Coping with Terrorism:

Lessons from the British and Israeli Experiences

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Brief Analysis

On July 15, 2007, Leonard Cole and Toby Harnden addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to mark the release of Dr. Cole's book Terror: How Israel Has Coped and What America Can Learn. An adjunct professor of political science at Rutgers University, Dr. Cole is an expert on bioterrorism and the emerging discipline of "terror medicine." Mr. Harnden is U.S. editor of the London Daily Telegraph and author of Bandit Country: The IRA and South Armagh (2000). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

LEONARD COLE

The fact that there has not been a terrorist attack in the United States since September 11, 2001, by no means implies that the threat of such attacks has passed. Although the U.S. government has strengthened its efforts to prevent terrorism at home, more needs to be done to prepare citizens and relevant agencies for an attack when it does occur. U.S. law often requires that procedures be in place for dealing with unlikely events. For example, New Jersey's eighty-two hospitals comply with a law requiring them to have four fire drills per year, even though none of them have experienced a major fire in recent history. The same attitude should apply to preparations potential terrorist attacks.

Israelis have demonstrated a remarkable ability to respond effectively to terrorism without permitting this vigilance to overshadow their everyday lives. In the wake of a bombing, they willingly come together to rebuild what has been damaged -- in spite of political and other issues that may divide them. A bombed cafe can be seen bustling with patrons just days after an attack.

At the core of practical improvements that the United States can draw from Israel's experience is a greater emphasis on unity and centralized procedures, both of which facilitate the coordination of emergency responders from various fields and localities. America's uniformed agencies tend to have severe shortcomings in communications capacity. During the September 11 attacks, for example, the New York City fire and police departments were unable to share information because they operate on incompatible radio frequencies. This incompatibility, which resulted in many unnecessary deaths, remains an obstacle today. In Israel, every group with an emergency-response responsibility has either interoperable communications capabilities or a central depot through which it can communicate with other agencies.

This incoherence cannot be attributed solely to America's geographical size. It stems from an excessive commitment to the individual sovereignty of various municipalities. For example, in New Jersey's Bergen County, most of the separate municipal police departments -- approximately sixty in number -- cannot communicate with each other because they are on different frequencies. The Department of Homeland Security estimates that it would require billions of dollars and more than fifteen years to develop an interoperable national communications system. This should nevertheless be made a priority.

Other important steps could be taken to upgrade U.S. preparedness for an attack more swiftly and at much lower

cost. One striking model is Israel's system of protocols -- including drills and other exercises -- to prepare for and respond to emergencies. These protocols are nationally mandated and standardized throughout the country for each subdivision of emergency responders. At the same time, they allow for substantial leeway in response style. As a result, ad hoc adjustments to standard procedures are common in response to unique situations.

The U.S. emergency response system is the opposite of Israel's top-down structure. There are no national mandates for emergency drills and protocols, even for chemical and biological threats. Instead, local entities develop their own procedures in response to national advisories issued by agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security. The lack of a uniform system results in vast discrepancies in both the conduct and capabilities of various local actors, hindering effective coordination when it is most necessary. Moreover, American emergency responders tend to stick rigidly to the letter of local mandates.

Following Israel's example, national mandates for preparedness measures, such as drills, should be issued and enforced by observers. Neighboring communities can work together to create a much larger safety net than they would have independently in the event of a terrorist attack. Finally, the United States and Israel can learn more from each other if they held periodic meetings of experts to discuss appropriate terrorism response measures.

TOBY HARNDEN

The British army has learned much from its modern experience in Northern Ireland, which began in 1969 and persisted for nearly thirty years. Although different from the situation faced by the United States today, those experiences provide several relevant lessons.

One such lesson is that it is sometimes better not to respond to force with force. The British could have eliminated all of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) leadership in one fell swoop. Such an action would have led to the organization's military decimation, but it also would have ensured the continuation of the conflict for at least a decade more. Even targeted killings can have negative ramifications -- such as the creation of more militants -- that exceed their tactical value. In the same vein, overwhelming force and force protection measures are not always the best option; sometimes it is better to take on more dangerous operations that minimize civilian casualties.

Containing the IRA threat depended heavily on intelligence, particularly human intelligence. Well-considered methods are crucial, since blunt instruments tend to alienate members of the home population, who may in turn sympathize in some way with the terrorists. For example, formulaic profiling of individuals based on their appearance or background is ineffective. In addition to alienating innocent citizens who feel they are being discriminated against, it is easily circumvented by terrorist groups, who simply recruit operatives that do not fit the profile. This can be seen in Hamas's use of women and old men to carry out attacks.

At the same time, it is also unwise to strive for absolute political correctness. Israel's large-scale profiling is effective because authorities ask the right questions, targeting a set of suspicious characteristics. Moreover, Israel maintains information on individuals (such as those passing through its international airport), so that once they have satisfactorily demonstrated that they are not a threat, they are unlikely to be subjected to unreasonable hindrances due to profiling at a later date.

Americans should not be in a state of constant fear, but they should be attentive to the existence of a threat so that they can take the appropriate steps in response. In Israel, the first line of defense is the civilian who senses that something is not quite right, and reports a suspicious individual or package to the police. Children learn early to be cognizant of potential threats. Although we cannot prevent every attack, we should nevertheless train ourselves to prevent what we can.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Melody Malekan. ❖

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