

Nomadic terrorism: concept and technology

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Many years ago, I read the book *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (Norton, 1974) by Robert Heilbroner, a progressive economist later turned relatively conservative. He was talking about the danger of nuclear terrorists from underdeveloped countries waging a “war of redistribution” or blackmailing the developed world by the end of the 20th Century. Hence his pessimism about “the human prospect”.

Heilbroner’s prediction is coming back with a vengeance. Except that there is no need for mini atomic bombs. And the “redistribution” is more of “justice” than “wealth and resources”. Modern terrorism is, as he forecast, largely practiced by poor country radicals. Some of them have access to high-tech weapons. But there is actually no absolute need for that.

The SDI (Strategic Defence Initiative) was conceived by Ronald Reagan, as a response to the “evil empire”, i.e. the former Soviet Union. Is it a coincidence that the deployment of missile shields by George W. Bush is in theory a defence against “rouge states” collectively known as the “axis of evil”? Bush’s logic is of course much more shaky in the post-Cold War era. The chances for Iraq, Iran and N. Korea being able to fly nuclear missiles past Alaska are remote.

As to terrorism, the trouble is that its modern form is rapidly becoming “nomadic”, due to the advance in both technology and concept. On the one hand, chemical and biological weapons can be micro-manufactured and micro-managed. The reported news of Iraq secretly shipping them to Syria, strongly denied by both, is a chilling reminder even if it is untrue. Al Qaida was hosted by the Taliban. But the latter’s demise did not result in the same fate for the former. Terrorist organisations in the cyber-age are virtual nomads, dispersed, faceless and hard to catch. There is less and less need for rouge states to serve as their hosts.

Moreover, the most “famous” example of modern terrorism, the September 11 tragedies, was a “low tech, high concept” conspiracy. Flying commercial planes into critical artifacts requires very detailed and intelligent planning, but almost no technology (remember the paper cutters of the hijackers?).

So what is the Bush Administration doing by preparing to wage a war against Iraq? Cynics see the military-industrial complex lurking behind: a major war is needed once in a while to dump old inventories and move ahead in the high-tech weapon race,

although there might not be worthy opponents. Hence the First and now possibly the Second Gulf War, despite the yet-to-be-provided evidence that Iraq is linked to Al Qaida and its weapons of mass destruction are a potent threat. It may also be a diversion of the US's failure to capture bin Laden or effectively disband his "organisation".

As I said earlier ("11 and 17 September 2001", 22/9/01) the root of the problems of international terrorism is a clash of politicised religious ideologies and the result of north-south political economy. Without addressing them, any type of military responses, no matter how efficient and how it is packaged with moral high ground (e.g. creation and spreading of democracy) could only produce more aggrieved people, a minority of who would be recruited by the terrorist nomads. Even the most advanced technology, including missile shields, would find it difficult to ensure homeland security because the sources of attacks are so illusive, and the targets so extensive.

Is there a more urgent need for biological and chemical shields?