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Sequels Seldom Sell: Why Terrorism is losing its Strategic Value for Al-Qaeda

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QUESTION: What do all the Al-Qaeda linked bombings post-9/11 have in common?
Answer: They seem to be generating less fear amongst the general public while also garnering less attention.

Indeed, if the amount of media coverage devoted to these events and the general public mood is anything to go by, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates seem to be losing the means by which they hope to attain their ends. Terrorism just isn't as terrifying as it once was. In a sense, what Al-Qaeda is facing is what most Hollywood studios face after producing a blockbuster – the sequels usually never generate as much interest as the original.

This point is made not to trivialise the hurt and suffering felt by those immediately affected by these events or to be flippant about the wretchedness of such actions. Rather, the point here is that Al-Qaeda is failing to cower as many people as intended and the strategic value of terrorism plummets when it fails to terrorise.

The Strategic Value of Terrorism

The end goals of terrorism are as diverse as the people who perpetrate such acts, ranging from the political to the economic to the religious. Though these goals may differ between groups, the strategic value of terrorism is a facet common to all terrorist groups. The strategic effect of terrorism lies in its twin ability to: (1) attain publicity for a group's demands and (2) coerce governments through popular pressure driven by the creation of a political climate of fear.

Strategic value refers to the value of the violence perpetrated in order to attain specific end goals. The acts of violence – whether a terrorist bomb attack, or the use of regular military forces in a conventional military campaign – are therefore simply the means to achieve specific end goals.

In that respect, terrorism is not fundamentally different from the employment of strategic air power that was so popular during the period stretching from the end of the First World War through to the end of the Second World War. Proponents of the use of strategic air power argued that the best way to end a war quickly was to bring popular pressure to bear against the enemy government, either to coerce the enemy government into surrendering or by creating a powerful wave of popular unrest within the enemy state leading to the collapse of the enemy government.

Although the experience of strategic air power – witnessed in the strategic bombing campaigns of the Second World War – was undoubtedly devastating in terms of the levels of physical destruction of buildings and cities, its strategic value was arguably negligible. After the initial shock waves of fear created by the first attacks against cities, the people of these cities simply became inured to these attacks. This was a pattern of behaviour that was repeated not just in London and Coventry, but in Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, Tokyo and Yokohama as well. The people in these cities simply got used to regular bombing attacks against their cities, and got on with their regular lives as much as possible.

Assessing Al-Qaeda Bombings post-9/11

Judging the strategic value of the major post-9/11 bombings, it is possible to see that the value of terrorist bombings is slipping. Though it is difficult to calculate emotions in general, not least of all fear, the following barometers should suffice as indicators of the success of major Al-Qaeda bombings post-9/11 at generating unease, uncertainty and, of course, fear: media attention and stock market reaction. For what is considered post-9/11 bombings, we consider here the 12 October 2002 Bali bombing, 11 March 2004 Madrid bombing, 7 July 2005 London Bombing and the 1 October 2005 Bali bombing.

With regard to newspaper coverage, major newspapers such as the New York Times, The Times, The Straits Times and the International Herald Tribune have devoted increasingly less column inches towards covering the terrorist incidents listed above, with the relatively small spike during the London bombing as the sole exception. As for air-time on major global news networks, both CNN as well as BBC World have not significantly interrupted regular programming with each preceding bomb attack. Finally, if the reactions by major stock markets are used as an indicator of the strategic value of Al-Qaeda bombings, Al-Qaeda may have to consider a different *modus operandi*. Besides a major fall in the Dow post-9/11, major stock markets have not stayed depressed after subsequent bombings. The trend has so far been for markets to take a dip immediately after a bombing and then recover over the period of a week.

What do these indicators show? These indicators show that the strategic value of terrorism is falling and, akin to the lack of value seen in strategic bombing in World War Two, the general public is getting acclimatised to the terror it is supposed to generate.

Conclusion

In a sense, Al-Qaeda is competing in a saturated market of fear and it is not doing very well. Other events such as the threat of avian flu, the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programmes, and increasing oil prices with the attendant economic effects have become more important factors for the general public to be concerned and fearful about.

Reactions after the London bombings and the second Bali bombings drive home this point. After London, the British to their credit refused to panic. To illustrate this point, there was even a website created proudly stating ‘We’re not afraid’. Contributions to this site have been so great that a book may soon be published. After the second Bali bombings, besides the condolences and expressions of outrage that are customary, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s comments also captured how bombings are losing its value for Al-Qaeda. PM Singh hit the nail on the head when he maintained that the terrorists will not win once ‘the general

masses are not scared' and 'these kind of stupid acts by terrorists won't shatter the spirit of fighting against terrorism'.

As recent events in Australia and Jordan show, this does not mean governments and the general public should let down their guard. However, are we constantly looking over our shoulder? Are the terrorists therefore winning? Not really.

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