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LESSONS FROM BOSTON BOMBINGS: Need for Strategic Creativity in Counter-Terrorism

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Synopsis

The recent attacks in Boston offer operational and strategic lessons. Operationally, there is need for better national and international information sharing and understanding of early warning indicators of radicalization. Strategically, the focus of policy responses should be on stronger families, effective self-monitoring of diasporic communities from conflict zones, and the rise of Al Qaedaism.

Commentary

As the dust settles following the twin bombings of the iconic Boston Marathon two weeks ago in which three people were killed and more than 200 severely injured, it may be apposite to take stock of two operational and three strategic lessons from a homeland security perspective.

Two Operational Lessons

A first operational lesson is that anti-terrorist "hardening" measures, while important, are not enough. In the United States, following 9/11, hardening measures included the setting up of the Department of Homeland Security, tough anti-terrorism legislation such as the Patriot Act, and heavy investment in technical solutions such as CCTV (closed-circuit television) networks in major cities equipped with facial recognition technology. In the end, information sharing between security agencies nationally and internationally was the weak link.

In the Boston case the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) contacted the FBI twice in 2011 to convey concerns about the slain bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev, but was informed that the US counterpart had no information about Tamerlan's links with foreign extremist groups. It turns out that FSB communications with the CIA also elicited minimal response. US agencies apparently held that Chechen terrorism was directed at Moscow rather than Washington.

Had there had been closer scrutiny by the US agencies on Tamerlan and his younger brother Dzhokhar, routine surveillance may potentially have detected weak signals of impending militancy. Hardening measures are thus not enough. These need to be complemented with strong, reliable – and responsive - information sharing between agencies within and across borders.

To be fair to the US agencies, however, their relative lack of responsiveness to the FSB's concerns is understandable. After all, a second operational lesson of the Boston incident is that greater awareness of the

behavioral indicators of radicalization turning into violent extremism is sorely needed. Research in this area is currently rather sparse, relative to work on terrorist de-radicalization for instance. Part of the reason may well be concern over over-reaction: just because an individual consumes extremist materials does not mean he is radicalising. However, the context of such intellectual consumption is important: in this sense the case of Tamerlan is nothing really new at all.

Tamerlan was a driven 26-year old who in fact became a regional boxing champion in the US. He, like many violent Islamists before him, was not religious at all, but was gripped with profound alienation from his new US homeland even a decade after arriving from Russia. He admitted that he had not a single American friend because he did not understand them. Against this backdrop Tamerlan apparently had his religious-ideological beliefs constructed by a mysterious Armenian convert to Islam called Misha, with whom he spent hours discussing religion and global affairs. It was Misha who evidently introduced Tamerlan to extremist websites that painted the Americans as the enemies of Chechens and Muslims everywhere, and deserved to be targeted as well.

Tamerlan's behavioral changes arising from his relationship with Misha, and not just his known six-month visit in 2011 to his hometown mosque in violence-afflicted Dagestan was striking and should have been better flagged. He gave up boxing as a haram sport; became not only more obviously religious, but even judgmental toward others around him that he felt to be not religious enough; and overtly critical of US foreign policy: all by now classic behavioral symptoms of the gradual transition to violent extremism.

Three Strategic Lessons

First, the case of 19-year old Dzhokhar's very close relationship with his older sibling Tamerlan is instructive, in the context of his parents' split and geographical separation from his father. We now know that many terrorists come from families which are too large, or broken, or in which the father figure is absent, or if present emotionally distant. Hence younger siblings, for all their apparent intellectual prowess – Dzhokhar is an accomplished student and seemingly relatively less socially alienated than his brother – nonetheless grow up emotionally dependent on available older siblings who are willy-nilly transformed into surrogate role models.

Likewise the late Bali bomber Amrozi Nurhasyim, who came from a very large East Javanese family, was ill adjusted emotionally and dependent for guidance on his revered elder brother Mukhlas. Strong economically stable families with emotionally available fathers are hence an important goal of not just social policy, but arguably national security policy as well.

A second lesson is the background factor of diasporic conflict countercultures. That the Tsarnaev brothers were ethnic Chechens is a point of great significance. Chechnya has been involved in a brutal insurgency with the Russian government for more than two decades, and the brothers would have grown up in a relatively radicalized counterculture in which out-group prejudices and distrust would have been deeply ingrained. Such countercultural baggage is not necessarily left behind when these communities relocate overseas.

Thus Tamerlan especially and to a lesser extent Dhokhar carried around in their psyches the very ingredients readily available for construction of a violent extremist mindset. The fact that the brothers learned how to make their pressure cooker explosives from the Al Qaeda online English magazine Inspire, together with Dzhokhar's admission that the American interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan had been motivations for their actions, plus the choice of civilian bystanders as targets, is hugely significant. It suggests that they were in fact Global Jihadists moulded more by the Al Qaeda worldview in which there are no innocent Western civilians than any residual ethnic Chechen narrative.

Policy-wise what is needed is not a witch-hunt on all diasporic communities from global conflict zones. Rather such communities themselves should perhaps set up effective self-monitoring mechanisms to detect early warning signals of impending militancy - especially amongst young males from destabilised homes.

Finally, the Boston bombings affirm what Thomas Friedman called the democratisation of finance, technology and information facilitated by the Internet. Literally anyone can go online and download bomb-making instructions with readily available materials, as the Tsarnaev brothers did. Technological trends such as increased Internet access via cheap smartphones, are converging with global ideological shifts toward emphasis on grassroots-driven small-cell or lone-wolf terrorism.

The days of the Al Qaeda organisation are now in the past. Al Qaedaism – in which the enemy is now a highly contagious and rapidly self-propagating viral meme jumping from one vulnerable mind to another – is the new enemy. Now more than ever, strategic creativity in counter-terrorism is needed.

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