

Mass-casualty drill at  
Camp Bondsteel,  
Kosovo.



55th Signal Company (Thomas Bray)

# Detering Mass-Casualty Terrorism

By WYN Q. BOWEN

**W**estern governments have become preoccupied with preventing mass-casualty terrorism. The American-led campaign against al Qaeda has shown that the preventive strategies most likely to succeed must focus on disrupting and destroying suspect groups and their

capabilities. Indeed the emphasis of the Bush administration on preemption as a central pillar of emerging U.S. strategic doctrine indicates that this approach is the best way to deal with chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or enhanced high explosive (CBRNE) weapons. While active disruption and destruction constitute the most realistic options at hand, does this mean that deterrence has nothing to offer as an element of a broader, comprehensive strategy for preventing mass-casualty terrorism?

**Wyn Q. Bowen is senior lecturer at the Joint Services Command and Staff College at Shrivenham and co-editor of *Defence Studies*.**

Simulated attack,  
Foggy Shores 02-06.



30<sup>th</sup> Communications Squadron (Jennifer C. Wallis)

## An Established Strategy

The object of deterrence is preventing real or potential enemies from initiating hostile acts. It differs from but is related to the concept of compellence—more often known as coercion—where the goal is getting an enemy to do something—to alter its behavior and an existing state of affairs. For example, air strikes by the United States against Libya in 1986 were intended in part to compel Colonel Qaddafi to stop sponsoring terrorist activity against American targets in Europe. The aim was changing Libyan policy, under which the regime sponsored terrorism, not preserving it.

A deterrent strategy can rely on one or both of two mechanisms. First, it can be based on threats to visit punishment on an enemy that significantly outweighs the gain of a particular course of action. This approach is traditionally viewed as targeting civilian assets and constituted the basis of the Cold War concept of mutual assured destruction.

Another approach is based on the concept of denial. Specific capabilities deter enemies from pursuing either a given objective or a conflict strategy.

This is achieved by undermining their ability, or belief in their ability, to realize a desired outcome.

Deterrent strategies can include both punishment and denial mechanisms. For example, the United States appears to favor such an approach to deter unconventional weapons usage by a regime by combining denial capabilities like missile defenses with the threat of punishment. Both mechanisms may support a comprehensive strategy to prevent mass-casualty terrorism.

A credible deterrent posture requires the capability to deliver on the deterrent message, or at least the appearance of it. The deterrer must demonstrate the intent and resolve to fulfil the message and effectively communicate this to an enemy, including which lines not to cross.

Deterrence also assumes that a target will be a cost-benefit calculator—a rational actor who evaluates options in terms of costs and benefits, including likely responses. But what is accepted as rational by one actor may not appear rational to another because of cultural factors or decisionmaking processes. This is a major consideration in the war on terrorism because of the asymmetric nature of the opposing sides in almost every respect. A preventive strategy in this context—deterrent

or other—requires knowing enemy motives, worldview, resolve, capabilities (including conflict strategies and techniques), and vulnerabilities.

Measuring the failure of deterrence is straightforward because the action that the deterring party seeks to avoid occurs. However, measuring success is more difficult, as it cannot be proven that the strategy was pivotal, marginal, or irrelevant to why an enemy opted not to act. This can be significant when attempting to prevent mass-casualty terrorism.

What role might deterrence play in preventing catastrophic terrorist attacks? How might such a strategy fit into broader counterterrorist policies? Should the aim be preventing actions that could create mass casualties or specific types of attack? Should the objective be preventing conflict escalation over a determined threshold (something that is hard to define) or buying time in order for preventive approaches to take effect?

## Non-State Actors

Since deterrence is about preventing an enemy from acting in a particular way, success will depend on a target believing, or being made to believe, that the current state of affairs is preferable to the cost associated with a particular course of action, at least in the short term, if the purpose is buying time for other approaches. It follows that if an enemy is determined to act, deterrence could prove unworkable.

At first glance, this infeasibility appears to be the case in mass-casualty terrorism since the motives of nonstate actors to perpetrate such attacks are likely to be extreme and their level of resolve so high that deterrence is inapplicable. Indeed, groups that contemplate such activity have radical views derived from religious (al Qaeda) or apocalyptic beliefs (Aum Shinrikyo). Moreover, fanaticism is expressed in unrealizable goals, operates outside of commonly accepted political and moral norms, and remains impervious to negotiation and inducement.

For example, Osama bin Laden and members of al Qaeda claim to be





Readiness exercise,  
August 11, 2001.

Offutt Air Force Base (Jake Bailey)

acting in the name of Islam in pursuing objectives such as eliminating Israel and destroying America. Moreover, it is clear that many members of the al Qaeda network think in suicidal terms and are willing to endure significant costs and destruction in pursuit of their objectives.

In the mid-1990s, the Aum Shin-rikyo sect in Japan sought to cause death, destruction, and chaos on such

### **traditional organizations exercise self-restraint and avoid undermining sympathy for their cause**

a large scale—through the use of chemical and biological weapons—that the resultant disorder and instability would cause the collapse of the political and social order.

It is vital to distinguish such radical terror groups from more traditional organizations such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Basque Fatherland and Liberty (commonly known as ETA) that tend to attack people or places associated with relatively limited political goals. They exercise self-restraint and avoid undermining sympathy for their cause. In contrast to al Qaeda, they are open to negotiation

and susceptible to inducements. As a result they will self deter when it comes to mass-casualty terrorism.

The real challenge in determining whether nonstate actors like al Qaeda are susceptible to deterrence logic involves penetrating their black boxes. This means understanding the frame of reference of actors, how it is evoked, options considered in decisionmaking, and the lens through

which they will perceive deterrent messages.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, there must be emphasis on evaluating how specific groups or individuals calculate costs and benefits: Are they risk prone or risk averse? Do they think in terms of minimizing losses or maximizing gains? To what extent are they motivated by survival, security, recognition, wealth, power, or success? It will also be critical to assess the processes through which suspect organizations make decisions and avoid perceiving the capabilities and intentions of such actors as being like one's own. Addressing such questions will require concerted and targeted intelligence collection and analysis.

## **Inflicting Punishment**

With regard to deterrence mechanisms, could punishment strategies deter in this context if directed against the leadership and members of terrorist groups? The key question is whether there are suitable high-value targets that could be threatened to make radicals such as bin Laden and his accomplices weigh the relative merits of various courses of action. Some argue that it is possible to threaten such targets, including family and supporters, and cause even the most radical leaders to engage in cost-benefit analysis.<sup>2</sup> The question also arises over symbols of importance to specific terrorists that could be threatened as part of a deterrent strategy. For example, what would be the equivalent of the World Trade Center to bin Laden?

Such approaches are difficult to legitimize if pursued overtly by democratically elected governments because of political, legal, and ethical constraints. Even if threats were made covertly a target would probably doubt their credibility on the assumption that the deterrer is operating under such pressures. Moreover, it is important to assess the impact of such threats against the wider goal of reducing the danger posed by nonstate actors. It could be argued that such threats would increase and not reduce the terrorist danger by alienating the deterring party even further from the existing and potential target support base.

## **Denial**

The heart of a denial-based approach involves demonstrating that the capability exists to ward off—or to minimize damage in the event of—an attack, thus mitigating the desired effects of the terrorists. While some requisite denial capabilities are applicable to all potential modes of attack, some are mode-specific.

Generic capabilities include using intelligence, diplomatic, military, and law enforcement means to locate and interdict nonstate actors before they act. For example, developing, bolstering, and refining the core elements of counterterrorist strategies could have a generic deterrent effect.

## Terms of Art

**Mass Casualty.** Any large number of casualties produced in a relatively short period of time, usually as the result of a single incident such as a military aircraft accident, hurricane, flood, earthquake, or armed attack that exceeds local logistic support capabilities.

**Terrorism.** The calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.

**Weapons of Mass Destruction.** Weapons that are capable of a high order of destruction and/or of being used in such a manner as to destroy large numbers of people. Weapons of mass destruction can be high explosives or nuclear, biological, chemical, and radiological weapons, but exclude the means of transporting or propelling the weapon where such means is a separable and divisible part of the weapon. **JFQ**

Source: Joint Pub 1-02, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (April 12, 2002).

The main challenge is denial capabilities designed for specific modes of attack. In the realm of chemical, biological, and radiological threats, careful preparations for consequence management can have a dissuasive or preventive effect. Relevant capabilities include the demonstrated readiness of first responders to deal with chemical, biological, and radiological incidents. In part, this would entail knowledge of specific biological and chemical agents

### a potential negative side effect of denial is the risk of it becoming a double-edged sword

and possession of vaccines and other medical countermeasures.

In addition, deterrence can be achieved by demonstrating a strong capability for preventing or hindering the spread of materials and knowledge nonstate actors need to develop and produce chemical, biological, and radiological weapons. Relevant capabilities include export controls and detecting and interdicting suspect shipments. The aim is convincing an enemy that acquiring such weapons is not worth the time, resources, and effort required.

Moreover, there may exist some scope for deterring nonstate actors by

developing forensic (biological and nuclear) attribution capabilities to underscore the threat of retribution. According to Jay Davis, if an enemy knows an event can be traced to the perpetrator, it can create “strong inhibitions in those that are not personally suicidal.”<sup>3</sup>

A potential negative side effect of denial is the risk of it becoming a double-edged sword. Specifically, there is the danger that denying or deterring one line of attack will push an opponent to strike against less protected areas, possibly using different means—the balloon effect.<sup>4</sup> Other modes of attack could be less predictable and more dangerous. Was September 11 an example of this?

If the aim is buying time to frustrate an enemy who is strongly committed to alter the status quo, the consequences of succeeding may not always be foreseeable and positive. Indeed, short-term success could make a target more desperate. This is not to claim that developing a specific denial posture should be avoided. But it is essential to consider its negative effects.

### Deterrence and Coercion

Beyond the terrorists themselves there is an added type of target for deterrence: regimes that provide refuge for them to operate. Here deterrence involves threats to punish regimes if

they are found to be aiding groups by sponsoring, harboring, or merely tolerating them.

The campaign against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was informative because it had a powerful deterrent effect, signalling that the United States has the intent, resolve, and ability to punish and depose regimes that may contemplate supporting terrorist networks. Prior to the events of September 11, it could be argued that the United States had not amply demonstrated that. Although al Qaeda posed a threat to U.S. security interests in Africa and the Middle East, it was not deemed sufficient to justify all-out military, economic, and diplomatic measures to destroy terrorist groups. The high profile but low-grade response of the Clinton administration to the bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa is evidence. However, attacks in New York and Washington radically altered the strategic calculus because they struck political and economic power centers of the United States. The campaign to unseat the Taliban has made deterrence more credible in the context of dissuading regimes from supporting terror groups.

As noted, there is a subtle distinction between the concepts of deterrence and coercion that can prompt confusion in application. Strictly speaking, threats or actions designed to stop a regime from supporting terrorists will be coercive because the aim is altering the status quo. The effort to coerce the Taliban into complying with American demands—namely, handing over al Qaeda members—failed, and the U.S.-dominated coalition had to use force to impose a regime change in Kabul.

In sum, deterrence is about keeping things as they are and is only relevant to regimes not implicated in supporting terrorism but which might contemplate becoming involved. Thus, in the context of preventing mass-casualty terrorism, coercion and deterrence should be treated as related but different concepts.

Deterrence by denial is applicable when a target is a terrorist organization or network. However, because of extreme motives and resolve on the part

The Pentagon,  
September 11.



U.S. Navy (Mark D. Faram)

Finally, because of the fanatical motives and resolve displayed by non-state actors such as al Qaeda, many observers will simply dismiss deterrence as a preventive option out of hand. However, the activities associated with alternative approaches should contribute to a deterrent effect. Examples include preparing for consequence management, developing intelligence and military capabilities to disrupt and destroy terrorist networks, and demonstrating the resolve of ongoing military operations against al Qaeda. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Simon, quoted in Richard Lebow and Janice Stein, "Rational Deterrence Theory: I Think, Therefore I Deter," *World Politics*, vol. 41, no. 2 (January 1989), p. 214.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald M. Steinberg, *Rediscovering Deterrence After September 11, 2001*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, December 2001, <http://www.jcpa.org/jl/vp467.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Davis, *The Grand Challenges of Counter-Terrorism*, Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2001, <http://cgsr.llnl.gov/future2001/davis.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See Anthony H. Cordesman, *Asymmetric Warfare Versus Counter-Terrorism: Rethinking CBRN and CIP Defense and Response* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2001), p. 14.

**The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Joint Services Command and Staff College, the Ministry of Defence, or any other government agency.**

of entities that have perpetrated or are likely to contemplate mass-casualty terrorism, this approach is a delaying option to buy time for other preventive approaches at best. A drawback is that deterring an attack in one area can force a nonstate enemy to change focus and strike at less protected areas with unpredictable and more heinous modes of attack.

When a target is a regime contemplating whether to support terrorists, deterrence by threat of punishment is most relevant. Allied action in the global war on terror should bolster both deterrence and coercion in the long term since it has indicated that the United States and its allies will act with determination against the perpetrators and would-be perpetrators of any mass-casualty attack.

Third, accurate and timely collection and analysis of intelligence is pivotal to countering the threat of CBRNE terrorism. The focus must be on the individuals, groups, networks, and states of greatest concern. Human intelligence will be key to understanding real and potential enemy motivation, resolve, culture, modus operandi, decisionmaking, resources, capabilities, locations, and conflict techniques. Such intelligence will be required for any preventive option. It will produce knowledge of how best to disrupt and destroy suspect groups and capabilities. In addition, it will also help in evaluating the susceptibility of such organizations—their leaders and other members—to deterrence logic.