
Is there still a terrorist threat?: The myth of the omnipresent enemy

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Summary

Despite all the ominous warnings of wily terrorists and imminent attacks, there has been neither a successful strike nor a close call in the United States since 9/11. The reasonable - but rarely heard - explanation is that there are no terrorists within the United States, and few have the means or the inclination to strike from abroad.

For the past five years, Americans have been regularly regaled with dire predictions of another major al Qaeda attack in the United States. In 2003, a group of 200 senior government officials and business executives, many of them specialists in security and terrorism, pronounced it likely that a terrorist strike more devastating than 9/11 -- possibly involving weapons of mass destruction -- would occur before the end of 2004. In May 2004, Attorney General John Ashcroft warned that al Qaeda could "hit hard" in the next few months and said that 90 percent of the arrangements for an attack on U.S. soil were complete. That fall, Newsweek reported that it was "practically an article of faith among counterterrorism officials" that al Qaeda would strike in the run-up to the November 2004 election. When that "October surprise" failed to materialize, the focus shifted: a taped encyclical from Osama bin Laden, it was said, demonstrated that he was too weak to attack before the election but was marshalling his resources to do so months after it.

On the first page of its founding manifesto, the massively funded Department of Homeland Security intones, "Today's terrorists can strike at any place, at any time, and with virtually any weapon."

But if it is so easy to pull off an attack and if terrorists are so demonically competent, why have they not done it? Why have they not been sniping at people in shopping centers, collapsing tunnels, poisoning the food supply, cutting electrical lines, derailing trains, blowing up oil pipelines, causing massive traffic jams, or exploiting the countless other vulnerabilities that, according to security experts, could so easily be exploited?

One reasonable explanation is that almost no terrorists exist in the United States and few have the means or the inclination to strike from abroad. But this explanation is rarely offered.

Huffing and Puffing

Instead, Americans are told -- often by the same people who had once predicted imminent attacks -- that the absence of international terrorist strikes in the United States is owed to the protective measures so hastily and expensively put in place after 9/11. But there is a problem with this argument. True, there have been no terrorist incidents in the United States in the last five years. But nor were there any in the five years before the 9/11 attacks, at a time when the United States was doing much less to protect itself. It would take only one or two guys with a gun or an explosive to terrorize vast numbers of people, as the sniper attacks around Washington, D.C., demonstrated in 2002. Accordingly, the government's protective measures would have to be nearly perfect to thwart all such plans. Given the monumental imperfection of the government's response to Hurricane Katrina, and the debacle of FBI and National Security Agency programs to upgrade their computers to better coordinate intelligence information, that explanation seems far-fetched. Moreover, Israel still experiences terrorism even with a far more extensive security apparatus.

It may well have become more difficult for terrorists to get into the country, but, as thousands demonstrate each day, it is far from impossible. Immigration procedures have been substantially tightened (at considerable cost), and suspicious U.S. border guards have turned away a few likely bad apples. But visitors and immigrants continue to flood the country. There are over 300 million legal entries by foreigners each year, and illegal crossings number between 1,000 and 4,000 a day -- to say nothing of the generous quantities of forbidden substances that the government has been unable to intercept or even detect despite decades of a strenuous and well-funded "war on drugs." Every year, a number of people from Muslim countries -- perhaps hundreds -- are apprehended among the illegal flow from Mexico, and many more probably make it through. Terrorism does not require a large force. And the 9/11 planners, assuming Middle Eastern males would have problems entering the United States legally after the attack, put into motion plans to rely thereafter on non-Arabs with passports from Europe and Southeast Asia.

If al Qaeda operatives are as determined and inventive as assumed, they should be here by now. If they are not yet here, they must not be trying very hard or must be far less dedicated, diabolical, and competent than the common image would suggest.

Another popular explanation for the fact that there have been no more attacks asserts that the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, although it never managed to snag bin Laden, severely disrupted al Qaeda and its operations. But this claim is similarly unconvincing. The 2004 train bombings in Madrid were carried out by a tiny group of men who had never been to Afghanistan, much less to any of al Qaeda's training camps. They pulled off a coordinated nonsuicidal attack with 13 remote-controlled bombs, ten of which went off on schedule, killing 191 and injuring more than 1,800. The experience with that attack, as well as with the London bombings of 2005, suggests that, as the former U.S. counterterrorism officials Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon have noted, for a terrorist attack to succeed, "all that is necessary are the most portable, least detectable tools of the terrorist trade: ideas."

It is also sometimes suggested that the terrorists are now too busy killing Americans and others in Iraq to devote the time, manpower, or energy necessary to pull off similar deeds in the United States. But terrorists with al Qaeda sympathies or sensibilities have managed to carry out attacks in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in the past three years; not every single potential bomb thrower has joined the fray in Iraq.

Perhaps, some argue, terrorists are unable to mount attacks in the United States because the Muslim community there, unlike in many countries in Europe, has been well integrated into society. But the same could be said about the United Kingdom, which experienced a significant terrorist attack in 2005. And European countries with less well-integrated Muslim communities, such as Germany, France, and Norway, have yet to experience al Qaeda terrorism. Indeed, if terrorists are smart, they will avoid Muslim communities because that is the lamppost under which policing agencies are most intensely searching for them. The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were ordered generally to stay away from mosques and American Muslims. That and the Madrid plot show that tiny terrorist conspiracies hardly need a wider support network to carry out their schemes.

Another common explanation is that al Qaeda is craftily biding its time. But what for? The 9/11 attacks took only about two years to prepare. The carefully coordinated, very destructive, and politically productive terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 were conceived, planned from scratch, and then executed all within six months; the bombs were set off less than two months after the conspirators purchased their first supplies of dynamite, paid for with hashish. (Similarly, Timothy McVeigh's attack in Oklahoma City in 1995 took less than a year to plan.) Given the extreme provocation of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, one would think that terrorists might be inclined to shift their timetable into higher gear. And if they are so patient, why do they continually claim that another attack is just around the corner? It was in 2003 that al Qaeda's top leaders promised attacks in Australia, Bahrain, Egypt, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Yemen. Three years later, some bombs had gone off in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan (as well as in the unlisted Turkey) but not in any other of the explicitly threatened countries. Those attacks were tragic, but their sparseness could be taken as evidence that it is not only American alarmists who are given to extravagant huffing and puffing.

Terrorists Under the Bed

A fully credible explanation for the fact that the United States has suffered no terrorist attacks since 9/11 is that the threat posed by homegrown or imported terrorists -- like that presented by Japanese Americans during World War II or by American Communists after it -- has been massively exaggerated. Is it possible that the haystack is essentially free of needles?

The FBI embraces a spooky I-think-therefore-they-are line of reasoning when assessing the purported terrorist menace. In 2003, its director, Robert Mueller, proclaimed, "The greatest threat is from al Qaeda cells in the U.S. that we have not yet identified." He rather mysteriously deemed the threat from those unidentified entities to be "increasing in part because of the heightened publicity" surrounding such episodes as the 2002 Washington sniper shootings and the 2001 anthrax attacks (which had nothing to do with al Qaeda). But in 2001, the 9/11 hijackers received no aid from U.S.-based al Qaeda operatives for the simple reason that no such operatives appear to have existed. It is not at all clear that that condition has changed.

Mueller also claimed to know that "al Qaeda maintains the ability and the intent to inflict significant casualties in the U.S. with little warning." If this was true -- if the terrorists had both the ability and the intent in 2003, and if the threat they presented was somehow increasing -- they had remained remarkably quiet by the time the unflappable Mueller repeated his alarmist mantra in 2005: "I remain very concerned about what we are not seeing."

Intelligence estimates in 2002 held that there were as many as 5,000 al Qaeda terrorists and supporters in the United States. However, a secret FBI report in 2005 wistfully noted that although the bureau had managed to arrest a few bad guys here and there after more than three years of intense and well-funded hunting, it had been unable to identify a single true al Qaeda sleeper cell anywhere in the country. Thousands of people in the United States have had their overseas communications monitored under a controversial warrantless surveillance program. Of these, fewer than ten U.S. citizens or residents per year have aroused enough suspicion to impel the agencies spying on them to seek warrants authorizing surveillance of their domestic communications as well; none of this activity, it appears, has led to an

indictment on any charge whatever.

In addition to massive eavesdropping and detention programs, every year some 30,000 "national security letters" are issued without judicial review, forcing businesses and other institutions to disclose confidential information about their customers without telling anyone they have done so. That process has generated thousands of leads that, when pursued, have led nowhere. Some 80,000 Arab and Muslim immigrants have been subjected to fingerprinting and registration, another 8,000 have been called in for interviews with the FBI, and over 5,000 foreign nationals have been imprisoned in initiatives designed to prevent terrorism. This activity, notes the Georgetown University law professor David Cole, has not resulted in a single conviction for a terrorist crime. In fact, only a small number of people picked up on terrorism charges -- always to great official fanfare -- have been convicted at all, and almost all of these convictions have been for other infractions, particularly immigration violations. Some of those convicted have clearly been mental cases or simply flaunting jihadist bravado -- rattling on about taking down the Brooklyn Bridge with a blowtorch, blowing up the Sears Tower if only they could get to Chicago, beheading the prime minister of Canada, or flooding lower Manhattan by somehow doing something terrible to one of those tunnels.

Appetite for Destruction?

One reason al Qaeda and "al Qaeda types" seem not to be trying very hard to repeat 9/11 may be that that dramatic act of destruction itself proved counterproductive by massively heightening concerns about terrorism around the world. No matter how much they might disagree on other issues (most notably on the war in Iraq), there is a compelling incentive for states -- even ones such as Iran, Libya, Sudan, and Syria -- to cooperate in cracking down on al Qaeda, because they know that they could easily be among its victims. The FBI may not have uncovered much of anything within the United States since 9/11, but thousands of apparent terrorists have been rounded, or rolled, up overseas with U.S. aid and encouragement.

Although some Arabs and Muslims took pleasure in the suffering inflicted on 9/11 -- Schadenfreude in German, shamateh in Arabic -- the most common response among jihadists and religious nationalists was a vehement rejection of al Qaeda's strategy and methods. When Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979, there were calls for jihad everywhere in Arab and Muslim lands, and tens of thousands flocked to the country to fight the invaders. In stark contrast, when the U.S. military invaded in 2001 to topple an Islamist regime, there was, as the political scientist Fawaz Gerges points out, a "deafening silence" from the Muslim world, and only a trickle of jihadists went to fight the Americans. Other jihadists publicly blamed al Qaeda for their post-9/11 problems and held the attacks to be shortsighted and hugely miscalculated.

The post-9/11 willingness of governments around the world to take on international terrorists has been much reinforced and amplified by subsequent, if scattered, terrorist activity outside the United States. Thus, a terrorist bombing in Bali in 2002 galvanized the Indonesian government into action. Extensive arrests and convictions -- including of leaders who had previously enjoyed some degree of local fame and political popularity -- seem to have severely degraded the capacity of the chief jihadist group in Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah. After terrorists attacked Saudis in Saudi Arabia in 2003, that country, very much for self-interested reasons, became considerably more serious about dealing with domestic terrorism; it soon clamped down on radical clerics and preachers. Some rather inept terrorist bombings in Casablanca in 2003 inspired a similarly determined crackdown by Moroccan authorities. And the 2005 bombing in Jordan of a wedding at a hotel (an unbelievably stupid target for the terrorists) succeeded mainly in outraging the Jordanians: according to a Pew poll, the percentage of the population expressing a lot of confidence in bin Laden to "do the right thing" dropped from 25 percent to less than one percent after the attack.

Threat Perceptions

The results of policing activity overseas suggest that the absence of results in the United States has less to do with terrorists' cleverness or with investigative incompetence than with the possibility that few, if any, terrorists exist in the country. It also suggests that al Qaeda's ubiquity and capacity to do damage may have, as with so many perceived threats, been exaggerated. Just because some terrorists may wish to do great harm does not mean that they are able to.

Gerges argues that mainstream Islamists -- who make up the vast majority of the Islamist political movement -- gave up on the use of force before 9/11, except perhaps against Israel, and that the jihadists still committed to violence constitute a tiny minority. Even this small group primarily focuses on various "infidel" Muslim regimes and considers jihadists who carry out violence against the "far enemy" -- mainly Europe and the United States -- to be irresponsible, reckless adventurers who endanger the survival of the whole movement. In this view, 9/11 was a sign of al Qaeda's desperation, isolation, fragmentation, and decline, not of its strength.

Those attacks demonstrated, of course, that al Qaeda -- or at least 19 of its members -- still possessed some fight. And none of this is to deny that more terrorist attacks on the United States are still possible. Nor is it to suggest that al Qaeda is anything other than a murderous movement. Moreover, after the ill-considered U.S. venture in Iraq is over, freelance jihadists trained there may seek to continue their operations elsewhere -- although they are more likely to focus on places such as Chechnya than on the United States. A unilateral American military attack against Iran could cause that country

to retaliate, probably with very wide support within the Muslim world, by aiding anti-American insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq and inflicting damage on Israel and on American interests worldwide.

But while keeping such potential dangers in mind, it is worth remembering that the total number of people killed since 9/11 by al Qaeda or al Qaeda-like operatives outside of Afghanistan and Iraq is not much higher than the number who drown in bathtubs in the United States in a single year, and that the lifetime chance of an American being killed by international terrorism is about one in 80,000 -- about the same chance of being killed by a comet or a meteor. Even if there were a 9/11-scale attack every three months for the next five years, the likelihood that an individual American would number among the dead would be two hundredths of a percent (or one in 5,000).

Although it remains heretical to say so, the evidence so far suggests that fears of the omnipotent terrorist -- reminiscent of those inspired by images of the 20-foot-tall Japanese after Pearl Harbor or the 20-foot-tall Communists at various points in the Cold War (particularly after Sputnik) -- may have been overblown, the threat presented within the United States by al Qaeda greatly exaggerated. The massive and expensive homeland security apparatus erected since 9/11 may be persecuting some, spying on many, inconveniencing most, and taxing all to defend the United States against an enemy that scarcely exists.

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