Getting to Grips with Global Terrorism

Professor Michael Clarke

Terrorism is as old as conflict itself. To terrorise innocent people has always been a way of putting pressure on their leaders to change policy. And to attack soldiers, policemen, government institutions, with bombs and assassinations is a way of striking at an enemy and claiming the moral authority of the soldier while doing it: 'our bombings are the only effective tactics we have against our enemy,' says the terrorist, claiming to be in a 'war' with government – whether government recognises it or not. There is no surprise in this. The real surprise is how easily it is forgotten by leaders under pressure.

So, much western policy since 11 September 2001 has mistaken a technique of conflict for a type of conflict; confusing an age-old tactic of many wars with a new species of twenty first century war. Washington declares flatly that 'the enemy' are now the terrorists, whether they operate in Afghanistan, Iraq, Europe, or inside America. Britain, while it has never been comfortable with the rhetoric of a 'global war on terror', nevertheless defines terrorism as a major 'threat' to its safety and interests. Western relations with Pakistan become highly sensitive, the 2001 terror attacks on the Indian Parliament or the 2003 and 2006 bombings in Mumbai take on a new significance, and Putin's Russia gladly accepts that Chechen terrorism is all one with the global enemy. When terrorism shapes the US security agenda, it also shapes, for that very reason, the agenda for much of the rest of the world.

It is easy to assume that the *jihadis* pose some sort of global threat. But is the *Al Qaeda* movement -its network of networks, its pyramids of hard-bitten professionals and dangerous amateurs – really something that poses a global challenge? Has it elevated terror from being merely a technique, into a defining identity among those who would engineer a world revolution to enforce their vision of *salafist* Islam and the rule of a new *sharia* Islamic order from Morocco to Indonesia? In its rhetoric, at least, it has. The *jihadis*

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war on western values, on Jews, Hindus, apostates in the Middle East, on shi'ite peoples in the Islamic world, on modernity, gays and women's rights, don't leave many of us out. If wishes were horses, *jihadi* spokesmen would ride a very long way. There is a genuinely global dimension, too, in the way terrorists of all persuasions now learn from each other. The most effective techniques are well-publicised across the global web. No image can be effectively suppressed, no declarations squeezed out of the system. The propaganda of the deed itself is ever-present; and no terrorist deed is a failure if it attains immortality in cyberspace.

Not least, there is a global dimension in the glamour and fashion that attaches to terrorism in the present era. It attracts recruits from all backgrounds and circumstances. Its conspiracies are exciting and it 'franchises' itself so that groups spring up claiming an allegiance that the professionals can accept or reject as they please. Suicide bombers are revered before and after their deaths, bound into the act with celebrity status, threats of shame and promises of paradise. With its use of all the technologies available in a globalised world, terrorism is both an ultra-modern, and a very traditional conspiracy.

All of this, however, is more gloss on the activity of terrorism than cause of it in the first place. *Al Qaeda* may have global rhetoric but its initiatives are driven by localised factors. This is generally understood in western society and for the last five years there have been constant calls to 'deal with the root causes of terrorism' within and between our societies. But this is chasing rainbows. Not only is it a practical impossibility–its not as if any of us could agree on what would have to change to satisfy the terrorist– but those who are attracted by the glamour and pornography of terrorism will continue to be terrorists as a lifestyle choice as much as a political one. Their activities have to be addressed in preventative measures: through public protection, intelligence penetration, disaster management. It requires good police work allied to good intelligence, and preferably between good international allies. But our real targets for the long term are not these individuals themselves but the wider public that might give *jihadi* terrorists the support that sustains them beyond the cycles of fashion and glamour.

Most western societies have lost much valuable time over the

last five years. We have been fixated on what the terrorists do rather than on what they stand for. In a multi-cultural society as Britain now is, there has been a great reluctance to challenge the narratives that terrorists create and feed off. The elaborate conspiracy theories of systemic oppression of Muslim peoples, of global control by a cabal of Jews, of religious humiliation at every turn – all the stuff of cliched suicide videos – have gone largely unchallenged by the British government and by the majority of the population. It is not that there is any agreement with this view of the world, but rather that the majority opinion doesn't really know where to start. It is easier to dismiss the wickedness of the individuals rather than challenge the legitimacy of their ideas.

This is the sense in which the *jihadi* movement is a significant global challenge. This is where America's global war on terror, and the war that involves the rest of us, should concentrate its energies. In Britain, at least, there is a growing realisation among the political classes that we have now got to establish a robust dialogue among all our majority and minority communities. The callow narrative of the terrorists must no longer be allowed to run unchallenged. The British government is on the verge of establishing a 'Joint Information Unit' to try to influence this more robust perspective. In truth, governments can encourage such an approach but there is not much they can do to make it happen. Society itself must drive the desire to confront its truths and prevent its minorities falling into fear and self-pity. The media is crucial, the international atmosphere the backdrop of the whole enterprise.

Five years ago it would have been easier for governments to have a constructive influence on this difficult process. But in the West we analysed *jihadi* terror wrongly. The US rushed to war, the Europeans rushed to more draconian criminal legislation. We all ignored the effects on the ideas behind the *jihadi* movement and it made some spectacular propaganda gains as a result. Now America's war on terror is in deep trouble in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Europeans have felt the effects of 'home grown terrorism'. There is a more sober appreciation of what we are up against. It is both less and more serious than we thought. Less serious in that *jihadi* terror can be contained, if never completely prevented; more serious in that it is still riding the crest of a propaganda wave that is genuinely global and to which we have only just begun seriously to turn our attention.