

# **TERRORISM: WHY THE NUMBERS MATTER**

By

Larry C Johnson  
Managing Director  
BERG Associates, LLC

In the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001, fighting terrorism has become a growth business in the United States. We are spending money like wild fire to harden airports, equip first responders, deploy explosive detection equipment, and beef up border patrols. I understand how in the immediate aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks there was enormous political pressure to do something. As a result Federal and State governments are spending a lot of money to deter and prevent this threat.

While we assume that the threat of terrorism is very grave, little attention has been paid to trying to assess the actual threat. If we are going to spend a lot of money to detect and deter a particular threat it stands to reason we should have some method of identifying and monitoring the persons and groups who threaten us. I believe we have an obligation to the taxpayers to somehow measure the effectiveness of our nation's efforts to combat the threat of terrorism. Yet some have argued that we cannot use statistics to help gauge the actual threat. If we accept that argument then what standards or methods should we use to determine if a threat exists? Feelings? Mind reading? I am not trying to be flippant. But surely we should be able to have an objective, empirical discussion about terrorism because ultimately it is an activity carried out by flesh and blood human beings.

Although a terrorist act can have a psychological effect on a population, it is more than a state of mind--it is a tangible, organized physical activity. It is a pre-meditated act. And when I say "pre-meditated" I am referring to a host of activities ranging from the recruitment of personnel, training, intelligence collection, acquisition of explosives, and the provision of such mundane things as food and a place to sleep. People who want to engage in terrorist operations need a place to train. It does not require a large base with elaborate barracks and shooting houses. It can be done on the cheap. But it does require one or more physical locations where prospective murderers can plan and prepare.

I take the threat of terrorism seriously. I believe that Americans, regardless of political affiliation, take the threat seriously. We recognize that there are people in the world who, if given the opportunity, would like to kill large number of Americans. Fortunately for us, desire does not equal capability.

If we are going to confront this threat intelligently we must be serious about measuring and monitoring the activity. We must also be willing to take an honest, objective look at the facts and put terrorism in its proper perspective. We ought to acknowledge that terrorism, thankfully, is a relatively infrequent activity and that the number of lives lost at the hands of terrorists over the past 30 years are relatively few compared to the thousands who die from drug abuse, or cancer or automobile accidents in any given year. Nonetheless, terrorism has the potential to cause great harm and should not be ignored or trivialized.

We are here today in part because the State Department, in a break with previous policy, has claimed that the numbers on terrorism do not matter. When I learned in mid-April that the Department was planning to quietly submit the legally required report to Congress without including the 2004 terrorism statistics I was shocked. (I decided to publish this development on the Counter Terrorism Blog—[counterterror.typepad.com](http://counterterror.typepad.com).) I was told by friends in the intelligence community that the Seventh Floor at State (this is a State Department euphemism for the Secretary of State and her staff) was alarmed by the data, which showed a dramatic increase in significant terrorist attacks and fatalities. Rather than explain the meaning of these numbers to the Congress and the American people, the Seventh Floor wanted to shift the burden of explanation to the National Counter Terrorism Center. It was only after a minor media and Congressional firestorm that the State Department decided to release the report in tandem with the statistical data from the National Counter Terrorism Center.

I was amazed by the audacity of Phil Zelikow and John Brennan at the State Department press conference on April 28<sup>th</sup>, who insisted that the that the numbers did not matter and could tell us little about the progress of our national policy in dealing with terrorism. At a minimum this is intellectually dishonest. If we are to be successful in finding and defeating those groups and individuals who want to employ terrorism against us we must have the courage to call a spade a spade. I hope we have not entered a world created by Lewis Carroll, where up is down and bigger is smaller. If we refuse to accept objective facts about

terrorist activity then I do not know how we can keep track of what is happening around the world.

Last year's facts on terrorism are disturbing because they point to a trend of increased lethality by Islamic extremist groups. The 651 attacks marks the highest number of significant incidents of terrorism the intelligence community has recorded since 1968. (An incident is counted as significant if an attack results in death, injury or kidnapping of one or more persons, or property damage is in excess of \$10,000). This surpasses the previous high of 273 significant attacks in 1985. It also was the second highest death toll from terrorist attacks. The 1,907 people who died in international terrorist attacks last year marks the second highest death toll in 36 years, with 2001 still holding that horrific record.

Why are the numbers important? For starters the raw data on terrorist incidents tells us who is getting killed, where they are being killed, and who are the likely culprits. That information should help our policymakers set priorities for employing our diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement, and military resources in going after groups who have killed or are planning to kill Americans.

Beyond helping establishing priorities, the numbers also flag trouble spots that require intense focus. Take last year, for example. The numbers show that most of the attacks and fatalities occurred in Iraq, India, and Russia. If we are going to confront the threat of terrorism effectively our efforts ought to concentrate on these areas. The terrorist attacks in these three countries share a common tie—the attacks were carried out by groups with links to international Islamic jihadists.

Let us take a closer look at the threat in India's Kashmir region. Some of the groups carrying out those terrorist attacks—the Lashkar Tayiba and Harakat ul-Ansar—have received direct support, including financing and training, from senior Pakistani intelligence officers. It is worth recalling that the cruise missiles fired by President Clinton in August of 1998 in retaliation for the Al Qaeda bombing of the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania struck a camp in Afghanistan and killed members of Harakat as well as two Pakistani intelligence officers. In the war against Islamic extremists Kashmir matters.

Pakistan poses a delicate policy dilemma. On the one hand it has been an important ally in the war against Al Qaeda. Pakistan has helped

apprehend and turn over to US authorities terrorists such as Khalid Sheik Mohammed, Ramsi Yousef, and Mir Aimal Kansi. On the other hand there are Pakistani officials who are financing and training groups responsible for international terrorist attacks. The statistics on terrorist activity in Kashmir tell us a very uncomfortable story—our ally in the war on terrorism is also a sponsor of terrorism.

The terrorism statistics can create some uncomfortable policy dilemmas. I am not suggesting that they should take precedence over all other considerations. During my time at State Department, for example, there was a behind the scenes debate about whether or not to put Greece as well as Pakistan on the list of State Sponsors of terrorism. If we had relied solely on the terrorism data then both countries should have been put on the list. But State Department also looked at other issues. This is the grey area where intelligence data and policy considerations collide. In retrospect I do not think previous versions of Patterns of Global Terrorism went far enough in putting both Greece and Pakistan on notice that their support for terrorism was unacceptable behavior. Frankly if the data concerning their role in supporting groups responsible for terrorist attacks had been more fully disclosed it might have generated enough pressure to persuade them to back off of that support.

## WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT THE NUMBERS?

I have no beef with NCTC taking over the job from CTC of compiling the statistics on terrorism. I also welcome the news that 10 analysts are now focused on this task. If that leads to better, more comprehensive data on terrorist activities it will provide an important resource to finding and rooting out those groups who threaten us. However, we still do not have a good explanation of why the CIA's CTC was able to do a credible job of tracking terrorist activity but TTIC could not. Why did TTIC only assign three part time workers to the task of monitoring and counting terrorist incidents? What is NCTC, the TTIC successor, doing differently?

I think it is a big mistake to separate the statistics from the policy analysis in the Annual Report. I believe that State Department should continue to be responsible for issuing an annual report on terrorism that includes the statistical data. This is not a fight over turf, nor am I trying to protect a status quo. The State Department role in producing the Patterns of Global Terrorism, at least until this year, was pretty

straightforward. S/CT was never in charge of collecting or compiling the statistics. That task was carried out by CTC (and later TTIC) with the help of INR. In the future I would hope that NCTC and INR analysts would again meet on a regular basis to make the decision about what should be classified as an incident of international terrorism. The analysts in NCTC and INR should continue to draft the narrative of the report. For its part S/CT should continue to do the policy overview and the policy summaries at the start of each regional section. The Office of the Coordinator for Counter Terrorism should retain the job of editing and producing the final report. The key to this process is a joint, closely coordinated effort with the NCTC and INR.

There is a need for better information in the report. Summary statistics, such as total attacks or total fatalities, are of little use in helping further our understanding of what is going on in the world of international terrorism. NCTC needs to provide more “micro” data. By “micro” I mean specifically identifying which groups are responsible (or believed to be responsible) for terrorist attacks that produce fatalities. If you consult the previous editions of Patterns of Global Terrorism, for example, you would be hard pressed to answer the question: How many attacks has Hezbollah carried out? How many fatalities did Hezbollah attacks cause?

One piece of analysis sorely lacking in previous editions of Patterns concerns identifying emerging trends in terrorist attacks. Last year, for example, I created charts using the data I summarized from incidents listed in Appendix A of previous editions of Patterns of Global Terrorism that showed a dramatic, steady rise in the number of significant attacks, even though the total number of attacks was declining. When I looked more closely at the data I realized that in 2003, for example, over 95% of the casualties were caused by attacks by Islamic extremists in just 10 countries. The annual report to Congress needs more precise data and more thoughtful analysis.

The definition of “international terrorism” needs to be reconsidered. From an analytical standpoint I think it would be useful for NCTC to keep track of all violence, not just terrorism, as a means of establishing a benchmark. I do not think we have sufficient data today to indicate whether or not there is a direct correlation between violence and terrorism. From an analytical standpoint it is important to differentiate between groups like Colombia’s FARC, who rarely targets US and

European citizens, from a group like Islamic Jihad that takes pride in encouraging such attacks.

NCTC's methodology should be expanded to include under the umbrella of international terrorism those groups that receive assistance of any kind from outside their national territory. This would allow us to capture the terrorist attacks carried out over the last several years by the Chechens. While it is true that most Chechen attacks have killed Russians in Russia there is overwhelming evidence that they are closely aligned with Al Qaeda. In March 2002, for instance, Chechen fighters killed US soldiers in the mountains of Afghanistan.

The State Department and NCTC should also follow up on the recommendation by the State Department's Inspector General that some statistics be made available on a quarterly basis. I fail to see how having more information about terrorist events is harmful or counterproductive.

I believe that part of the reason the statistics became an issue again this year is because of the failure to keep the position of the Coordinator for Counter Terrorism filled with a competent Presidential appointee. That slot has been vacant now for almost six months. While the conventional wisdom is that State Department's role in combating terrorism consists of sending stern diplomatic notes to terrorists, it is an unfair and inaccurate perception. State Department's role as the lead for coordinating international terrorism emerged in the mid-1980s in the wake of devastating attacks in Lebanon. A National Security Decision Directive signed by President Reagan in early 1986 gave State the responsibility of coordinating international terrorism policy. This was in response to an interagency fight that broke out during an effort to apprehend the terrorists responsible for the hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship. While flying over Italy in late 1985 in pursuit of Abu Abbas, a State Department official and a CIA officer argued heatedly over who was in charge of the mission. Recognizing the need for a clear chain of command the Department of State was put in charge of coordinating the efforts of CIA, DOD, and FBI efforts to track and deal with terrorism. The first man put in charge of this effort was L. Paul (Jerry) Bremer.

The Coordinator for Counter Terrorism at State Department (S/CT) plays a variety of roles, including facilitating the travel of military special operations personnel into countries where terrorists are operating or are

receiving safehaven. S/CT also has played a direct role in helping FBI and other law enforcement personnel move into countries to apprehend terrorists or provide assistance to local forces, who in turn root out and capture terrorist suspects. And, within Foggy Bottom, S/CT pokes a finger in the eye of the regional bureaus. While the incentive of the desk officer for a country like Pakistan, for example, is to be accommodating of Pakistani concerns, a bureau like S/CT is there to bring up the uncomfortable facts about Pakistan's support for terrorist activities. Not having a Coordinator for Counter Terrorism is inexcusable and unfortunately says a lot about the true importance assigned to that function.

At the end of the day we need more and better coordination between the intel community and the policy community, not less. While there have been problems with Patterns of Global Terrorism in the past, the basic process of the coordination of the two elements was sound. I am struck by the irony that the staff director of the 9-11 Commission that correctly criticized the stove piping of information and the lack of coordination, was a key decision maker in taking collaborative process and splitting it into separate components that will make cooperation and coordination more difficult. I encourage this Committee to take the appropriate steps to require these two important agencies—State and NCTC—to work closely together on one report on terrorism.