

Vulnerabilities to Terrorism

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In recent decades the nature of the terrorist threat has changed from narrow nationalistic political goals to motives cultivating an apocalyptic religious fanaticism. While traditional forms of terror continue seeking ethnic autonomy, political independence, and control of criminal enterprises, the tactics of groups like al-Qaeda have come to dominate public attention. Historically, terrorist events and phenomena were designed to produce minimal casualties and maximum public exposure. Today, modern terrorists seek not to limit casualties but to kill as many people as possible. Brutal, large-scale violence is the point of their activities.

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“...we are over familiar with the sensitivity of the sensitive and relatively ignorant of the cunning of the strong and the stupid. We remain one step removed from an intimate perception of the procedures of the corporate, financial, governmental, mafia and working-class establishments. Investigative journalism tends to rest on too narrow an ideological base -- the rational, ironic, fact-oriented world of the media liberal. So we have a situation, call it a cultural malady, of the most basic sort – a failure of sufficient detail to inform our assessments. ...we tend to know too little of how the world works.”

Norman Mailer

“Birds and Lions: Writing from the Inside Out”

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World War IV

The Fourth World War began on September 11, 2001. While the attacks were shocking for their audacity and effectiveness, it was not completely unexpected: a large-scale attack on American soil has been widely predicted by experts. For years students of terrorism have drawn attention to a disturbing paradox that while the number of international terrorist incidents had been declining over the past decade, the number of casualties rose. The atrocities made September 11, 2001 one of the most memorable days in American history dwarfing even the horrendous events of December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor.

Approximately three times as many Americans died in New York City, Washington, DC and rural Pennsylvania as did at Pearl Harbor. The intended targets were American civilians, not military men. Moreover, this was not just an assault on America; citizens from nearly eighty countries died in the collapse of the World Trade towers on that fateful day.

The New Terror: Apocalyptic Fanaticism

Over the past three decades, many terrorist groups operated with narrowly defined, limited political goals and agendas. Terror was a tactic designed through its spectacular activities to draw attention to the cause. The logic of fear and intimidation was augmented by yet another goal – awareness. The idea was to publicize the sense of psychological desperation driving the cause. Naturally, attacks with too many casualties, would offend the very audiences the terrorists wished to convert to the cause or look at it with some sympathy. Attacks, therefore, were tactically designed to kill just enough people to attract media attention but not too many so as to repel the public into anger and opposition.

Further, terror was a tool that might force negotiations on some issues, such as the release of other jailed terrorists. In Europe, two of the key terrorist groups of the 1960s and 1970s (the Italian Red Brigade and the Baader-Meinhof of West Germany) along with the IRA Provos in the 1980s and 1990, tired out the public with their recurrent threats and wanton acts of violence and mayhem.¹ Not surprisingly, the publics in those countries turned against them. At the same time, the outraged publics had access to vigorous counter-terrorist policies and strategies that proved capable of coping with the threat.²

At the heart of these counter-terrorist policies and strategies were three principles: (a) to define terrorists as criminals that must be brought to justice; (b) to make no concessions to the/criminals; and (c) to punish states that support terrorism. On balance, this strategy has worked.

Now, over the last ten years, however, many terrorist groups appear to be

motivated less by narrow nationalistic political goals and more by apocalyptic religious fanaticism.³ The goals now are predicated on hatred and revenge for one or another grievance. The tactics too have changed to accommodate these broader more violence prone motives. Rather than carefully limiting casualties, these terrorists seek to kill as many people as possible. Brutal, large-scale violence is the point of their activities; they appear to be utterly unconstrained about indiscriminately taking human life.

One can begin in the late 1980s where changes in the terrorist mind set became apparent; Pan Am Flight 103 in December, 1988, through the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, to the chemical attacks in the Tokyo subway system in 1995, and the bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998 have all resulted in larger numbers of casualties.⁴ The September 11, 2001 attacks which killed 3,000 people were the single worst attack in world history.

Things might even get worse. The terrorist nightmare arouses increasing concerns because there is evidence that terrorists might use chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear agents. In the 1980s, terrorists could have developed such weapons, but they declined to do so, apparently calculating that the use of such horrendous instruments of war would make support of their causes much less likely.⁵ Now however, al Qaeda and its affiliate's are absorbed by another scenario more depraved than we could have imagined: they find biochemical weapons attractive, precisely because they can kill many thousands.⁶ This was the goal of Aum Shinriyko's sarin nerve gas attack in the Tokyo subway. Contemporary terrorist groups including al-Qaeda have also tried to acquire biochemical agents and nuclear bomb components which foreshadows a major change and escalation in their violence.⁷

This suggests that a substantial part of the original counter-terrorist policy is now outmoded. However, one element of that strategy – no concessions to terrorists- remains valid in principle (but is often compromised in practice). But confronting groups such as al-Qaeda renders even that principle irrelevant: al-

Qaeda is not interested in negotiations of any kind and they have not made “demands” that the United States/the West might comply with to deter further attacks. A deep, raging blood lust is at the root of the new terrorism.

Osama bin Laden and his organization, al-Qaeda with its Wahhabi-indoctrinated sectarians consider only the purest and most fanatical Muslims worthy of consideration; the teachings and published proclamations of this cult present the idea that the tolerant, the open-minded, the apostate or the followers of different branches of the Faith are fit only for slaughter and contempt – to say nothing of the infidels (the non-believers who do not follow the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed).

Al-Qaeda: “Sovereign – free” terrorism⁸

A distinctive characteristic of al-Qaeda, is that it is not tied to a nation state but relies for its identity on a free-floating religio-political ideology informing a global network of religious “martyrs” and terrorists. This makes the organization, its members and associates, difficult to identify and contain. Traditional law enforcement strategies and counterterrorist organizations have become virtually irrelevant: the world is attempting to deal with the twenty-first century phenomenon of terrorism using structures, mechanisms and instruments and ideas still based in 20th century concepts and organizational forms.

How has al-Qaeda become the intimidating presence that it is in so many countries? Typically, organizations like al-Qaeda and Hamas, even the IRA some years ago, have had home bases where state authority was weak, corrupt or just ineffectual. Terrorist groups sustain themselves and function best within a protective cocoon of sympathizers in ethnic enclaves, religious or racial ghettos and among those who nurse grievances of one sort or another against the society at large or against the institutional authorities governing their communities and lives.⁹ Weak state authority and law enforcement also contribute to the prevalence and spread of terror.

Recently, the Taliban and its surrogates were not content to degrade their own society in poverty and misery. They were deluded into believing that it was their mission to spread their version of a sanctified religious community on earth and to insure that the unrighteous would be exterminated or otherwise persuaded into conversion. At least the Taliban was a tangible presence, an occupying force that held a territory. In contrast, al-Qaeda is an enemy without an army; it has no fixed assets, and no clearly defined territory. These trends are new and so is the political/philosophically-informed psychology of these terrorist forces who perversely see the effective use of efficient technologies of killing and mayhem as a means of entering paradise and seeing God in the sun-kissed bleachers of eternity.

Our reaction to the ruthlessness of this terror is to say that they do not understand us. But the Taliban and al-Qaeda members do indeed “understand” us and hate us for that very reason. They hate the freedoms of American society, its universal suffrage and material success. Apparently, for bin Laden and his cronies, there is nothing that America can do or say that will satisfy them. Should we cease to exist as a nation that will doubtlessly satisfy them.

What is not so extraordinary today in view of these fatalistic apolyptic visions of salvation, of the struggle between good and evil, between their version of Islam and their version of the corrupted infidel West, is the phenomenon of recurrent suicide bombings and deaths that typically involve explosives and a commitment to fundamentalist beliefs.¹⁰ Suicide death and murder underscore the fact that some of the conventional disincentives to acts of terrorism are futile – those prepared to crash aircrafts into buildings or blow themselves up in the middle of a restaurant or on a bus are clearly not likely to be deterred by the mere threat of incarceration from pursuing their idiotic fantasies. Thus, the strategic goal of bringing terrorists to justice is unworkable with adversaries eager to die and kill others-and as many as possible for their vaunted cause. Our thinking needs to be revised; perhaps President Bush’s suggestion that “bringing justice to the terrorists” is the basis for the appropriate response to the post 9/11 terror.

The Furies of 9/11

A cluster of buildings that took seven years to construct crashed to earth in one hour and a half on September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks on the WTC obliterated 10 million square feet of office space and exacted nearly \$30 billion in direct costs. In addition to the nearly three thousand lives lost, a telephone switching office was demolished, others were heavily damaged, and the cell antennas on top of the towers collapsed with the buildings. Mass transit subway lines in southern Manhattan were buried in the rubble, and an office of the CIA was destroyed temporarily disrupting routine intelligence operations.

Despite the tragic loss of life, the massive physical damage to the trade center area and to the New York economy, the 9/11 attacks did not irreparably cripple U.S. financial or communication systems. Actually, the World Trade Center was not a critical non-redundant mode in the national or regional economic infrastructure.¹¹

9/11: Aftermath and Possibilities

September 11, 2001 was unique in that, relative to all other states in the world, America in the highest hour of hybrid, omnivorous power is stronger than any country has ever been in history and it was attacked and severely wounded by a small group of desperate men armed with paper cutters and a crazed resentment, a suicidal determination to succeed in bringing the “Great Satan” to its knees. They succeeded but also failed. Indeed, the weak can attack the strong – as if we needed so dreadful a history lesson to confirm the obvious. The asymmetry of the attacks was fundamental to the new security threats America or any vulnerable, complex industrial giant must face in the new millennium.

At least two important asymmetries provide lightly equipped but psychologically clever and emotionally fierce fighters with an edge. First, the targets of terrorism have to be defended which means they must protect all their points of vulnerability; the terrorist has only to attack the weakest point. The attacks on the

two African embassies in Dar es-Salaam and Nairobi in 1998 where hundreds were killed are a bitter lesson about poor protection, under-preparedness and the difficulty of defense.¹²

Second, launching an attack costs a fraction of what it takes to defend against it. The September 11 events are a good example. September 11 in total – and that includes travel to the USA, flying lessons, room and board, etc – probably costs the terrorists less than \$2 million but their assault caused nearly \$750 million in damages and commercial interruptions.¹³ Terrorism reverses the conventional military wisdom that offensive operations must exceed the resources of defensive forces by a factor of three.

In these circumstances what should the proper counter-terror strategy be? Pre-emptive war? Should the policy be to prevent attacks before they occur by neutralizing potential aggressors and their palpable threats? These questions require good intelligence.

The Intelligence Issue

More than any other area of security counterterrorism policies, strategies and tactics depend upon intelligence--principally human intelligence.¹⁴ Having informants or placing moles in terrorist organizations is a precarious process. Surely, infiltrating terrorist groups is as difficult as placing a law enforcement agent in a Cosa Nostra crime family. While inserting agents or patiently cultivating informants in groups that are clandestine; that are by nature suspicious and desperate is difficult to achieve. Problems are exacerbated when group memberships are primarily based on ethnic, tribal, racial or clan ties. The alternative is to develop friendly working liaisons with other national intelligence agencies; and properly handled, the intelligence data yields can be rich and rewarding. Unfortunately, until very recently, the US government seriously impaired its own

capabilities to acquire useful, current human intelligence. It seems that Congressional restriction on the CIA and kindred agencies damaged their operational capacity and morale. In 1995, the Clinton Administration imposed rigid bureaucratic procedures on spy recruitment and contacts with terrorist organizations.¹⁵ The National Commission on Terrorism which convened in 2000 concluded after hearing dramatic accounts of problems in the field from CIA officers, home and abroad, that the guidelines promulgated by the Clinton Administration were more of an obstacle than an aid in the recruitment of spies and informants in the struggle against terrorism.¹⁶

The New Counter Terror Strategy

The Bush Administration accepted the National Commission on Terrorism recommendations regarding the development and production of human intelligence. One of the key comprehensive strategic initiatives is to deny terrorist groups safe havens from which they can operate and generate logistical and political support from “sympathetic” governments. Operationalized the strategy means that not only terrorists themselves will be brought to justice but so will any groups or nations that support them. Specifically, the counter terrorist agenda entails several objectives. Among these are that terrorist camps, personal and infrastructure need to be identified and destroyed. The struggle is not only with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Another strategic objective is to deny terrorists operating bases. For too long the United States and its European allies (who often have been the victims of terror) have been less than forceful in dealing with state sponsorship of terrorism. An example of irresoluteness: when the European Union conducted what it described as a “constructive dialogue” with Iran over its geopolitical interests and activities. As a consequence, many European business firms won lucrative contracts to develop Iranian energy resources but failed utterly to alter Iran’s support of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon that harasses the Israeli border. Other states, including Iran, lend support to Hamas and Islamic

Jihad which regularly conduct suicide bombing campaigns in Israel that target innocent civilians.

The third element in the counter terror strategy urges the recreation of an international consensus against terrorism that had collapsed during the 1990s. If done competently, terror can be delegitimized –its heroic mystique deflated once and for all. The process of delegitimizing terror is long-term and complex: it entails several interrelated activities that include information-sharing in order to develop realistic, common strategies that can assist states in tracking terrorist funds and uncovering “front” organizations that protect them. Another vulnerability to terrorism concerns the very structure of modern, highly developed nation states that offer tempting targets to those prepared to do mass murder and generate fears associated with destructive attacks.

The Spill of the Infrastructure: Psychological Ramifications

The very core of modern industrial, highly developed societies include complex, interrelated infrastructures that invite terrorist attacks. Advanced societies like the United States bristle with exposed, impossible to protect, highly vulnerable techno structures of electronic towers, power stations, transport matrices, industries that are capital intensive and brittle in the extreme; power lines, gas, oil, chemical facilities and ports, relatively open and unprotectable bridges; interstate roads and tunnels, gas and electric lines, rail transit systems and communications networks that are huge and also fragile to attacks by resolute, willing to die terrorists.

The September 11th attack showed that modern, high-tech societies can be grievously hurt by relatively simple terrorist acts. But, arguably, even while the September 11 attacks may have caused considerably less direct disruption to the U.S. financial system than believed despite the unprecedented closing of the Wall Street Stock Market for several days; the financial system survived because it had financial network redundancy and good backup systems. Nonetheless, the

attacks did have an unsettling effect on our psychological/social networks—the mass public links stitched and coupled together through talk radio, 24 hour TV cable news, Internet connections, and the major TV and Radio web sites. Through these audiences of listeners, readers and viewers flowed the panoply of feelings associated with the violent events and their brutal aftermath. The terrorists succeeded in fostering widespread fear and in producing the huge psychological effect they were seeking: scenarios of public hysteria on a large scale coupled with the fear of more destruction from supposed or anticipated terrorist targets that would include destroying electrical grids, causing train derailments, aircraft accidents, and attacks that would strike at the health of the nation by poisoning its food and water supplies.¹⁷

In the judgment of many observers who examined the causes and expressions of collective fear, the September 11 attacks had their biggest impact on the nation's collective psychology and subjective feelings about safety and security.¹⁸ By using methods that are unimaginably cruel, the terrorist perpetrators maximized their impact, and this in turn helped to foster an impression that anything is possible which would further magnify fear and uncertainty. Looking at the attack in this way, the World Trade Center was an ideal target because the buildings were a symbol of American capitalism. When they collapsed completely and rather quickly, it suggested that the thing they symbolize, American capitalism, was likewise weak and fragile. How could anything so powerful and so much a part of the American identity vanish so quickly? Who could erase the economic hegemony of the American way of life so deftly and thoroughly and with such an indifference and callousness towards the lives of their victims?

Such an emotional response has had palpable economic consequences. Frightened, grieving people are not ebullient consumers. Insecure, scared individuals act prudently, cautiously and hesitate before spending. Consequently, consumer demand declined, corporate investment fell, and economic growth in general slowed down. With the multiplier effect of a technology-induced ampli-

fied emotional response the al-Qaeda terrorists of September 11th may have achieved an economic impact far greater than they ever dreamed possible. The total cost of decreased equity value and lost economic growth could exceed a trillion dollars.¹⁹

Conclusions and Summary

What lessons might we, and terrorists, learn about our weakest links and strongest points? First, our complex networks upon which the functioning of our modern society depends have critical vulnerable weak points. For instance, our energy system includes networks embedded in separate organizational entities operating interconnected grids that produce and distribute information, water, food, heat, light, transit in auto, rail, air and maritime transport of people and things and services (education, healthcare, etc). This vast, complex energy system which comprises everything from a national network of gas pipelines to the national electrical grids & satellite communications systems is replete with nodes like oil refineries, electrical transformer substations and satellite positioning facilities. At times of peak energy demand, the interlocked networks are tightly coupled together. The loss of one link in the chain of dependent assets means that other components must compensate for failure. If, however, other links are operating near capacity—as in the case of power supply companies servicing metropolitan areas in times of heat waves or cold snaps—then even a slight additional load on an overtaxed operational grid can cause the entire system to fail in a domino-type effect where each subsystem displaces its overloads to others not equipped to handle it the incrementally enlarging loads and demands. Breakdowns in the energy transmission lines in the United States have often affected millions of people in many states. Other networks (communications) are equally susceptible to threat, yet no one can possibly imagine in advance the numerous opportunities for terrorism provided by our technologically sophisticated systems. Because they are so complex, they are replete with vulnerabilities that are often difficult to

anticipate. Some terrorists capable of exploiting connections between and among the components of complex systems—for instance, between passenger airlines and soaring skyscrapers—that few people have anticipated, will be able to strike against us and harm us as happened on 9/11. And terrorists are likely to be politically effective if their goal is not so much a specific target (like the USS Cole in Yemen or Air Force barracks in Saudi Arabia) but simply the overall generation of panic, (Tokyo subway system) widespread fear (US embassies in Nairobi & Dar es-Salaam; World Trade Center 1993) and economic disruption (WTC, 9/11/01). More general objectives afford terrorists the luxury of more latitude in their choice of targets.

Secondly, what can be done to reduce risks beyond conventional counterterrorism strategies that are somewhat outmoded but are, nonetheless already being implemented by the United States and other countries? We cannot stop technological growth and development, nor can we nullify terrorist capacity for violence that is technology-based. However, efforts to de-centralize and loosen the couplings of our techno-structures and efforts to disperse high-value assets so that they are less concentrated and less inviting as targets, might work. Also in the energy sector, as President Bush announced in his 2003 State of the Union Message, more intensive research will be funded towards the development of alternatives to non-renewable fossil fuels. Small-scale solar power, hydrogen sources of fuel, in decentralized structures may make us more independent and less enslaved and handcuffed to our fossil fuel grids and bladders. Similarly, in food production what is to be avoided are the cascading pernicious effects of a breakdown in a coupled system of vital nutrition production. “Circuit breakers” in the sense of quick interruptions and blockings of processes are needed to forestall and prevent panic that can get out of control. A good example of a systemic “circuit breaker” is the New York Stock Exchange. Trading automatically halts if the market plunges more than a certain percentage in a particular period of time in key NASDAQ, Standard & Poors and Dow Averages. The success accom-

plished break points utilizing these prudent approaches in the control of panic and subsequent irrational behavior, may make it worth considering the effects of unconscionable and irresponsible news reporting that may actually precipitate a panic rather than report objectively and informatively about such events that could calm people and prevent panic behavior.

By bringing into the analyses of terrorism the dense web of relationships that constitute the core techno structures of modern societies, we can create and evaluate a “terrorism susceptibility” index and apply it across a spectrum of states. A highly globalized society is more apt to be borderless with flows of products, people and ideas coursing through its integrated economic, political and technical structures. Creating an index of globalization is one step in an effort to mitigate the negative shocks of 9/11. The indicators measuring a state’s “globalization ranking” would span a nation’s technology, finance and trade data; its political engagements in terms of its memberships in international organizations and trade associates; its economic integration in terms of foreign direct investment and portfolio capital flows, national income data, tax policy and incentives for market growth. By developing plans that help us understand what the terrorists may be likely to know about a nation-state and its socio-cultural, politico-economic structures, we can reduce and weaken their leverage to do violence and at the same time enhance our capacity to defend ourselves.

We should end on a dialectical truth: a great Russian writer observed that “...just as there are two geometries, Euclid’s and Lobachevsky’s, there may be two histories of literature, written in different keys; one that speaks only of acquisitions, another only of losses, and both would be speaking of one and the same thing.”²⁰ No doubt there are several versions of “World War IV” (the current Terror War)-following the Cold War (World War III, by our reckoning). Interpreting the world, constructing social reality out of its constituent elements does not always require altering or embellishing reality, inventing facts and incidents. It is not difficult to appreciate the desire of some angry, raging orthodox,

traditional believers who think that absorption into the Western secular, materialist culture is so threatening that it must be resisted. But we cannot let this happen through murderous Jihadist radicalism-however plausible this tactic seems in their world view.

The terrorists facing us live in the shadows, live willingly with death. Their discipline, cunning, extremism excites passions. With societies like Afghanistan, Palestine, Pakistan and Egypt in their austere poverty and religious authoritarianism there is a frenetic coherence; in modern, developed Western societies of blur and glut, terror can appear as one of the few meaningful acts. In the West, there's too much of everything, more than we can ever use. Who do we take seriously? The lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Only the terrorist stands out-oblivious to the consuming materialist passions of Western culture. It's confusing when they kill the innocent, but this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West appears to understand, as they see it.²¹

The terror struggle is deep; a profound philosophical war to alter the inner life of two different, oppositional cultures. The struggle is no longer abstract, however it began; now bomb-makers, gunmen and soldiers have taken command and the terror war is filled with an onslaught of ugly obscene images of death and cataclysmic events that do not reaffirm values nor provide cultural redemption.

We believe clarity can best be achieved about the issues of terrorism when, as Mailer suggests; analyses are not clotted by half-facts or overwhelmed by abstract possibilities, or smothered in a tide of speculation that will only widen the social chasms as time passes. Indeed, we need to know more about our potential adversaries through knowledge. More knowledge may mean fewer violent conflicts.

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Eugene Smith, Rufus Schatzberg and Robert J. Kelly (2003) "9/11-A Rearguard Action or a Portent of the Future?" *Eurocriminology* Vol. 16.
9. Modernization is an accomplished fact in the West but remains in other parts of the world a frustrated aspiration. Among the consequences of this has been the arrival in the cities of Europe and North America hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America who have had to flee the chaos, violence, and transformations of their half-modern societies (see "9/11-A Rearguard Action or Portent of the Future" *EuroCriminology* Vol. 16 [2003]) In the midst of their re-making of themselves out of bewildering diverse cultural & psychological artifacts various conceptual categories have been appropriated to encapsulate their experiences: multicultural, diasporic, Islamic, Latino, Asian, Indian-and not least, terrorist which encourages rabid political passions. To be a terrorist one must begin with a certain kind of sensibility. The sensibility itself is created, or given direction, by an intellectual atmosphere. The Islamists cultist atmosphere provides a refined, ritualized milieu for the cultivation of terrorist ideology.

The interesting features of the Wahabi Islamic orientation that lays at the heart of the al-Qaeda movement only commits itself to an exploration of the World in terms of the alienating different ness of what lays outside.

10. In connection with the Islamic world, the term "Fundamentalism" was not widely used until the 1980s. After the Iranian Revolution, the media worked through to this concept. However, "the revival of Islam" was somewhat of a puzzle: it seemed that it had so little, to offer its adherents in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, so what did it now in the 20th and 21st centuries have to hold out to an infinitely better educated world? Ironically, the fact of more educated informed Muslims population probably contributed to feelings of exploration by the West.

Why is Islamic fundamentalism held up in opposition to Western values? In Iran under the rule of the Shiite Ayatollahs the faith is the complete way; it fills and covers everything leaving no spare corner of the mind, or will or soul, to the other world-the non-Muslim world where it is necessary to be an individual and responsible so that people develop vocations and can be stirred by ambition and achievement.

What adds fuel to the fire is the articles of faith within the belief system of Islam: that everything before the faith was wrong, misguided, heretical; there was no room in the heart or mind of these believers for their pre-Mohammedan past. See also Paul B. Davis (2001) "The Terrorist Mentality." *Cerebrum: The Dana Forum or Brain Science* (Summer). The essay explores the terrorist psyche and concludes that much contemporary terrorism seems to be predicated on excessive resentment and extreme self-righteousness.

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