

Transnational Terrorism

by Stephen Krasner

Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy
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The 9/11 attack was a stunning event with long-term consequences for stability in the Middle East and even the global order that have yet to play themselves out. Almost from the outset, the attacks generated two very different interpretations of the state of the world and the threat that transnational terrorism posed for the United States. The first is the position adopted by the Bush administration and echoed in President Obama's statements about the need to degrade ISIS/ISIL that transnational terrorism poses an existential threat to the security of the United States. The second is that transnational terrorism does not pose a security threat and that it should be treated as a crime. The appropriate response should not go beyond intelligence and policing.

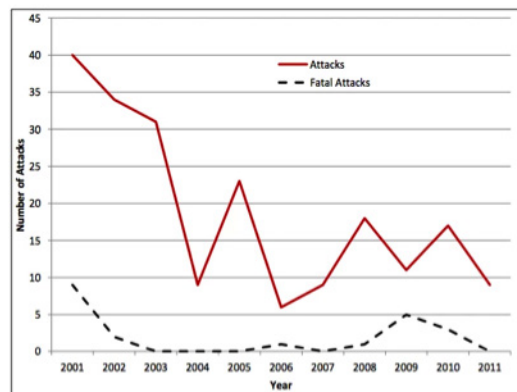
Developments since 9/11 strongly support the second interpretation. The two figures below show the groups responsible for terrorist attacks in the United States, the casualties and fatalities resulting from these attacks, and the number of attacks.

Table 9. Groups Responsible for Most Terrorist Attacks in the United States, 2001-2011

| Rank | Organization | Number of Attacks | Number of Fatalities |
|------|---|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Earth Liberation Front (ELF) | 50 | 0 |
| 2 | Animal Liberation Front (ALF) | 34 | 0 |
| 3 | Al-Qa'ida | 4 | 2,996 |
| 4 | Coalition to Save the Preserves (CSP) | 2 | 0 |
| 4 | Revolutionary Cells-Animal Liberation Brigade | 2 | 0 |
| 5 | Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) | 1 | 0 |
| 5 | Ku Klux Klan | 1 | 0 |
| 5 | Minutemen American Defense | 1 | 2 |
| 5 | Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) | 1 | 0 |
| 5 | The Justice Department | 1 | 0 |

Note: These are all groups attributed responsibility for attacks in the GTD between 2001 and 2011. If responsibility for an attack was attributed to more than one group, then both are listed. The total number of attacks with attributed groups is 90. Seven of those attacks list a second perpetrator, resulting in 97 attributions of responsibility.

Figure 2. Total and Fatal Terrorist Attacks in the United States by Year, 2001 to 2011



Note: There were 208 total attacks and 21 fatal attacks in the United States between 2001 and 2011.

Several points are evident. First, the total number of attacks has declined and the absolute numbers are very low. Second, almost all the attacks have been carried out by domestic rather than transnational groups. Third, the fatalities resulting from terrorist attacks have been very low except for 9/11. An American's chance of being killed by a terrorist attack is de minimis about one in twenty million, about half the chance of being killed by lightning.

Given the experience of the past decade, why has American policy continued to be seized by the dangers posed by transnational terrorism, especially jihadist groups from the Moslem world? Why are the successes of ISIS/ISIL treated as a security threat rather than a humanitarian concern? Could American leaders redeploy assets—military, economic, and rhetorical—toward other policy objectives?

There are at least three reasons why the position taken by American leaders since 9/11, treating transnational terrorism as an existential threat, is inescapable: black swans, potential destruction, and risk aversion.

Nassim Taleb defines black swans as events that have three characteristics:

- High improbability
- High impact
- Explicable only after the event

Terrorist attacks designed to impose mass casualties are black swans. They are highly improbable; 9/11 is the most dramatic case in all of human history and had a huge impact, killing nearly three thousand people. But it also altered the course of history. The Bush administration had entered office with the intention of focusing on domestic policy. The administration's most gripping foreign policy event before 9/11 was the collision of American and Chinese planes over the South China Sea and the subsequent emergency landing of the US EP-3 on Hainan island where it was dismantled and eventually returned in pieces by the Chinese. After 9/11 the United States attacked and removed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and then invaded Iraq. For black swans, history does not provide guidance. That there has been no repetition of 9/11 (the Boston marathon bombing, which killed three people and injured more than two hundred, is a pale reflection) does not mean there will be no successful attack in the future.

The second reason that transnational terrorism has been treated as an existential security threat is that the level of destruction resulting from such an attack could approximate that seen in war. Criminal activities might kill scores of people. A terrorist attack could kill tens or hundreds of thousands or more. Actors with limited capabilities, both state and non-state, can now secure weapons that could wreck havoc even on the most powerful states. The two obvious candidates are nuclear bombs and biological agents. Nuclear bombs are hard to obtain, very hard. Nevertheless, it takes little imagination to tell a story about how such a weapon might fall into the hands of transnational terrorists: governance in Pakistan might collapse or rogue elements in the military committed to a jihadist agenda might provide weapons to such a group; North Korea might sell a weapon if it were confident that its origins could not be detected or even, if it had enough weapons, if it were unconcerned about detection; or Iran could succeed in making nuclear weapons that it might provide to Hezbollah or another associated group, if the regime were facing a threat to its survival. Biologics, however, are a more likely threat for the future. The ability to develop biological weapons is becoming more widespread. In August 2014 a laptop that had belonged to an ISIL fighter from Tunisia was discovered in northern Syria. The fighter had been trained in chemistry and physics at two universities in Tunisia. On the laptop were files describing how to weaponize the bubonic plague from infected animals. The document stated that “the advantage of biological weapons is that they do not cost a lot of money, while the human casualties can be huge.” The laptop also contained a file with a fatwa from a Saudi cleric stating that if unbelievers could not be defeated in any other way it was legitimate to use weapons of mass destruction “even if it kills all of them and wipes them and their descendants off the face of the Earth.” (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/28/found_the_islamic_state_terror_laptop_of_doom_bubonic_plague_weapons_of_mass_destruction_exclusive).

A successful mass destruction terrorist attack by a transnational terrorist group would upend norms and behavior in the international system. If such an attack originated in, or was associated in some way, with a country that would not or could not effectively suppress such a group, sovereignty, which has provided the principles for organizing political life at a global level, would be thrown out the window. No fig leaf of state approval would be required for kinetic strikes against suspected terrorist targets. Questions of proportionality—assessing the potential military gain against collateral damage to civilians—would become meaningless. National police forces or militaries would act freely within the boundaries of states

unwilling or unable to suppress terrorist groups. Trusteeships or mandates—colonialism in one form or another—would become legitimated. The costs of such a transformed international environment, of more or less unconstrained interventionism, would be extremely high not only for the targets (weak or malevolent states) but also for the initiators (most obviously the United States).

Finally, transnational terrorism will continue to be treated as an existential threat rather than a criminal activity because of the way in which human beings, not only leaders but also electorates, confront low probability but potentially large loss events. Human beings are not naturally rational thinkers. Human behavior is more driven by what Daniel Kahneman has termed type 1 thinking (emotive, intuitive, nonreflective) than by type 2 thinking (rational and calculating). The following is a quote from Kahneman's recent book *Thinking Fast and Slow*:

"I visited Israel several times during a period in which suicide bombings in buses were relatively common—though of course quite rare in absolute terms. . . . For any traveler, the risks were tiny, but that was not how the public felt about it. People avoided buses as much as they could. . . .

My experience illustrates how terrorism works and why it is so effective: it induces an availability cascade. An extremely vivid image of death and damage. . . . The emotional arousal is associative, automatic, and uncontrolled. The emotion is not only disproportionate to the probability, it is also insensitive to the exact level of probability."

A successful mass terrorist attack would, as 9/11 did, dramatically alter people's subjective sense of security. The political costs for an American leader of such an event could be extremely high. The Bush administration was castigated for not connecting the dots but escaped political punishment by acting forcefully in Afghanistan and Iraq. No American president could risk taking the position that precautions against a mass casualty terrorist attack had been limited because the probability of such an attack was extremely low to vanishing. Although the rational course of action—the policy that would maximize expected utility *ex ante* (conforming with type 2 thinking)—might be to commit resources only to the measures that were thought to be most efficient in reducing the probability of a mass casualty terrorist attack, the policy that would be most politically judicious (conforming with type 1 thinking) would be to do everything reasonably possible to prevent such an attack. Kahneman captures this problem in Figure 13 of his book.

| | Gains | Losses |
|------------------|---|--|
| High Probability | 95% chance to win \$10,000 Fear of disappointment RISK AVERSE Accept an unfavorable settlement | 95% chance to lose \$10,000 Hope to avoid loss RISK SEEKING Reject favorable settlement |
| Low Probability | 5% chance to win \$10,000 Hope of large gain RISK SEEKING Reject a favorable settlement | 5% chance to lose \$10,000 Fear of large loss RISK averse Accept unfavorable settlement |

(Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Figure 13)

A mass casualty terrorist attack falls into the bottom-right-hand cell, except the probability is lower than 5 percent and the loss greater than \$10,000. Under these conditions human beings are risk averse. They will accept policies that are unfavorable from a purely rational, utility-maximizing perspective because of the fear of a large loss. They will be willing to spend more on avoiding a large loss than a purely utility maximizing approach would dictate, and they will punish political leaders who, from their type 1 intuitive emotive thinking, do not take these threats seriously enough.

To sum up: The empirical evidence—the absence of a mass terrorist attack against the United States since 9/11 and the very low probability of such an attack taking place again—would suggest that the American government is devoting too many resources to counterterrorist activities. No American leader, however, will endorse such a conclusion. A mass terrorist attack would be a black swan. The cost of such an attack in terms of lives lost and instability at the global level would be extremely high. An inherent human tendency toward risk aversion with regard to large losses will continue to provide a base of political support for overcommitting (from a utility-maximizing perspective) resources to prevent such an attack.

If there is an argument that the United States has chosen the wrong path, it would have to rest on the proposition that the vigorous measures that the United States has taken to combat transnational terrorist organizations, most notably conducting kinetic attacks against Islamic jihadist organizations, ranging from drones to the invasion of Iraq have, made matters worse rather than better and have increased the number of individuals willing to join jihadist organizations rather than reduced them.

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First printing 2014

19 18 17 16 15 14 13 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy

The certainties of the Cold War, such as they were, have disappeared. The United States now confronts several historically unique challenges, including the rise of a potential peer competitor, a rate of technological change unseen since the nineteenth century, the proliferation of nuclear and biological capabilities, and the possible joining of these capabilities with transnational terrorist movements. There has been no consensus on a grand strategy or even a set of principles to address specific problems. Reactive and ad hoc measures are not adequate.

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