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Terrorism: Current and Long Term Threats

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Before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to address this important subject.

Despite the high level of anxiety the American people are currently experiencing, we may still not fully comprehend the seriousness of the current and near-term threats we confront or the longer-term consequences of the trends underscored so dramatically on September 11th.

I say this not to arouse further alarm. I have never counted myself among the "Apocalypticists" who forecast scenarios of doom in lurid detail. In my own essays over the past 30 years, I have been skeptical of the notion that there is an inexorable progression in terrorism from car bombs to terrorist use of nuclear weapons. Rather, my purpose here is to warn against a return to complacency once the shock of September 11th has begun to wear off.

Over the past decade, we have suffered a series of devastating terrorist attacks—attacks that in terms of the concentration and magnitude of casualties have been greater than anything experienced by other nations: The 1993 World Trade Center bombing was followed by the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, which was, in turn, followed by the events of September 11th—each attack worse than the last. However, because those

¹The opinions and conclusions expressed in this written testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of the research.

attacks have been sporadic, the passage of time between them has allowed us to go back to business as usual.

This time must be different. In that light, let me begin by discussing the current and near-term threats we face, before turning to the longer-term consequences of the trends emerging from September 11th.

Current and Near-Term Threats

Turning first to the current and near-term threats, Bin Laden's Al Qaeda network will almost certainly attempt further major terrorist operations against American targets abroad and, potentially, here. We know that the September 11th attack was years in planning, which means that preparations for it overlapped the attacks on the American embassies in Africa and the U.S.S. Cole, as well as the foiled attempt to carry out terrorist attacks here during the millennium celebrations. The terrorist leaders also would know that the September 11th attack would provoke a military response, which they could then characterize as an assault on Islam. In other words, the terrorist leaders did not intend September 11th to be their last act—they intended it as the beginning of their end-game. Therefore, they would have made plans to survive the anticipated military response and continue to communicate, and they may have set in motion terrorist operations that will occur weeks or months or years from now, unless we can identify and destroy every terrorist cell.

What form these attacks might take is impossible to say. There is no obvious predictable scenario and vulnerabilities are infinite. However, we can speculate on some of the logical targets.

Commercial aviation remains a preferred target for terrorists seeking high body counts through sabotage or through the acquisition of an airplane to use as a guided missile. While a repeat of the September 11th hijackings may not seem likely, authorities did, after the September 11th attacks, uncover a terrorist plot to hijack a commercial airliner in Nepal and possibly crash it into a target in India. Unfortunately, despite efforts to improve it, aviation security is still inadequate in this country, and general aviation also needs better protection.

Public surface transportation offers terrorists easy access and concentrations of people in contained environments. We have seen terrorist bombing campaigns on trains and buses abroad, and there was a plot in 1997 to carry out suicide attacks on New York's subways, which would have resulted in hundreds of casualties.

Because of its size and scope, the nation's critical infrastructure is hard to protect; then again, terrorists have historically not attacked it, preferring instead to go after targets offering high symbolic value or killing fields. Still, that does not mean that terrorists will not seek to carry out such traditional sabotage. We may want to exploit the opportunity afforded now to rebuild aging infrastructure, incorporating security in the new design.

In terms of targets abroad, diplomatic facilities and corporate symbols of America will bear the brunt of terrorist attacks.

Of course, Bin Laden's televised appeals also may inspire individual acts of terrorism by supporters around the world. And our own military efforts

against Al Qaeda and the Taliban may provoke isolated acts of terrorism as we saw during the Gulf War, although these are likely to be more spontaneous, smaller-scale attacks.

I remain doubtful that the person who sent anthrax through the mail in September reports to bin Laden. From the beginning, I have believed he is more likely a single individual driven by idiosyncratic motives, which will make him more difficult to identify and apprehend. He will probably strike again, and his skills will continue to improve with each attack. And the publicity he has received will inspire others. Expect to see further small-scale biological attacks by terrorists, extortionists, and lunatics. Anthrax hoaxes already have become a major problem. The anthrax letters also have illustrated one perhaps unanticipated consequence—the persistence of the spores makes decontamination difficult and costly and may deny the use of contaminated facilities for long periods.

September 11th creates a new level of destruction toward which other terrorists will strive. Since September 11th, several terrorist plots have been uncovered, including one by the Basque ETA to set off nearly two tons of explosives at the Picasso Tower in Madrid, a building resembling the World Trade Center.

And although our focus is on bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network, current and near-term threats abroad and on American soil will come from other sources as well. Our growing involvement in Colombia's vicious guerrilla wars could provoke a terrorist response. Anti-globalization protests, which had been building in size and intensity prior to September 11th, will not fade

with the slowdown of the world's economy and may harden into a more aggressive anti-American posture.

Anti-Semitic, white supremacists, and other extremists here who see themselves at war with the federal government also remain a threat. Their fantasies tend toward scenarios of mass destruction, and they have exhibited a dangerous interest in chemical and biological substances.

In addition, politically inspired assaults in cyberspace now regularly accompany international crises. September 11th overshadowed the concurrent spread of a vicious virus that brought some companies close to pulling the plug on the Internet. Cyber-crime has evolved rapidly with the growth of the Internet. Cyber-terrorism and cyber-war are still in their infancy. More sophisticated attacks are likely.

Long-Term Consequences of the Trends Emerging from September 11th

While the current and near-term threats will persist, there is also the issue of the longer-term consequences of the September 11th attacks. Was September 11th an anomaly or did it mark the transition to a new world of terrorism? Seeing it as an anomaly would give us comfort that, once we have dealt with those responsible, we can return to the world as it existed the day before. That is unlikely to be the case, although in several respects, the September 11th attacks derive from a unique confluence of developments. In particular, the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan created a network of veterans throughout the Islamic world. The subsequent victory of a like-minded Taliban guaranteed safe haven for the network's headquarters and training camps, which graduated thousands of additional volunteers,

fanatically obedient to a megalomaniac leader who possessed vast sums of money, organizational skills, dedication to large-scale violence, and a sense of strategy unusual among terrorists. Of course, the United States contributed to his growing reputation by denouncing him as the pre-eminent organizer of international terrorism. Add to this a religion-based ideology calling for a violent holy war and offering paradise to suicide attackers—the benchmark of commitment to their cause.

Japan's Aum Shinrikyo cult had some of these attributes: vast financial resources, a charismatic leader, fanatically obedient followers, and a taste for schemes of mass destruction. However, it did not have suicide attackers or a geographic safe haven. Within weeks of its attack on Tokyo's subways, the organization was destroyed, and its leaders were in prison.

Although the September 11th attacks derive from a unique confluence of events, some aspects of those attacks also confirm broader trends. Analysts in the 1990s began to describe a "new terrorism" that was motivated by ideologies deriving from ethnic hatreds or extremist interpretations of religion, that was organized into looser networks, and that was more willing to engage in mass destruction. The Bremer, Gilmore, and Deutch Commissions on terrorism and proliferation all warned of the possibility of large-scale terrorism in the United States, terrorist use of chemical and biological weapons, and even of the major psychological consequences of small-scale bio-terrorism attacks. These warnings are now realities.

We must anticipate further large-scale terrorist attacks, coordinated when possible to achieve greater destruction. The thwarted 1993 plan to bomb

multiple targets in New York City, Ramzi Yousef's plot to sabotage 12 U.S. airliners in the Pacific, bin Laden's coordinated bombings of the American embassies in Africa, and the September 11th attacks clearly indicate the mindset of today's most dangerous adversaries. These attacks have political purpose, but they also represent the hostile use of violence as opposed to the instrumental use of violence.

In September, we suffered an *uncoordinated* multidimensional assault comprised of a series of massive conventional attacks, a small-scale bio-terrorism attack, and a computer virus. The perpetrators probably were not connected to one another, but in the future, we could see *coordinated* multidimensional attacks calculated to achieve cascading effects and overload our capacity to respond.

It is still uncertain whether the use of chemical or biological weapons will become a routine terrorist tactic. Aum experimented with biological weapons and used chemical weapons, but six years later, long after most terrorist innovations become routine terrorist tactics, no group has yet attempted to imitate the 1995 sarin attack, although North African groups affiliated with bin Laden reportedly have attempted to acquire poison gas. The Al Qaeda network has been linked with efforts to acquire both biological and nuclear material and includes demonstrations of chemical warfare in its training curriculum.

Will terrorists go nuclear? Years ago I argued that while madmen might nurture plans to destroy the world, self-imposed constraints discouraged even those we labeled terrorists from operating at the higher levels of

violence of which they were clearly capable, even without resorting to exotic and technically demanding weapons if mayhem were their goal. Wanton violence could jeopardize group cohesion, alienate perceived constituents, and provoke ferocious government crackdowns. I wrote then that terrorists wanted a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead.

I still believe this to be true of most of the groups that have resorted to terrorism, but these constraints were neither universal nor immutable. Over time, terrorist violence has escalated. Large-scale, indiscriminate violence has become the reality of terrorism in the 1990s. At the same time, owing to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the proliferation of nuclear weapons development programs, the acquisition of nuclear material, the biggest technical hurdle, may have become easier. How close we are to that theoretical point in time when capabilities meet intentions I cannot say, but we are closer. Of course, in focusing on the high end of the threat spectrum—a nuclear bomb—we should not ignore the possibility of lesser actions involving radioactive material.

Still, I doubt that bin Laden currently possesses nuclear weapons. But if he did, I suspect he would find a way to use them, whether as a deterrent to halt U.S. military action or, if facing annihilation, in a final act of destruction. We do not want to run the test. So long as the Al Qaeda network survives, we must assume that it will seek the most advanced means of destruction and that we will be the target. The destruction of Al Qaeda will not end terrorism, but it will buy time to improve our intelligence and our defenses and to address some of the reasons for the hostility that the bin Ladens of the world have been able to exploit.

Terrorism comprises not only the attacks terrorist carry out but also the psychological effects these attacks produce. Thus, another long-term trend is that we live now in an age of alarms. Research since September 11th shows that many Americans are suffering from trauma-related stress reactions. The nation's mental health must be considered another vulnerability. Its protection will require public education and skillful communications strategies.

The September 11th attack underscored a final long-term trend. Power—the power to kill, destroy, disrupt, alarm, and force nations to divert vast resources to protection against attacks—is descending to smaller and smaller groups, whose grievances, real or imaginary, it will not always be possible to satisfy. Put another way, the small bands of irreconcilables, fanatics, and lunatics that have existed throughout history have become, in our age, an increasingly potent force to be reckoned with. How we, as a democratic society, will defend ourselves against this and remain a democratic society is one of the major challenges of the 21st century.

Conclusion

In light of this sobering vision of the future—both the current near-term threats and the longer-term consequences of September 11th—our biggest enemy may be our own complacency—a complacency born from our typical American optimism and our frustration for long, frustrating campaigns. Unlike our country, other countries that have confronted a continuing terrorist campaign—such as the United Kingdom, Spain, and Israel—have developed the focus and mindset to view the struggle as ongoing.

That said, we must develop the same focus and mindset. In these terms, our ultimate defense against terrorism will not be more concrete and more guards. It will be our own individual courage and resolve, our sense of community and humanity, our continued tolerance, and our ability to realistically accept risk, as well as our continuing commitment to the values for which this nation stands. While the challenge to do this is great, I am confident we will come through.