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Fighting Terrorism Will "Be an Enduring Task"

"A new era of conflict" is coming, predicts an expert. He warns that Americans increasingly will be targets of terrorists who are being used as surrogate soldiers by other governments.

Q Mr. Jenkins, the U.S. has been trying for years to combat the terrorist threat, and yet today the problem seems worse than ever. Do we face a permanent dilemma?

A I certainly think international terrorism is going to persist. In fact, I think we're on the edge of a new era of conflict in which limited conventional combat, classic guerilla war and international terrorism coexist side by side on the international plane.

Q Are you saying the terrorist problem will get worse?

A We confront a frustrating paradox. Governments have been increasing their efforts to combat terrorism—by improving their intelligence, increasing the security around obvious targets, mobilizing to respond more effectively. But the fact is the volume of global terrorism has not declined. It has increased, and it's becoming bloodier.

Q Why is terrorism such a persistent phenomenon?

A Terrorism functions as an avenue of political expression for extremists, whether they are motivated by ideology, ethnicity or religion.

Increasingly, it is also becoming an instrument of state policy among certain governments. Indeed, one of the trends we see that makes it so difficult to deal with terrorism is the increasing participation of governments in adopting terrorist tactics, employing terrorist groups or exploiting terrorist incidents as surrogate warfare.

Q Why are Americans singled out as targets?

A It's the price we pay for influence and presence. America, of course, is the chief capitalist nation of the world. That provokes some groups.

Also, terrorists exaggerate the degree of influence Washington has over other governments. They truly believe that if they kidnap an American diplomat, the President need only pick up the phone and tell the local government what to do in order to resolve the episode.

Finally, Americans are ubiquitous—they are everywhere. So they are readily available as targets.

With regard to the current situation in the Middle East, we must understand the deep suspicion and hatred with which Shiites view us. They see every bullet fired at them as made in America. And they view many aspects of Western cultural influence as blasphemous.

Brian Jenkins, 42, is director of the Security and Subnational Conflict Program at the Rand Corporation, a Santa Monica, Calif., think tank.

Interview With Brian Jenkins, Authority on Unconventional Warfare



Shiite extremists, in addition to the TWA hostages, hold an American diplomat, an American journalist, an American librarian and a couple of American priests. The message is: "We don't want any American influence here. We want you guys out."

Q Will they succeed in driving the U.S. out of the Mideast?

A We have to admit that in Iran they did succeed, and to a certain extent they have succeeded in Lebanon as well. The U.S. presence in Lebanon has been drastically reduced as a result of terrorist action, especially kidnappings.

Q Is there any danger that the kind of violence directed against Americans in the Mideast will appear on U.S. soil?

A We should knock on wood here. There's always a danger of a spectacular incident or two. But thus far, the U.S. has been immune to terrorist attacks from abroad. In part it's geography. Terrorists can travel through the Middle East and Europe fairly easily. But here they're at the edge of their reach, and our law-enforcement agencies have shown themselves to be very effective.

Second, many terrorists from the Middle East actually went to school in Europe and felt at home in European cities. We have not had a large foreign presence.

There may also be a certain degree of self-imposed constraint operating. Most terrorist groups want to get the U.S. to alter its behavior to their benefit. To carry out attacks in this country could very well provoke a hostile U.S. reaction that would be counterproductive.

Q In the recent TWA incident, what appears to have been a limited airline-hijacking event was transformed into a more elaborate hostage situation with a militia group in charge. Are we witnessing a new species of terror operation?

A Put the current hijacking aside because we don't have all the details yet. The fact is that more and more terrorism is part of broader strategic or diplomatic campaigns by others.

In many recent cases, you have a handful of terrorists, but behind them you have a whole structure of diplomatic and political aims. This is war on a hundred fronts. In responding, we may be obliged to take more active measures to demonstrate to the terrorist patrons that there is a cost associated with it.

Q Action against a state, for example?

A Against the state, right.

Q Do you think that we have reached that point now?

A Somewhere there is a red line which, when terrorists cross it, will trigger a U.S. response. I don't know where that red line is. We may be close.

Q Would such a response deter future terrorist actions?

A If we do respond to state-sponsored terrorism with military force, we ought not to have any illusions about what we will achieve. We are not going to end terrorism, and indeed there may be more retaliatory actions against us.

We also must recognize that although we may make moral distinctions between dropping bombs on a city from 20,000 feet and car bombs driven into embassies by suicidal terrorists, the world may not share that fine distinction.

We can talk about containing terrorism, we can talk about trying to deal with incidents that do occur, but none of that implies that there is a final solution. Combatting terrorism is going to be an enduring task. □