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"Iconic Soft Targets"? Public Housing Estates, Terrorism and Social Resilience

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Since the September 11 2001 Al Qaeda attacks in New York and Washington, governments around the world have responded to the threat of catastrophic terrorism by tightening security around targets with so-called "iconic" or "symbolic" value. For example, airports, military installations, embassies and government buildings are now extremely difficult to strike due to the extensive security measures that have been put in place.

Terrorists have responded to these measures by opting for softer targets. The 7 July 2005 bombings in London, the two Bali bombings in October 2002 and October 2005 as well as the March 2004 Madrid train attacks are all examples of this shift.

The trend towards soft targets has a strategic logic from the perspective of terrorist networks. The success of a terrorist attack is inversely related to the amount of security a target has in place: the lower the security, the higher the risk of being a target. In addition, soft targets such as train stations and shopping malls offer terrorists high casualty rates for maximum publicity. Most major train stations experience through traffic in the thousands in a single day. At the same time, striking at major retail complexes is designed to cause massive disruption to the lives of city dwellers while also damaging consumer confidence. Not long ago, the British security services had to thwart a planned strike on the large and popular Bluewater Mall east of London – one of several other "soft targets" identified by a terrorist cell.

Security planners know there is a wide range of "soft targets". Risk assessment techniques tell us that there is no way a government can protect every soft target. To protect every building in Singapore for instance would be to protect every building in Singapore poorly. Resources, however supplemented by technological wizardry cannot confer upon the national security apparatus omniscience. Nevertheless, the worldwide terrorist shift toward striking at soft targets does have important implications for Singapore. If one were to rethink the whole idea of "iconic" targets, then the public housing estate, with its densely integrated latticework of residential, educational, transportation, leisure and retail elements, can be seen as an "iconic soft target" as well.

The Public Housing Heartland is Also "Iconic"

With approximately 83-86% of the total Singaporean population living in public estates, these may well be viewed by terrorists as the soft underbelly of Singapore.

Public housing estates would be seductive targets for terrorists for three reasons. First, security in these sprawling multi-faceted urban conurbations can never be as tight as that provided for relatively more defensible stand-alone iconic structures such as the Esplanade, Jurong Island, Parliament and Changi Airport.

Second, daily human traffic in these estates is huge with transportation arteries such as roads and the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system running through them. Potential terrorists may realize that setting off a car bomb in the public housing heartland would not just kill people but profoundly disrupt the daily routine of Singaporeans. This development would have adverse knock-on effects on business and other economic activity.

Finally, and most importantly, public housing estates represent the very social fabric of Singapore. These estates, with their clustered together high-rise neighborhoods, satellite shopping malls, community libraries, numerous schools, hawker centers and coffee shops embody the very heart and soul of multiracial Singapore. If Jurong Island is iconic for economic reasons, the public housing heartland is equally if not more iconic in a more visceral sense.

"Inoculating" the Heartland

It is clear that much is being done to "harden the heartland". Recognizing that the security services cannot possibly guard every aspect of the estates, the government has poured resources into encouraging the heartland to be more actively involved in community security by being the extra eyes and ears of the police and security agencies. In addition, government-led initiatives such as the constituency-level Emergency Preparedness Groups seek to coordinate the efforts of grassroots volunteers to augment law enforcement and emergency services in the event of a terrorist attack. On top of that, through such measures the government also appears to be striving to psychologically condition the public to accept that a terror attack is possible, thereby indirectly "inoculating" them somewhat against the sheer shock of an actual strike – after all, the "known unknown" is far less frightening than the "unknown unknown".

During the July 2005 London Underground bombings, the first people who responded were not emergency personnel but rather fellow commuters caught up in the same events. The response of the general British public, fortified by the collective memory of having survived the Blitz and the bombs of the IRA, was commendably calm, enabling London to get back to its feet by the next day. Through regular dialogues, exhibitions, and exercises aimed at disseminating easily-understood protocols for responding to terrorist strikes at the myriad strands – transportation, residential, educational, retail and leisure - of the public housing web, Singaporeans could over time, like the Londoners, become mentally and emotionally inoculated against the sudden trauma of an actual bomb going off in the midst of the heartland environs. This would in turn minimize overall disruption to the daily routine of life and business and permit normalcy to return as quickly as possible.

Psychological Inoculation is NOT Social Resilience

Psychological inoculation to terror shocks, while necessary, is not enough to ensure security in our estates. Responding well to a terror strike may not prevent Singaporeans from lashing out at one another in acts of reprisal. Going back to the London example, after the 7/7 attacks, hate crimes against non-whites including Muslims shot up several-fold, despite the best

efforts by the British government and religious community leaders to keep things in check. Psychological inoculation to terror shocks is simply not the same as social resilience, especially in a multiracial society.

Social resilience in the Singapore context must refer to the ability of the nation to not just continue functioning, but crucially, maintain cohesion after the experience of a severe trauma such as a major terrorist attack. The government's attempt to conceive and implement a nationwide Community Engagement Programme (CEP) goes some way in building social resilience.

The Programme has not been fully revealed to the public but it is clear that the CEP needs to create opportunities for regular and substantive interactions between Singaporeans of all faiths and creeds. This is to enable Singaporeans, through interaction, to see one another as fellow human beings and not as distant two-dimensional stereotypes – to see the commonality they share rather than their differences.

In order to do so, it is important for the CEP to reach out to as many groups as possible within Singaporean civil society. To be successful in the long-term, participation solely by those who normally come forward or by those whose voices are already heard in the public sphere will be inadequate. There is a need here for all views to be heard seriously for true commonality and community to develop. Admittedly, Singaporeans in general are uncomfortable with the cacophony of differing views but in this instance, if true resilience is to be arrived at, all the small voices within Singaporean society have to heard for a resounding chorus to develop.

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