

Notes on the Future of Terrorism

By Daniel Benjamin

Of the countless prophecies, analyses and clichés spawned by the events of September 11, 2001, few have been spread as widely or accepted as uncritically as the expression, “Everything has changed.” In fact, a great deal did not change, including many of the fundamental patterns of behavior among nations. The one thing that did change dramatically, of course, was terrorism.

This tactic, which involves the use of violence against non-combatants in order to advance a program that is typically political, has, depending on your perspective, either been around forever or perhaps since gunpowder became widely used or perhaps since the invention of dynamite. For roughly a century and a half, the practice of terror has shown remarkable continuities. Weaponry was virtually always the bullet or the bomb, and so assassinations, massacres, hostage-taking, hijackings, and bombings accounted for the overwhelming majority of attacks. Terrorists have historically been conservative about their trade: they did not want to try things that might not work, so they have stuck to the tried and true, sacrificing potential greater effects to reliability. That is not to say there have been no innovations: suicide bombings, which have been used to great effect first by such disparate actors as the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka and the Lebanese Shiites in the early 1980s have now been taken up by Sunni Muslims—the transmission appears to have occurred through the Palestinians, who were impressed by the accomplishments of Hezbollah. But by and large the tools had remained the same.

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As had the general scale of violence. Terrorist violence is notoriously difficult to gauge in terms of volume—the number of events can fluctuate significantly over time, and the problem of distinguishing terrorism from insurgency makes matters even more trying. But the size of the individual attack varied relatively little: attacks that claimed 10 or more lives were unusual; those that claimed 100 or more, exceptionally rare—one of the reasons such events as the bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland and the destruction in 1989 of UTA 772 became such *causes celebre*. There was a reason for scale of terror: the practice was in its essence about leveraging small acts of violence to significant political effect—hence the famous expression that terrorism was about a few people dead and a lot of people watching. As a result, and because of the conservatism of tactics and the infrequency of large-scale attacks, terrorism was a third-order security concern, even if it was a first-order matter for television broadcasters and newspaper editors. As has often been noted, for the average individual, bee sting and lightning strikes were more likely to kill you.

Today, as long as one is not living in Iraq, the actuarial tables do not show much of change regarding the likelihood of dying in a terrorist act—even factoring in 9/11. But terrorism—or at least some terrorism, and the kind that afflicts us most directly—has changed, and 9/11 was the pivot. That attack, and other conspiracies that either sought comparable levels of bloodshed, such as the Heathrow conspiracy uncovered in the summer of 2006, demonstrated a desire to kill on the grand scale. In contrast to the large majority of terrorist groups, jihadists have demonstrated an interest in weapons of mass destruction going back as far as the period in the early 1990s during which al-Qaeda was headquartered in Sudan. The aspiration to use such weapons—and after 9/11, no one should doubt that they would use them—indicates that these militants see violence in a different way than most others. For them, the violence is not a means of forcing an opponent into negotiations and incremental concessions but a sanctified activity that aims at massive change. To a degree not true of most other terrorists, the violence is also an end in itself.

What is the future of radical Islamist violence—what is the trajectory of this cause, which is at once archaizing and arch-modern? There are many imponderables here, and many issues are keenly disputed among scholars. Most agree that the West would have faced a significant challenge from jihadist violence no matter how it reacted after 9/11. Osama bin Laden's demonstrated ability to match deeds to words and inflict real damage on the United States gave the world's most dramatic recruiting effort a powerful effectiveness. Al-Qaeda was sharply set back by the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and that might have been the point of inflection in its fortunes—a downturn accelerated by the impressive string of intelligence operations against the group and its allies. The performance of the alliance of intelligence services cooperating around the world has been the unsung success of what the Bush administration has termed the Global War on Terror.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, gave the jihadists an unmistakable boost. Terrorism is about advancing a narrative and persuading a particular audience to believe it. Although leading figures in the American administration have often spoken of the terrorists' ideology of hatred, U.S. actions have too often lent inadvertent confirmation to the terrorists' narrative. In its most bare-bones formulation, that narrative holds that America and its allies seek to occupy Muslims' lands, steal their oil wealth and destroy their faith. Radical Islamists interpret much of history through this prism: From the Sykes-Picot redrawing of borders in the Middle East after World War I to the creation of Israel to the U.S. deployment to Saudi Arabia and the invasion of Iraq in Operation Desert Storm. Radical Islamists believe, moreover, that the United States supports the autocrats of the Muslim world as a way of keeping the believers down and undermining the faith.

So, not surprisingly, U.S. actions in Iraq have given the radicals fresh fodder for their "clash of civilizations" claims. Polling in Muslim nations over the last three years has shown that America's image has plummeted to historic lows. The invasion and the botched occupation opened a new "field of jihad" for militants who were more than eager to take on U.S. forces in the Arab heartland. For the radicals, killing Americans and their Western allies is the essential task; by doing so, they demonstrate their bona fides are the only ones determined to stand up for Muslim dignities. The presence of coalition forces in Iraq thus provided an irresistible invitation. Through their violence, the jihadists have also created a drama of the faith that disaffected Muslims around the world can watch on television and the Internet. (It has become routine event in the investigation of terrorist conspiracies to find a library of video recordings of action in Iraq in the possession of operatives.) Whatever one thinks of American intentions in going into Iraq, in the context of the culture of grievance that exists in much of the Muslim world, the extremists' narrative has had a profound resonance. New areas of the globe are increasingly falling under the shadow of this growing threat. To be sure, the jihadists have not achieved anything like a true mobilization of Muslim opinion, and the overwhelming majority of Muslims will not embrace a vision of their faith that places violence at its very center, but the radicalization of individuals and small groups has gained momentum.

Because in large measure of Iraq, three new categories—and the term should be used loosely—of terrorists and to the changing geography of terror. The first group is comprised of self-starters, also often called "home-grown." We have become familiar with them through such attacks as 2004 bombings in Madrid, the 2005 bombings in London, murder of Dutch artist Theo van Gogh by a young Dutch Muslim militant also in 2005. These are individuals who may have very little connection to al-Qaeda or other preexisting groups, but they have been won over by the ideas of Osama bin Laden and his followers. These terrorists are self-recruited and often self-trained, using the vast wealth of instructional materials available on the Internet. Self-starters have appeared not only in Europe but also in Canada, the Maghreb, the Middle East and in Pakistan, a country with a well-established jihadist infrastructure which some of the new recruits deemed insufficiently aggressive. A complete parsing of their motivation is

difficult, but it is clearly the case that Iraq was on the lips of those who carried out bombings in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, as well as on those of Mohammed Bouyeri, the Dutch-Muslim murderer of Theo van Gogh.

It is true that as a group, the self-starters have a less experience and are less skilled than, say, those who have gone through al-Qaeda training camps. However, a significant number of highly educated individuals show up in these cells. If only a small percentage of these groups manages to carry out attacks, we could therefore see a considerable amount of damage and casualties. The rise of the self-starters and the erosion in capabilities of the core al-Qaeda have led many terrorism experts to believe in the near-term, we are likely to see many more 3/11s—Madrid size bombings—than 9/11s. But the recently discovered Heathrow plot, which sought to reenact the failed “Bojinka” plot of Ramzi Yousef in 1994-1995, appears to have aimed to bring down as many as a dozen wide-body commercial jets by using liquid explosives assembled on board. In short, the lust for massive carnage still beats in the jihadist heart—including those newly won over to the cause. The good news here is that the conspirators fell flat—their group was too large, they were under surveillance for months, and they did not get close to carrying through their vision. The bad news is that others may not make as many mistakes.

We should also not make the mistake of believing that terrorists who begin as self-starters will not find the connections, training and resources they seek. It appears that some of the London bombers traveled to Pakistan for training and evidently some of the Toronto suspects have links to others linked to Zarqawi. We could well see a re-networking of the threat, which could well mean a further increase in the level of danger we face.

The two other groups of terrorists are both centered in Iraq: The first consists of the foreign fighters who traveled there to fight against U.S. and coalition forces. Contrary to the expectations voiced by the administration at the outset of the war, those who came to Iraq did not represent the global remnants of al-Qaeda after its eviction from Afghanistan. On the contrary, studies by the Israeli expert Reuven Paz and the Saudi scholar Nawaf Obeid both demonstrate that the foreign fighters are overwhelmingly young Muslims with no background in Islamist activism. That is, they represent another pool of the recently radicalized. Although U.S. officials have repeatedly argued over the last three years that the Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his band of foreign fighters represented a very small percentage of the insurgents in Iraq, their violence drove the insurgency—especially the large-scale attacks, such as the attack on the Golden Mosque in Samarra last February that gave the country a powerful push toward an all-out civil war.

Even before Zarqawi’s death in June, his work in stoking sectarian tension appeared to have run much of its course, and increasing levels of violence demonstrate that plenty of other groups have become active. According to several Western intelligence services, in fact, Zarqawi was

turning away new foreign fighters who wanted to come to Iraq. We do not know how many of these foreign fighters remain, or how many have begun to wind their way home. What we can say, however, is that they could become the vanguard of a new generation of jihadists, much as the veterans of the fighting in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s were the founding generation of al-Qaeda.

The last group that deserves attention is comprised of Iraqi jihadists who have emerged from the turmoil of the last three years. Today, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia has become predominantly Iraqi, and in such groups as Ansar al-Sunna and the Islamic Army of Iraq there are thousands of militants with a jihadist outlook—according to some reputable sources, there could be more than 15,000 in their ranks. The chaos in Iraq has allowed for extensive training and development in various terrorist tactics and urban warfare, including increasingly proficient use of improvised explosive devices. Furthermore, the proliferation of such tactics—thanks to traveling fighters and information-sharing via the Internet—has ensured that the style of urban warfare tactics will likely be exported to distant regions. Where the collapsed state of Afghanistan allowed numerous opportunities for bin Laden's endeavors, the ongoing insurgency in Iraq has produced a new type of threat: a real-time, authentic "jihad" experience which is grooming a new generation of committed fighters. The fighters will likely have a durable sanctuary in al-Anbar province in Western Iraq. It is too early to say what the long-term orientation of these Iraqi jihadists will be—will they focus their violence solely on the fledgling regime in Baghdad, or will some of them join the global jihad and seek to export violence beyond their borders? Chances are they will be principally focused on Iraq, but even so, the November 2005 bombings of three hotels in Amman suggest that some will have other targets in mind.

Geographically, the picture is one of jihadist metastasis. With more than 30 failed plots across the continent in roughly five years, Europe has become a central battlefield. In Australia, meanwhile, a major dragnet wrapped up 18 conspirators who appear to have been plotting an attack on the country's one nuclear research reactor. And in South Asia—as the recent bombings in Mumbai and a rash of violence in Bangladesh demonstrate—the incidence of Islamist violence has grown dramatically.

The implications in the Middle East/Persian Gulf region of so much jihadist activity in Iraq are ominous, and it is important to note that jihadist violence had largely been absent from the area since the late 1990s. At that time, the Arab security services had succeeded in dismantling many of the extremist organizations, and the remainder of the problem had been exported to Afghanistan or Europe. The war in Iraq has changed all that, and a rash of violent acts has occurred. In November 2005 when three hotels in Amman were bombed by Iraqi suicide operatives—the first major attacks in Jordan and the most stunning demonstration of the spillover effect of the turmoil in Iraq. But they were hardly the only such cases. Kuwait, a country with no history of jihadist violence, experienced running gun battles between authorities and militants and discovered plotters within its own military. Syria, a country that waged a campaign of extermination

against Islamists in the early 1980s, has seen Sunni radicalism reemerge. Qatar experienced its first vehicle bombing in early 2005. Saudi Arabia suffered a series of bombings and attacks, and while the authorities have gained the upper hand against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group still exists. The discovery of Iraqi-style bombs in the kingdom may well be a harbinger of worse to come once veterans of the fighting to the north—and Saudi Arabia is the home of the largest cohort of foreign fighters—return home.

The United States has been fortunate not to have been struck again since 9/11, and a number of reasons can be adduced for this: The American Muslim community has thus far been largely immune to the jihadist virus because of its high level of integration, education and affluence compared with Europe's communities. Thanks to solid intelligence and law enforcement work, it is more difficult for radicals from abroad to gain entry to the country. The core al-Qaeda is on the one hand not as capable and on the other hand, probably still determined that its next attack will top its last one in drama and impact. And, of course, it is easier for jihadists to kill Americans in Iraq than it is in the United States, and those casualties provide the radicals with the proof they need to show the global community of Muslims of their devotion to their cause. Although jihadists are not responsible for killing all of the more than 2600 American soldiers who have fallen in Iraq, they undoubtedly will stake a claim along those lines. The Bush administration, it must be said, was fortunate that the number did not rise to the iconic 3,000 deaths of 9/11 when the fifth anniversary of that tragedy came around.

Over the long term, however, the terrorists will inevitably seek to rebuild their networks and capabilities to attack the United States at home. This is the gold standard for them, and if the overall strength of the movement is growing, reestablishing the capacity to carry off "spectaculars" will be on their agenda. No one, Americans least of all, should be complacent and believe that radicalization and terrorist attacks are not going to happen at home. The United States is experiencing a significant rise in anti-Muslim sentiment, fanned in no small part by the Christian evangelical right, parts of which have cast Islam as the replacement for the Soviet Union. Incidents of attacks against Muslims have been increasing as well. In these circumstances, the chances that angry and alienated young individuals will turn to violence could well increase.

How will it end? President Bush is of course correct when he says there will not be a signing ceremony on board a battleship to end the war on terror. He might have gone farther and acknowledged that even that image of a struggle between two opposing forces is somewhat inappropriate. Jihadist terrorism will subside—though perhaps not disappear—because of some combination of developments including the loss of much of its audience, which will have turned away from the jihad and decided that it is another dead-end ideology, most of its practitioners will age and give up violence, young Muslims will have a hope of better things to do with their lives, and, perhaps most importantly, Muslim moderates will eliminate much of the political space in which the extremists

operate. Persistent tactical defeats at the hands of intelligence and law enforcement agencies may hasten the end, but the clinching consideration is likely to be the conclusion by most Muslims that the violence is counterproductive and, for some, un-Islamic. Ironically, the “Zarqawi effect,” the repulsion many Muslims felt at the exceptionally vicious and seemingly indiscriminate violence of the Jordanian born jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was a positive development in terms of diminishing the appeal of the jihad. The U.S. operation that succeeded in killing him in Iraq was a necessity, but the sense of terrorist violence being un-Islamic has dimmed in his absence.

How long might it take for the jihadist movement to run its course? David Rapoport, one of the founders of modern terrorism studies, has argued that terrorism comes in “waves” that have a life-cycle of 30-50 years, and he contends that we are in the middle of a fourth wave of modern terror that has been characterized by religious motivation. Rapoport may be right, but a number of factors make prediction hazardous. The first is the terrorists’ motivation. Drawing distinctions between religious motivation and the more traditional political forms of terrorism is difficult to do—it would be folly to say that al-Qaeda’s goals, for example, are not political, or that another ideology, say Nazism, did not have a cult-like religious quality. But because of the jihadists’ appropriation of sacred texts to buttress their case that they are avatars of a true and uncorrupted faith, their ideology may prove more durable than those that have animated other causes. Though their actions may be appalling to many Muslims, those who are attracted to it may find in it a rare authenticity. The sense of sanctification can provide an emotional energy that can perhaps carry believers far, and it is impossible to say that this movement will peter out in the same manner that, say, anarchism did. It is conceivable that the same forces of acceleration that has driven acceptance of the jihad over the Internet could also speed its decline. But here, too, we are in uncharted territory.

The Future of State Sponsored Terror

The rise in tension between the West and Iran has renewed fears of a campaign of state sponsored terror. Before the advent of al-Qaeda, many governments worried more about this brand of terror than the actions of those who acted independently of state support. Naturally, the United Kingdom and Spain worried about their indigenous problems in the form of the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna or

Basque Homeland and Freedom). But for the most part, larger terrorist attacks and sustained campaigns of violence, it was felt, was something only groups with state sponsorship could achieve. All that changed when al-Qaeda demonstrated that a non-state group acting independently could—and would—carry out attacks far larger and more indiscriminate than the state sponsors of terror were ever likely to countenance.

Even before 9/11, however, state sponsorship of terror was a phenomenon on the wane. Many terrorist groups have relied on state support, and al-Qaeda's development was indeed aided by its relationships with states. Sudan harbored the group in the early 1990s, and Afghanistan gave it a home after Osama bin Laden was expelled from Sudan in 1996. Compared with the kind of support that Hezbollah, for example, has received from Iran and Syria, the sustenance al-Qaeda has received from states is relatively small. Al-Qaeda's relationship with both Sudan and Afghanistan were anomalous and resembled little the traditional model, in which a state provides the lifeblood of money and materiel for a group. Bin Laden invested heavily in Sudan while he was there, and he appears to have lost a sizable amount of money when he was expelled. The Taliban gave al-Qaeda sanctuary, which benefited the group greatly, but there too, al-Qaeda did not receive financial support from the Taliban. Instead, bin Laden helped the Afghans keep their Islamic Emirate going—it would be more correct to say it was a terrorist-sponsored state.

Today, state sponsorship of terror continues to flourish in the Middle East, where both Iran and Syria support Palestinian rejectionist groups. With the outlook for the Middle East uninspiring, this is likely to continue. But attacks against European nations and the United States have declined greatly. The three leading state sponsors of terror in the past two decades were Libya, Syria, and Iran. Libya's last major acts of terrorism were the bombings of Pan Am 103 and the UTA 774 in the late 1980s, and Tripoli's authorship was, of course, revealed. Syria has avoided targeting Westerners and its proxies have not attacked United States assets in the last two decades. Iran's last major attack on a Western target was the 1996 bombing of the U.S. troop facility at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia.

Iraq, which would have ranked fourth or even fifth (behind Sudan) on most experts' ranking of state sponsors, and its last conspiracy against the United States suggests one important reason why the state sponsorship of terror has diminished: The event was the failed attempt to assassinate former President George H.W. Bush in Kuwait in 1993. This cloddish conspiracy was uncovered before it could be carried out, and President Clinton ordered a cruise missile strike that destroyed the country's intelligence headquarters. That action was derided by conservative critics of the Clinton administration as a "pinprick," but Saddam seemed to have gotten the message.¹ (Iraqi terrorism afterward consisted overwhelmingly of three kinds of activity: efforts to kill Iraqi

¹ It is an interesting question whether our opponents in the future will have the same respect for American intelligence capabilities after the debacle over Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. It would be deeply ironic if the push to war in Iraq weakened this aspect of our deterrence.

dissidents abroad; support for the Mujahiden e-Khalq, an Iranian opposition group based in Iraq that carried out terrorist attacks against the Tehran regime; and payments to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers.)

Iran's experience in the case of the Khobar Towers bombing appears somewhat similar. The Iranian regime evidently supported the attack by a shadowy group called "Saudi Hezbollah" because of a desire to drive a wedge between the United States and Saudi Arabia, but the bombing's only effect was to cause Washington to move the troops stationed in Saudi Arabia to a more secure location in the desert. That show of resolve and the U.S. message in the late 1990s that Iran's hand had been detected appears to have convinced Tehran that further attacks carried an excessive risk of detection and retaliation. In short, the state sponsors' appear to be operating now on the assumption that they cannot carry out significant operations undetected, and therefore, the risk of retaliation has become excessive.

This is, admittedly, an America-centric view of state sponsored terror—or at least a view that "fits" for the Western alliance, since any state that sponsored a major attack against one member of the alliance would have to reckon with the capabilities of many or all the members being directed against it. Some countries, due to their geopolitical situation, face more sustained threats. Israel's terrorist challenge is unlikely to be eliminated absent a comprehensive peace deal in its region, and even then, some violent actors may never be reconciled to the existence of the Jewish state.

Even if the recent history of state sponsorship of terror is generally positive, one cannot exclude the possibility of state sponsored terror returning. If Iran's nuclear facilities were attacked by the United States—with or without allies—or Israel, a wave of terrorist violence could result. Together with Hezbollah, Iran has a global infrastructure for terror, as the attacks on a Buenos Aires Jewish community center and the Israeli embassy there demonstrated more than a decade ago. There is no reason to think that capability has been abolished. The kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah last summer, which ignited the war in Lebanon, was almost certainly given the green light in Tehran in the belief that it would remind Israel, the United States and others of one of the instruments of Iranian power that would be brought to bear in a conflict, even if the Israeli reaction and subsequent conflict went far beyond both Hezbollah's and Iran's expectations.

One much-discussed nightmare scenario involving state sponsors of terror is much less likely to occur than is often suggested: namely, an attack with a weapon of mass destruction such as a nuclear or biological weapon. This specter was summoned regularly by members of the Bush administration in the run-up to the war with Iraq, with the argument that "on any given day," Saddam Hussein might give a nuclear weapon to a terrorist group because it would allow him to hurt the United States "without leaving fingerprints." Setting aside the issue of Iraq's non-possession of such weapons, this was extraordinarily unlikely to occur for the same reason that

state sponsorship has waned generally: there is no way to be assured that one's involvement will be undetected. And what is true of a limited attack that destroys a plane or kills a couple of hundred people is much more true of one that would kill tens or hundreds of thousands.

Prudence is an aspect of statecraft even for the most dangerous dictators in a way that it is not for non-state actors like al-Qaeda. Though not precisely on point, it is worth recalling why Saddam never used non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction—which he did possess—against a more powerful opponent when he had the chance.

In January 1991, during the run-up to Operation Desert Storm, Secretary of State James Baker had sent Saddam a message. In a meeting with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz in Geneva, Baker said bluntly: “If the conflict involves your use of chemical or biological weapons against our forces, [...] the American people will demand vengeance. We have the means to exact it [...] this is not a threat, it is a promise. If there is any use of weapons like that, our objective won't just be the liberation of Kuwait, but the elimination of the current Iraqi regime, and anyone responsible for using those weapons would be held accountable.”²

At that time, Iraq possessed enormous stocks of chemical and biological weapons, but Saddam never used them during the war. In the twelve years thereafter, he never used them, although, characteristically, he implied that he might use chemical weapons against Israel. Saddam is an execrable man and one of the most loathsome national leaders in a century in which there was plenty of competition. He had miscalculated badly on a number of occasions, most notably by invading Kuwait in August 1990. But he was not insane. He wanted to avoid obliteration. As far as the United States and its allies were concerned, he was deterred.

To be sure, one cannot rely on such prudential calculations on the part of national leaders the way one would the laws of physics. World leaders rightly worry that North Korea might sell some of the fissile material it has produced in recent years. But the likelihood of Iran one day handing a nuclear device to Hezbollah is remote.

² J. A. Baker III with Th. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, New York, G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1995, p. 359.

After al-Qaeda

Beyond Radical Islam

Perhaps because of the historical discontinuity represented by al-Qaeda, there is a tendency to identify catastrophic terrorism solely with radical Islam and believe that the two will one day disappear together—that the only acts of such terror that we need to fear are ones carried out by Muslims. But this thinking is mistaken. Events outside of Islam in the period before 9/11 suggest that the motivation to commit acts of catastrophic terror.

It is not news that a global religious revival has been underway for several decades in virtually every faith and, with the exception of Western Europe, in virtually every part of the world. This tide of spiritual reaffirmation is, in effect, raising all boats, including those of individuals inclined to violent expression. The advances of globalization and the technological society appear ineluctably to be conjuring and empowering separatists, absolutists and apocalyptics—those whose eyes are fixed on the sacred, and who view negotiation as betrayal of faith.

Consider some examples: Judaism saw in the last decades of the 20th century the emergence of extremists with a specifically religious motivation unlike anything in modern experience. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a conspiracy was undertaken to blow up the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as a way of purifying the Temple Mount and ushering in a new and fateful millennial era. The plot failed primarily because rabbinic approval could not be secured. But in 1995, a religious student carried out the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in what was surely one of the most strategic acts of terror since the killing of the archduke in Sarajevo in 1914. The assassin, Yigal Amir, explained his act as a way of removing a danger to Israel and its historic mission, and, in fact, the killing triggered a sequence of events that fatally undermined the Oslo peace process.

Although his thinking was deeply muddled, Timothy McVeigh, the chief author of the destruction of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 had been influenced by the American Christian Identity movement. He expected that the detonation of the 4,400 pound bomb in his truck was meant to ignite an Armageddon-like rising against the U.S. government. Christian Identity has suffered serious setbacks since McVeigh, but U.S.

authorities have disrupted other plots since McVeigh that aimed to cause catastrophic results.

Finally, the global rise of cults adds a further dimension to the danger. It was, after all, the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo that truly broke the taboo on using a weapon of mass destruction in its sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway. Aum, which emerged from the bubbling mass of Japanese “New New Religions” combined elements from the Book of Revelations with some Buddhist doctrines into a surpassingly weird doctrine, and the attack, it appears, was meant to serve as a harbinger and confirmation of the sect’s vision of a coming apocalypse. Impressively, Aum had also worked on biological and nuclear procurement before the subway attack, and, with its large business empire, had extraordinary resources at its command.

Although Aum’s leader Shoko Asahara has been condemned to death, and messianism seems to be on the retreat in Israel, there is little reason to think that the global tendency toward apocalyptic thinking will not persist. It could also infect some movements that may be susceptible to a kind of crypto-religious fervor—Western intelligence services have hypothesized that both the anti-globalization and radical environmental movements might give rise to genuinely dangerous activists.

What makes this all so worrisome is that industrial societies provide a wealth of targets which, if attacked could cause massive destruction—the United States has 123 chemical plant that, if successively struck, would each put 1 million or more people at risk. Moreover, the barriers to entry for those who wish to fabricate the most dangerous weapons are falling. So, for example, in the coming years, for example, the technology for making chemical weapons is likely to become more accessible. The development of “micro-reactors,” machines that are only a bit larger than an average bread basket, will allow chemical companies to produce chemicals in smaller quantities on short order. This serves the needs of “just-in-time” manufacturing, but the same technology in the wrong hands will make it easier to produce some of the most dangerous nerve agents, such as VX and sarin.

Horrible as chemical weapons are, they still represent a manageable threat for three reasons: large amounts are required to kill significant numbers of people; the environment can make dispersal difficult; and the area of contamination is usually small. Biological weapons, by contrast, pose a greater threat, because small quantities can go further—one kilogram of anthrax spores could kill 10,000 people under the right conditions—some agents are infectious, and detection is often slow. Most worrisome of all is the galloping technological progress that is putting the means for producing biological agents in the hands of thousands of people. Biological weapons production is not easy: producing anthrax spores that are the right size so that they are inhaled into the lung is quite difficult, as is drying the agent and dispersing it.

Technology, however, will soon lower these hurdles considerably, and, at the same time, the number of people with the training to prepare

dangerous biological agents is growing rapidly. Today, there are perhaps 10,000 individuals in the world with the range of expertise necessary to produce military-quality biological weapons. But the number of people who have the training not just to culture pathogens but also to manipulate their genetic material in a variety of ways that can make these agents more dangerous—by increasing infectiousness, lethality, drug-resistance and the like—runs into the hundreds of thousands and possibly millions. Thanks to the revolution in biotechnology, the number of facilities where such work could be done is undoubtedly in the thousands, and genuinely global oversight is impossible.

The threat of nuclear terrorism has also become much more real. Already, it is conceivable that terrorists could engineer a crude bomb if they acquired fissile material. Concerns about radical Islamists doing exactly that are already widespread. When the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) canvassed a group of leading scholars of radical Islam and nuclear weapons experts in 2005, a third of the respondents believed that the terrorists already had the capability to make a bomb, while the average of the other respondents put the necessary skill in the terrorists' hand in about five years. What the Islamists can do now, other groups will likely be able to do in the future. Given that there are still hundreds of tons of poorly secured nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union and many tons of highly enriched uranium in research reactors around the world, some with weak defenses, the specter of nuclear terrorism looks like it is here to stay.

“The privatization of violence,” is a phrase that has been much used to describe the rise of the new terror and the appearance of terrorist groups with the capacity to do as much or more harm than states. The expression, though, needs to be understood as the description not of a simple action but a historic dynamic. Because of the relentless advance of technology, violence will be privatized into the possession of ever smaller, “more private” units. The power that will soon be at the disposal of very limited groups and even individuals will be considerable—think about how few people it might take to create a biological weapon.

The situation is by no means hopeless; the societies of the West, with their enormous research establishments, will develop many technological remedies and countermeasures to defend themselves. But it will take great ingenuity, vision and determination to keep ahead of those drawn to violence. The results of the first half-decade of the era of catastrophic terror do not, on balance, inspire great confidence.