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OCCASIONAL
PAPER

The Victims of Terrorism

An Assessment of Their Influence and Growing Role in Policy, Legislation, and the Private Sector

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CENTER FOR TERRORISM RISK MANAGEMENT POLICY

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Summary

To date, insufficient attention and analysis have been focused on the victims of terrorist attacks—whether the survivors themselves or family members, friends, or colleagues directly affected by this violence. This paper focuses on one important aspect of this area of terrorism studies: the organized groups of families and friends that have emerged since September 11, 2001, to become a powerful voice in U.S. counterterrorist policy and legislation.

These groups were remarkably successful in pressuring the U.S. Congress to establish a commission to investigate the 9/11 attacks, getting the White House to approve it, and then ensuring that the commission's most important recommendations were enacted into law. Although their success is well known by now, the number and diversity of these groups, their wide disparity in mission and services, and their strategies for achieving their missions are not well understood. This paper addresses that need. We describe the victims' groups that emerged from 9/11 and clarify their missions and strategies. We also compare the 9/11 victims' groups to victims' groups that were formed in response to previous terrorist attacks both in the United States and abroad, highlighting the lessons the 9/11 groups learned from these precedents and the differences between the 9/11 groups and those that preceded them.[1]

The victims' groups that emerged after the 9/11 attacks were unprecedented in their number and the diversity of their goals. Some focused on improving public policies to prevent further terrorist attacks; others focused on ensuring the creation of a proper memorial at Ground Zero; still others worked to establish September 11 as national day devoted to voluntary service. Given this diversity, membership in more than one group became common in the aftermath of the attacks, when these organizations appeared in rapid succession. Although logic might dictate that greater progress and benefit could be harnessed from a few broadly oriented, larger, and therefore potentially more powerful, organizations, this has not been true of the 9/11 groups that both proliferated and pursued deliberately narrower, respective agendas. We describe 16 of these groups in this paper.

We classify these groups into three categories based on their agendas: national policy reform, state and local policy reform, and victim and family support. The breadth of many groups' activities makes it an approximate categorization. Examples of groups in the first cat-

[1] The first victims' groups in the United States appeared in 1972 in response to a dramatic increase in crime in the 1960s. They assisted victims of crime and civil negligence, demanded monetary compensation, and pushed for reform in the civil justice system. Although these groups are important in understanding the growing influence of victims' groups on public policy, they are beyond the scope of this analysis, which focuses on the history of terrorist victims' groups.

egory include the Family Steering Committee for the 9/11 Independent Commission (FSC), which became a powerful force in Washington and whose efforts culminated in the creation of the 9/11 Commission. Four FSC members, dubbed the "Jersey Girls" by the media, became some of the best-known 9/11 family members. They formed their own group, called the September 11th Advocates, which became one of the driving forces behind the push to systematically reform the U.S. intelligence community. One of the original and largest of the 9/11 victims' groups, Families of September 11th (FOS11), had a broad range of activities and services, making it difficult to categorize.

Groups in the second category include, for example, the Coalition of 9/11 Families and September's Mission, both of which have been exclusively involved with the planning and construction of a memorial at Ground Zero. Although they share this focus, their different visions for the end result and their means for achieving them have put them at odds with one another. The main objective of the Coalition of 9/11 Families is the preservation of the bedrock footprints of both the North and South Towers to a depth of 70 feet. September's Mission has pursued a different course for the development of the memorial.

The coalition, the largest advocacy group, with more than 4,000 family members, survivors, rescue workers, and 9/11 memorial supporters registered on its Web site, actually comprises many other organizations, some of which focus on policy issues and others on providing support services. An example of the latter was founded by Saint Clare's Church of Staten Island, which created the World Trade Center Outreach Committee after it lost 28 parishioners on 9/11. This committee seeks to help victims regardless of their religious affiliation and has expanded its efforts to serve the needs of almost 200 families living on Staten Island and in New Jersey.

We found that the success of the most prominent 9/11 organizations was due in part to the lessons they learned from the activities of groups formed after the 1988 in-flight bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. Indeed, the only set of victims' organizations comparable to those for 9/11 are the five groups formed by those who lost friends and family on board this flight, four in the United States and one in the UK. Although they differ from 9/11 victims' groups, they share an important characteristic with them: They strategically packaged their goals to gain access to the media and government. Their efforts' success can be seen in the passage of legislation increasing airline safety as well as the more recent formation of the 9/11 Commission. In contrast to the individually contoured missions of the 9/11 groups, their Pan Am 103 counterparts all had essentially the same goal: to learn what happened and how such tragedies could be prevented in the future. Their differences were in the strategies and approaches they used to achieve this goal.

The 9/11 victims' groups differed from the Pan Am 103 victims' groups in three significant ways. First, more people were killed on 9/11 than in any other single terrorist attack, which, in turn, generated intense and sustained media and government attention. The sheer number of people who perished that day unloosed an exponentially larger outpouring of grief from the tens of thousands of relatives, friends, and coworkers who each mourned his or her loss in equally profound ways. Drawing on this deep well of pain and sorrow, survivors, families, and others were able, both individually and collectively, to pry open doors along congressional corridors that might otherwise have been more difficult to enter.

Second, the evolution of the Internet and information technology between the time of the Pan Am 103 bombing in 1988 and the 9/11 attacks 13 years later enabled the 9/11 organizations to communicate, often in real time, with increasingly large groups of people spread over a wider geographic base than ever before. The 9/11 groups' adroit and effective exploitation of information technology enabled many of them to attain the reach, influence, and stature that remained outside the reach of the Pan Am 103 organizations, many of which were formed too early to take advantage of the information revolution or were slow to exploit it for their own purposes. On a similar note, it should be mentioned that the rise of 24-hour news networks also greatly helped the families of 9/11 get their word out and garner support. Networks such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC often jumped at the opportunity to ask victims' relatives to participate in programs, to the extent that many of them were making regular television appearances soon after the attacks.

Finally, the 9/11 victims' groups learned important lessons from past victims' groups, particularly those affiliated with Pan Am 103. Leaders of the 9/11 groups had conversations with a few prominent leaders among the Pan Am 103 families and had access to books and news articles detailing their activism, all of which helped them form early strategies and warned them of the inevitability of divisions among family members, a lesson that proved to be invaluable in the immediate aftermath of the attacks.

The victims' groups that formed after the Oklahoma City bombing were not focused on shaping public policy but on supporting the recovery process of survivors and families. The arrest and conviction of Oklahoma City bombers Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols and the full explication of their crime during their respective lengthy trials helped to redress the outrage that drove the Pan Am 103 and 9/11 families' search for justice, answers, and accountability that ultimately resulted in the rise of their influence in Washington. Additionally, the Pan Am 103 and 9/11 attacks were committed by foreign perpetrators and therefore had profound implications for U.S. foreign and national security policy in a way that the Oklahoma City attack did not. These different circumstances created groups that were able to concentrate on providing emotional support for victims and their families. Many of these groups were formed not by victims but by third parties not directly affected by the attack. Taken together, these groups offered fewer lessons for the 9/11 groups that pursued different goals.

Internationally, similar groups have formed, most noticeably in Israel and Northern Ireland, two countries plagued by violence and conflict. Unlike those spawned by 9/11, which are unprecedented in number and influence, few of these groups, with the exception of a couple of Israeli organizations to be discussed, originated in response to a specific terrorist attack. In general, the characteristics of overseas victims' groups are quite different from those of groups in the United States. The most predominant variation is that none of the groups identified in Israel or Northern Ireland provides assistance to the victims of a particular attack. Instead, their missions, to seek justice and support those affected by Palestinian, Republican, and Unionist violence, respectively, are broadly oriented to assist a dynamic and growing constituency rather than one bound together by a single, common, shared tragedy. Furthermore, these overseas victims' groups, which, in fact, predate their U.S. counterparts, have been growing more steadily in number—irrespective of terrorist "spectaculars"—compared to the periodic emergence of those in the United States, as seen with Pan Am 103, Oklahoma City, and 9/11.

A possible explanation for the discrepancies in growth patterns and other points of difference is the rarity with which direct terrorist attacks have taken place in the United States, in contrast to Israel and Northern Ireland, where they have occurred more regularly.

In still other areas of the world, victims' groups have arisen in the wake of major attacks, such as the March 11, 2004, Madrid train bombings. Surprisingly, the large death tolls associated with these attacks have not resulted in groups forming that are any more capable of affecting public policy than was the sampling of those located in Israel and Northern Ireland. Furthermore, each of these international terrorist spectaculars has produced a relatively small number of groups, nothing like the dozens created in response to 9/11, again due in part to the latter's unprecedented size. These foreign groups were, however, founded by and serve the needs of the victims and families of specific attacks—in which characteristic they are similar to those in the United States.

The comparative analysis offered in this paper emphasizes the evolution of victims' groups within the United States toward greater political influence. Building on Pan Am 103 victims' groups, the 9/11 groups assumed a level of moral authority and political persuasion in their fight for justice and improved national and aviation security that was unheard of among victims' groups overseas. These groups offer models of political activism on which future victims' groups will be able to draw. As a result, public policy on terrorism is likelier to be responsive to the demands of victims than it has been in the past.