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Research Paper

### The Flaws of American Counterterrorism

After 9/11, the world began to recognize a new threat taking shape. In the 1960's, Americans were thinking of hijackings, but it was not associated with terrorism, in fact, it was associated with inconvenience (Naftali, Early Counterterrorism Efforts). Post 9/11 security measures have restricted many freedoms that were once enjoyed. Most events fueled by terrorism stem from religious crusades as well as the intense desire to harm others. A terrorist organization is only considered to have legitimacy if other sovereign states or the UN recognize this legitimacy (Counter-terrorism). Only recently has terrorism gained so much momentum that it is now being combated by intelligence and military forces; this is known as counterterrorism. It is essentially considered the direct or indirect use of force and diplomacy to prevent or terminate acts of terrorism. With the emergence of modern terrorism, it has been revealed that most counterterrorism methods have little effect (Counter-terrorism). Global counterterrorism is still a relatively new concept to history. In theory, counterterrorism is purely logical, but there are critical flaws being surfaced that require immediate attention in order to maintain stability and security around the world.

The general rules in U.S. counterterrorism policy are as follows: make no deals with terrorists, treat terrorists as criminals and pursue them aggressively, bring terrorists to justice for their crimes against the U.S. no matter how far or long it takes, apply pressure on states that sponsor terrorism and force them to change their behavior, and bolster the counterterrorist capabilities of countries that work with the U.S. to acquire assistance (Counter-terrorism). This policy is mainly based internationally, not domestically. One of the driving goals behind counterterrorism is to deal with threats without antagonizing citizens or other states. Strategies used today are mostly built on experiences from the past, such as the previous occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. Typically, the label "terrorist" is given once a group or individual has openly begun to kill innocent people. When reviewing potential targets, the Bureau of Counterterrorism, or S/CT for short, looks not only at the actual terrorist attacks committed, but also the planning and preparation the group or individual has made for future attacks (S/CT, Foreign Terrorist Organizations). There are many ways to pursue these threats, yet, with unsuccessful attempts to quickly end confrontations may suggest that our system is flawed.

Each situation requires a different set of tactics, with this being said, current counterterrorism procedures and methods are outdated and contain many problems. A major parts of this is the lack of public support towards the current engagement in the war on terror. Current Director of the CIA, John O. Brennan, agrees. Brennan states, "Our counterterrorism tools do not exist in a vacuum. They are stronger and more sustainable when the American people understand and support them." Billions of dollars are being thrown into a decade long struggle, which the majority of Americans do not support, thus plunging this nation further into financial and emotional debt.

With the end of the wars in the Middle East growing nearer, a new war is taking place, a war fought by unmanned aircraft commonly referred to as predator drones. The Obama administration is nearing completion of a detailed counterterrorism manual that is designed to establish clear rules for targeted-killing, but leaves a major exemption for CIA drone strikes in Pakistan (Miller, Nakashima, and DeYoung, CIA Drone Strikes). This exemption would allow unrestricted killings for up to a year or more to take place before rules dictate CIA drone usage. Data collected from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism says anywhere from 2,600 to 3,404 Pakistanis have been killed by drones, with 473-889 of those reported to be civilians (Goh, UN Investigates Drones). This information takes only one country into account, drone strikes are taking place in a multitude of countries across the Middle East. Using the median of the data presented, that is around a 25% civilian casualty rate. With such big risks being taken with innocent lives, a dangerous game is being played to get high value targets. The UN released a statement declaring that investigations into drone attacks would not place legal liability onto any nation, but rather that it would support the relevant state's own independent investigations (Goh, UN Investigates Drones). When asked if drones should be used to kill high value terrorists, even if it meant killing innocent civilians, liaison Officer Stokes of Carman-Ainsworth replied, "Yes, because that country put itself in that position to begin with." As far as whether or not drone regulation is needed, she states, "Yeah because I can see them getting a little out of hand, so I could see a little bit of regulation." (Stokes). The decision to allow CIA strikes to continue was driven in part by concern that the window for weakening al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan is beginning to close (Miller, Nakashima, and DeYoung, CIA Drone Strikes).

An emerging new counterterrorism baiting technique is one of the most disturbing. The FBI's strategy involves provoking young individuals to commit premeditated acts of terrorism

against innocent people. Giving them the necessary tools on a silver platter along with words of encouragement, the FBI is creating dangerous situations where it is possible to intervene and then stop the event from happening through an elaborate sting operation (Moore, *A Shot in the Dark*). The would-be terrorists are led to hold extremist views, and after months are given the resources and moral support by the FBI to carry out these attacks. Mainstream media portrays these events as anything but sting operations, and the undercover agents responsible are regarded as heroes who foiled yet again another plot thus securing the nation (Moore, *A Shot in the Dark*). National security is put into place to prevent dangerous events from occurring, but federal credibility comes into question when they create the situation in the first place.

The late 2012 hit *Zero Dark Thirty*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, follows the female CIA operative who was vitally instrumental in locating Osama Bin Laden. Counterterrorism methods were displayed throughout, and each was shown with flaws. The demoralization and inhumane torture dished out upon detainees thought to be involved with Bin Laden, was found years later to be counterproductive and actually may have needlessly compromised cooperation that might have granted valuable leads or information, things that could have saved lives or lead to Bin Laden himself. Gathering intelligence appeared difficult due to lack of communication within the CIA; gathered intelligence contained an accuracy of about 50%. Opportunities to snag meetings with defected members of Bin Laden's inner circle was almost impossible, and extremely dangerous. Lives were sacrificed to discover a new name or lead that probably did not even exist. Overall, in *Zero Dark Thirty*, counterterrorism is portrayed as unorganized and almost impractical in tracking down Osama Bin Laden.

One of the nation's biggest domestic programs has failed to provide virtually any useful intelligence, according to congressional investigators (Risen, *Criticism of Counterterrorism*).

This tends to be the concern in many agencies throughout the country engaged in counter-terror operations. The discovered issues stem from intelligence gathering offices known as “fusion centers” that are financed by the Department of Homeland Security and created jointly between state and local law enforcement agencies (Risen, Criticism Counterterrorism). With an already noted security hazard by way of lack of communication, misinformation is also becoming a large concern. The report found that the centers “forwarded intelligence of uneven quality which was oftentimes shoddy, rarely timely, sometimes endangering citizen’s civil liberties and Privacy Act protections, occasionally taken from already published public sources, and more often than not unrelated to terrorism” (Risen, Criticism of Counterterrorism).

Acts of terror can have devastating long-term effects on victims or those effected. PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, is the most common ailment of those who have experienced terrorism. Most large scale terrorist attacks, such as 9/11 or the London subway bombing, are known in the scientific community as flashbulb memories. In dealing with flashbulb memories, individuals can remember accurate details about the day the events occurred, as well as the strong emotions that are involved with it . Almost any American old enough to remember 9/11 has an answer to that question. Classrooms, office parks, living rooms, dorm rooms — wherever people were at when the television was turned on, wherever the smoke was spotted, or wherever a frantic phone call was received — became imbued with extra meaning (Pappas, Do You Really Remember 9/11?). When Officer Stokes was asked to recall the events of her day during 9/11, she remembered, “I was at home and I had worked third shift the night before, I was supposed to go to training the next day.” Research suggests that people do forget a portion of the details associated with flashbulb memories over time, but the emotions that are paired with it stay strong correspondingly to when it was first experienced (Pappas, Do You Really Remember 9/11?).

This goes to show the psychological impacts caused by terrorism that can last a lifetime, and why it is necessary to prevent such trauma.

Kathryn Bigelow's 2008 award winner, *The Hurt Locker* follows the life of an explosives ordinance disposal (EOD) technician in the U.S. Army during a deployment in Iraq. The task at hand is to destroy or render useless any and all improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that are stumbled upon. This is the most direct form of counterterrorism, and also the most dangerous. Instead of preventing acts of terror ahead of time, EOD techs diffuse highly volatile situations while in progress, most of which involve bombs that must be dismantled by hand, through counter-explosives, or by robots. The pressure of war coupled with performing acts of high stress in countering terrorist threats while on the modern battlefield slowly wears on each of the soldiers, showing the frustration that comes with fighting an invisible enemy.

Terrorism and the counterterrorism efforts pursuing it have created ruin and chaos. Middle Eastern countries have been demolished by explosions and riddled with bullets. Places of peace and tranquility have been transformed into areas of urban warfare. In the U.S., over time, terrorism has greatly influenced our infrastructure, with the construction of thousands of bomb shelters during the cold war. It creates despair for many and benefits none. The negative impacts of terrorism felt by humans around the world is noticeable, and will only continue to grow over time if changes are not made to the way counterterrorism operates. The U.S. defense budget has soared exponentially with the involvement of our military in Iraq and Afghanistan in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Quite simply, at this rate the national debt will become seemingly irreversible, and a large portion of this is due to overspending on wars and the ineffective methods used to fight them. Innocent people are dying every day as a result of attacks

that were intended to kill terrorists, while at the same time, terrorists are out killing innocent people themselves. Either way it is put, everybody loses.

With the problems surrounding counterterrorism identified, it is easier to look for solutions. The internet has developed tremendously over the past decade, opening the door to a potentially vast cyber-counterterrorism system. Many modern agencies and even businesses rely on the internet to gather information while at the same time protecting it with advanced firewalls. Such a system would be inexpensive (as compared to the status quo), and likely be more effective in gathering useful intelligence. It would also play a role in integrating both government and civilian actions, as well as build host-nation cyber security against cyber-attacks.

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As far as the U.S. hierarchy goes, federal agencies such as the FBI and CIA do a majority of intelligence gathering, while the military performs the majority of the ground work in wars or Special Forces operations. It would be hugely beneficial to combine the two and create the right military intelligence team with fundamentals that would include air dominance, maritime control, space control, and counterterrorism measures. However, the reason such a team does not exist is due to required next-generation technology that is not yet in the hand of the military (Heritage, Next Wave). If someday this is a reality, counterterrorism would likely see positive improvements.

Within the first three months of government mandated comprehensive screening of commercial flight passengers, 5,000 guns and assorted weapons were discovered at American airports (Naftali, Early Counterterrorism Efforts). Given that this was over thirty years ago, those numbers are likely significantly less thanks to a relatively simple screening. The TSA's recent decision to allow small knives back aboard planes certainly raised some questions. When asked

what direction she saw the U.S. moving towards in regards to our security, here is what she had to say. "I think everybody is starting to arm themselves. It's nice to allow knives back onto planes for citizens to protect themselves but at the same time it's crazy too because of what's happened before." Taking one step forward and two steps is illogical when there are lives on the line, while it may restore confidence in those who fly, it also creates the opportunity for a catastrophe.

Arguably, the biggest problem in counterterrorism has one of the easiest resolutions. Lack of communication between counterterrorism resources can be detrimental and easily avoidable. Officer Stokes possesses a background in law enforcement, yet, handling any type of domestic terrorism as a police officer can be challenging due to lack of information and resources. Here is what she had to say.

We don't get a whole lot of information. Most of the stuff that they tell us, they send us things to look out for. They tell us when we're in a code yellow or red and let us know what's going on. They also have, through our NCIC, which is our computer network, things that will sometimes hit on a name. We run a name and it matches, comes close, or either is a person of interest. I don't think we have good enough communication between our agencies, between the federal and local, the state and local, I don't think we share all the information that we get. I don't think that the local and state levels of law enforcement are trained as well as they should be to deal with any kind of terrorism. I think mostly, we are trained to deal with regular criminals and regular crimes. We may not recognize a terrorist and we may not know what to do if we do come across one. (Stokes)

Minnesota politician Jim Ramstad also suggests, "Our intelligence community needs better coordination of operations and exchange of information, and that's why we need an



overall director of national intelligence and a national counterterrorism center.” What Ramstad is saying implies that we converge elements of each separate affiliated program (FBI, CIA, Homeland Security, etc.) into one organized entity, a counterterrorism headquarters that makes the flow of information smooth and simple.

U.S. strategies must be persistent, no counterterrorism effort can succeed without the will to see the strategy through (Heritage, Next Wave). The right way to achieve true counterterrorism is to stop terrorist groups from gaining resources, allies, or sympathizers, and then create specific strategies on a case by case basis to defeat them. As these threats are neutralized, the U.S. must retain in place a robust, and sustainable presence to identify and combat radicalism (Heritage, Next Wave). Considering the emotional damage created by terrorism, perhaps the focus should somewhat diverge from exclusively hunting down targets to also healing physical or emotional losses felt by victims.

With the direction of counterterrorism shifting in new directions, there looks to be much promise for the future. As terrorism advances, so will the methods to prevent it. There are obvious snags with methods used today, but there are solutions already mapped out that just need the initiative to be put into place. Better communication between counterterrorism agencies, restrictions on killing civilians, innovative training to deal with terrorism within law enforcement and federal agencies, as well as better intelligence and use of resources are all viable improvements that can effortlessly be implemented.

When there is a problem, there is always a source of origin. In the case of terrorism, the majority of the problem has been created by radical Islam throughout the Middle East and other areas of the world. However, terrorism can be caused by any group or individual, so the blame cannot be placed onto one single factor. The governments that are using a flawed approach to

counterterrorism must separately take responsibility for the lack of success in the drawn out conflicts surrounding various nations. While responsibility by governing nations using visibly defective techniques to combat terrorism will never be taken, there are clearly many pointers to those really at fault. Counterterrorism practiced by individual agencies, such as the FBI or CIA, use different tactics, some worse than others. Drone strikes orchestrated by the CIA are unethical, and the fact that zero responsibility is being positioned over anything is absurd. It is insulting that the UN would launch investigations into questionable drone use; just to help the countries affected by the strikes to acquire better forensics. This does no good if the forensic evidence obtained has no legal or practical use. The FBI is committing borderline criminal acts to poise innocent people to develop terrorist views of radicalism, and then providing every required ounce of material and support to carry out attacks. Even worse is the media response to the FBI's shady sting operations; instead of the facts being presented, a twisted form of the truth is being revealed to the public.

A constant reminder of American resiliency can be found in the established American national anthem, the Star Spangled Banner, written by Francis Scott Keys over two centuries ago. This composed work of music originally depicts the war of 1812, but many phrases can be applied to the war on terrorism today. "Whose broad stipes and bright stars, through the perilous fight...And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air...Oh say does that star spangled banner yet wave, o'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave." (Key, the Star Spangled Banner). Counterterrorism is by no means an easy task, and certainly has a long road of development before reaching potential effectiveness. Yet, no matter where the course of future counterterrorism takes the U.S., the American flag will continue to wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave.