NOTES

I. GENERAL COMMENTS

a) **Difficulties of Definition:** we can probably all agree on *what* **'terrorism'** is – the repeated (and systematic) use of acts designed to frighten and harm 'the enemy' (however that group might be defined) in order to achieve a particular end. Such tactics are neither new, nor confined to any one society. They often involve the use of physical violence, but can also take other forms – for example, psychological pressure, financial damage or today, cyber-attacks. There is no legal definition of terrorism, but most people's gut reaction would be that such acts are abhorrent and the perpetrators must be punished. But this raises the question: **Who is a 'terrorist'?** Not infrequently, one person's 'terrorist' is another person's hero, fighting for some noble cause – to overthrow an unjust regime, to liberate a subject people, to secure basic civil rights – i.e. they turn to terror tactics because all other routes are closed (cf Chechnya, Gaza). This ambiguity as to whether or not the end justifies the means – whether the context and motive transforms a criminal act into an act of epic bravery – makes it difficult, if not impossible, to forge a coordinated international response.

b) **'Counter-terrorism'** (likewise the closely related concepts of **anti-terrorism** and **counter-insurgency**) may seem easier to tie down. Yet this, too, is a slippery term. It does not denote a theory, still less an academic discipline. Rather, it is a collective label for a body of pragmatic responses to the 'real and present dangers' of the day. These responses are inextricably linked to particular circumstances – places, times and political climate – and can rarely be replicated elsewhere. Thus, the extreme and almost casual brutality that was used by European colonial powers against rebellious 'natives' was excused on the grounds that they were not 'like us'. As Winston Churchill put it: 'I do not understand this squeamishness ... I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes' (Departmental Minute, War Office, 12 May 1919). By the mid-20th century attitudes had changed – but not very much. The methods used by Britain and other European governments to suppress the 'terrorists' fighting for freedom in Asia and Africa seem shocking in today's social, moral and political climate, with international norms and conventions on human rights, on minority rights and so on. Yet the 'terrorist threat' has not gone away. It has merely assumed new forms, in pursuit of new goals – and given rise to new ambiguities. In tandem, counter-terrorism is acquiring a new methodology.

c) **Current Tactics:** counter-terrorism tactics today include preventive measures such as intelligence gathering, surveillance, public awareness campaigns and education and/or indoctrination of suspected 'vulnerable groups'. There are also punitive measures that can be

applied, some of which can be used pre-emptively, based on risk assessment. These range from arrest and imprisonment, with or without due legal process, through to the use of torture, extraordinary rendition, extrajudicial assassinations, use of drones and armed incursions into foreign states.

d) **‘Western Exceptionalism’:** Some of these measures are morally highly questionable, yet the very societies that claim to have a high regard for human rights and for due legal process can, and do, on occasion resort to such practices. These operations are generally covert, but if they are revealed, it is argued that they are necessary for the protection of the population at large. This was neatly summed up in a recent headline in *The Times*, ‘Drones or jihadis? Which would you prefer?’ (David Aaronovitch, 22 November 2012). He argues – as no doubt many others would – that the former is the lesser evil. To put it another way, in a crisis, *values* inevitably take second place to *security*. This may be an acceptable explanation for domestic audiences, but viewed from outside, it looks suspiciously like double standards. The dichotomy is highlighted when Western powers condemn others for violations of human rights in the conduct of counter-terrorism, while reserving for themselves the right to take whatever measures they see fit – a case of ‘do as we say, not what we practise’. Accusations of hypocrisy are strengthened by revelations of the ‘outsourcing’ of detention and torture to third countries to avoid the constraints of national legislation (e.g. Guantanamo).

e) **Globalising Terrorism:** In the past, terrorism was generally an internal issue, a tactic used by subject peoples who were seeking independence, or by ideologically motivated citizens who wanted to overthrow the existing political order. Today, in an age of large-scale migration, coupled with ease of communication and dissemination of ideas, the situation is more complex. Terrorists might be citizens with, at least theoretically, all the safeguards and protection of the legal system; or they might be immigrants, or temporary residents, with an unclear legal status. Moral concerns regarding the treatment of any human being, regardless of his/her legal status, might be the same, but in popular (as well as in political) perception there is frequently a differentiation, with harsher measures and fewer safeguards being deemed acceptable for non-citizens or minorities. This is liable to be interpreted – especially abroad – as discrimination on ethnic and/or religious grounds. The ensuing sense of grievance and resentment may well attract yet more recruits to terrorist organisations.

2. FOCUS ON CENTRAL ASIA AND AFGHANISTAN POST-2014

a) **Increased Threat Levels:** There are concerns that after the draw-down of NATO/ISAF troops in 2014, the security situation in Afghanistan and neighbouring states will deteriorate. Worse, the region might become a training ground for terrorists and religious extremists, who would then fan out across the wider region and beyond. This is not a fantasy: it is already happening. For example, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has long had a safe haven in Afghanistan, is now conducting recruiting activities and operations in the West (notably in Germany, France and the US).

b) **Cooperation:** An obvious way to address this issue would seem to be greater cooperation and coordination between Western agencies with regional states. However, this presupposes a substantial degree of mutual understanding and respect. This is often lacking. For example,

Uzbekistan, a key regional player, is frequently referred to in the Western media as a 'pariah state'. If NATO/ISAF states must, nevertheless, deal with this country, a leading UK newspaper recommended 'holding our noses while we do so'. This is not a good basis on which to build genuine cooperation. It reflects the implicit assumption of many Western officials that '*our* terrorists are evil people, *yours* are the product of your authoritarian, brutal regimes'; in other words, '*our* terrorists should be punished, *yours* should be regarded as heroes'. Such attitudes do not foster good relations, or promote the trust that is vital to any joint security actions.

c) **Multiple Linkages:** In Central Asia (CA), there is a nexus between terrorism/organised crime/religious extremism/ insurgency. Consequently, the security forces in these countries adopt a complex, 'wide-lens' approach, alert to connections and levels of complicity in all these fields. Rightly or wrongly, they believe this to be the best way to protect their populations. In the West, there tends to be greater focus on particular issues, with terrorism, for example, being seen as distinct from religious extremism. This difference in analysis can be a hindrance to effective cooperation. (In operational practice there is in fact a degree of convergence, but in public opinion and political positioning these are usually regarded as separate spheres.)

d) **Hizb ut-Tahrir:** The disconnect in analysis and response to security threats is well illustrated by the differing positions taken by the CA states and the West with regard to the radical Islamic movement Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). This organisation openly espouses the establishment of a trans-national Islamic caliphate. What is disputed is the way in which it seeks to achieve this goal. In most Western countries (Germany is an exception) it is seen as a peaceful, law-abiding organisation and is allowed to function freely. By contrast, in most of the 57 member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation it is seen as a subversive organisation and is banned. The authorities in these countries believe that although HT may observe the strict letter of the law, it operates covertly by exerting psychological pressure. This could best be described as the 'King Henry II's solution to the Thomas à Becket problem': the King wanted the archbishop to be eliminated, but to avoid incurring personal blame. So, he 'groomed' others to strike the blow, thereby (he hoped) maintaining 'plausible deniability'. Of course it did not work out that way, but the tactic – grooming others to commit a crime – is, in the opinion of many orthodox Muslims, precisely the approach that is being used by HT. Thus, they argue, HT is a dangerous, but highly sophisticated, terrorist organisation. The refusal of Western governments to take these concerns seriously is, for the CAs, a gauge of bad faith and a clear sign that their security is not being taken seriously. (NB Some Western analysts and security agencies do agree that HT poses a serious threat, but their views are confined to a relatively small circle of experts.)

3. GLOBAL COUNTER-TERRORISM INITIATIVES?

Most counter-terrorism operations are undertaken by national governments, often in conjunction with their close allies. Broader coalitions, involving a wider range of partners are, however, unlikely to be feasible in the near future. Quite simply, the gulf in basic understandings and approaches is too great. Moreover, the lack of mutual trust makes the

sharing of sensitive information unthinkable. Nevertheless, there may be cases in relation to very specific threats where some form of multilateral cooperation may be possible. The **Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism** is an example of the way in which an issue may be 'big' enough to attract a large number of partners (in this case, over 80, including all the CA states, as well as Russia and China). It is too early to judge how effective this initiative (launched in 2006) will be, but the experience of working together in the security field is in itself useful, as it builds up positive relationships. Other, smaller scale cooperative projects may also be possible – e.g. relating to particular individuals, groups or issues – but ultimately, unless there is political will on all sides, the results are likely to be very limited.

This brief survey touches on some of the issues that need to be borne in mind when considering not only the general context of counter-terrorism, but more specifically the prospects for working with the Central Asian states (i.e. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) following the post-2014 drawdown. It is clear that there are no easy, unambiguous ways of responding to the threat of terrorism. There will always be a tension, and at times a clash, between the practical need to safeguard public security and the moral duty to respect human rights. Perhaps the only clear message that can be given is this: if you do need to collaborate with partners other than your accustomed allies, be sure you understand their views and respect their professionalism. If you cannot do this, do not expect more than superficial (and temporary) cooperation, based on pragmatic self-interest.

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