

# UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM



BY  
Harry Jackson

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL COMPLETION OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF  
The Certificate-of-Training in United Nations Peace Support Operations



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Understanding Terrorism

A Thesis

By

Lieutenant Harry R. Jackson

United States Navy

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Terrorism has evolved from its historic origins from the French Revolution into a form of specialized crime today. What separates terrorism from ordinary crime is that crime stems mostly from need, greed, or passion. In addition, conventional criminals do not seek to terrorize the masses in order to blackmail governments. Terrorism, however is neither compelled by passion or need, it is sometimes defended for political reasons, and is sometimes supported by governments. Its motivations and underpinnings are egotism, intolerance, lack of dialogue and inhumanity, greed, and unaccountability.<sup>1</sup>

## **COMPONENTS OF TERRORISM**

There are five crucial components of terrorism, an involvement of an act of violence, an audience, the creation of a mood of fear, innocent victims, and political goals or motives.<sup>2</sup> The threat of violence in which the capacity and the willingness to commit violence is common to terrorism, where attacks on the undefended are not an unsought side effect, but a premeditated stratagem. Terrorists plan and execute the murder and or maiming of unrelated innocent persons in a calculated and needless fashion. Terrorist groups generally seek maximum publicity from their actions; no terrorist group or organization commits acts randomly or senselessly. They seek to frighten, and through fear, dominate and control. They want to impress; they play to and for an audience and

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<sup>1</sup> Medhurst, Paul. Global Terrorism. United Nations Institute for Training and Research Programme of Correspondence Instruction. New York, NY (c) 2000. p 1.

<sup>2</sup> Combs, C. Cindy Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Prentice Hall Inc. (c)2000 p. 6.

solicit their participation.<sup>3</sup> The goal of many terrorist organizations is to attract attention and international sympathy for their cause.

### COMMONALITIES

Terrorists attempt to avoid being labeled as terrorists by choosing names for themselves that avoids the image of terrorism in any of its forms or purposefully choose names that are neutral. Terrorists strive for legitimacy for psychological rather than tactical reasons. They endeavor to legitimate their activities in their own eyes, as it is to convince the public of their worthiness.<sup>4</sup> They actively seek to portray images of freedom and liberation, armies or other military organizational structures, self-defense movements, and righteous vengeance.<sup>5</sup> Terrorists often see themselves as reluctant freedom fighters, driven by desperation due to a lack of any other viable alternative, forced to take up arms to protect themselves and their constituents. This characteristic of self-delusion is a trait that distinguishes terrorists from political extremists as well as criminals.

Additional commonalties among terrorists is that they often go to great lengths to evade or obscure any inference or connection to terrorism, let alone acknowledge that they terrorists. They will always argue that society, government, or the socio-economic system and its laws are the real terrorists and that if it were not for the oppression caused by the reasons above, they would not have to resort to terrorism. Though they

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<sup>3</sup> Hoffman, Bruce Inside Terrorism. Columbia University Press. New York © 1998. p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> Wardlaw, Grant. Political Terrorism: Theory, tactics, and counter-measures. Cambridge University Press. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition © 1989 p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Hoffman, Bruce Inside Terrorism. Columbia University Press. New York © 1998. p. 29

intentionally cloak themselves in the terminology of military jargon, portraying themselves as freedom fighters. Terrorist organizations also claim they are entitled to Prisoner of War status and argue, due to their numerical inferiority and limited firepower, that they must operate clandestinely or conduct bloody indiscriminate acts of violence for publicity for themselves and their cause.

Most terrorist groups display by their membership, a strong religious component, such as the IRA, the PLO, and the Red Hand Commandos. Despite this relationship, the dominant motivations for these groups are political, not religious. Violence and terrorism assume a transcendental dimension for the religious terrorist. It becomes a holy duty or obligations to fulfill some sacred imperative. Coupled with a sense of alienation and isolation the terrorists can use religion as a means of justification and legitimization. Terrorist leaders often justify and rationalize terrorist acts to their followers by manipulating their religious doctrine. The religiously motivated Islamic Shi'a, the messianic Jewish fanatics in the Middle East, and American Christian white supremacists are examples of such groups that twist religious text and dehumanize their victims to motivate their members to carry out terrorist acts to fulfill the political agenda of the organization.

### **TERRORIST ACTS**

Universally condemned acts of terrorism that are treated, as crimes in a state of peace or war should be examined and the problem of the definition of legitimate victims plagues terrorism. When a corrupt society is the target it is difficult to deal meaningful

blows at the symbol of that society. The most accessible targets are human beings and it is very convenient to expand the concept of the enemy to include anyone not actively involved in overthrowing the society. The distinction between revolutionary action and violent crime becomes blurred, with a program of terrorism degenerating into indiscriminate and arbitrary terror and gangsterism.<sup>6</sup> “Terrorism distinguishes itself from conventional and to some extent also from guerilla warfare though the disregard for principles of chivalry and humanity contained in The Hague Regulations and Geneva Conventions.”<sup>7</sup> However, The Hague Regulations and Geneva Conventions do not adequately regulate terrorism in time of war as terrorism is committed during wartime, on varying scales, for a variety of reasons, such as demoralizing the enemy through propaganda campaigns, but only illustrates those forms of terrorism that are grossly unacceptable. Defining terrorist acts also contains further ambiguity in determining whether or not they are legitimate acts of war or crimes. Blowing up a bridge or sinking a cargo vessel are considered legitimate acts in time of war, but are they are not legitimate acts in prelude to war.

Terrorism has historically contained revolutionary connotations, such as the anarchists in the early twentieth century. The revolutionary context of terrorism continues today in modern time with organizations such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ), and the Basque ETA, all which claim to be freedom fighters for a freedom and independence. What one group, may regard as

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<sup>6</sup> Wardlaw, Grant. Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics, and Countermeasures. Cambridge University Press. New York © 1989. p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Schmid, P. Alex and Crelinsten, D. Ronald Western Responses to Terrorism. Frank Cass & Co. (c) 1993 p. 12.



terrorism, may be variously regarded as heroism, foreign policy, or justice by others.<sup>8</sup> For example, the French resistance, the Polish Underground, and the Greek Guerillas, were all considered terrorists by the Nazi Occupation in World War Two. Guerilla warfare traditionally includes attack on military personnel, government officials, and local collaborators whereas terrorism traditionally attacks the unrelated, the innocent, and defenseless. Guerillas seek to build a conventional army through secret support networks and eventually emerge in to the open; terrorists build nothing and go beyond nothing but terrorism.

### **DEFINING TERRORISM**

After the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the UN was consumed with trying to respond constructively to the emerging international alliance against terrorism. On September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001 The United Nations Security Council officially decreed, for the first time, that acts of international terrorism are threats to international peace and security. The Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations mentions its purpose “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, and for these ends ... to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security.”<sup>9</sup> With the diverse membership of the General Assembly, consensus is an issue and an obstruction in directing the international community in the effort to combat terrorism. To determine what constitutes a terrorist act, other than an attack on the undefended or innocent, universal definitions on

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<sup>8</sup> Wardlaw, Grant. Political Terrorism: Theory, tactics, and counter-measures. Cambridge University Press. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition © 1989 p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Fasulo, Linda. An Insider's Guide to the UN. Yale University Press © 2004 p. 2.

what is commonly accepted as legitimate acts of war in a guerilla campaigns must be established. Since World War II, the nearly one hundred and twenty conflicts that have occurred involved to some extent the use of terrorism.<sup>10</sup> Defining terrorism is an area of dispute where delegates from some Middle Eastern and Asian states argue the need to distinguish between terrorism, which they agree is unjust, and acts done in the name of ethnic or national self-determination, which they view as legitimate. Western nations, led by the United States, find this unacceptable and the debate over one man's freedom fighter is another's terrorism begins.

There is no universally accepted definition of terrorism; many definitions of terrorism include war crimes and crimes against humanity. In some cases, these terms are not valid as terrorism today has a wider range of political, religious, ethnic, and social implications. To discuss the statement, "One man's terrorist is another man's patriot" presents one of terrorism. Analysis of defining terrorism should include research subjects of what constitutes a terrorist act, leading to an overall definition of terrorism, could call into question the total conduct of conventional warfare. By examining and comparing the diverse and opposing definitions of terrorism and what constitutes a terroristic act in the critical context can one come up with universal definitions of terroristic acts, arriving at a universal definition of terrorism. The terms in particular that are in need of universal definition are terror and fear, use of force, permitted wartime conduct, guerilla warfare, and legitimate struggle.

The key to defining terrorism is to examine the act through a political lens, which would allow one to understand the aims, motivations, and purposes behind terrorist acts

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<sup>10</sup> Medhurst, Paul. Global Terrorism. United Nations Institute for Training and Research Programme of Correspondence Instruction. New York, NY (c) 2000. p 1.

and distinguishing terrorism from ordinary criminal behavior.<sup>11</sup> It is the illegal use of force on unrelated and or undefended persons and or property for political objectives committed by either an individual, non-state organization, or legitimate government. Terrorism is primarily political and inherently about the pursuit, acquisition, and the use of power. It is the use or threat of violence for the service or quest of a political agenda.

A universal definition must be sufficiently broad in order to unify efforts for the containment of terrorism and improvement of international security. Based upon the research, assumptions, reason, and jubilation, the following definition of terrorism can be construed: Terrorism is an attack on unrelated and or undefended persons and or property for political objectives committed by either an individual, non-state organization, or legitimate government. It is the use of illegal force and methods to steal or punish or to bring about change against the will of the greater part. The principal targets are political, destructive violence is used, and the actions are carried out by groups operating clandestinely and sporadically. Terrorism transgresses the rules of civilized conflict in which the unrelated, defenseless, and innocent are the primary target for political motivations on the part of the aggressor to bring about change.

### **GOVERNMENT RESPONSES**

As terrorists employ malicious and lethal means against innocent and unsuspecting people in order to disorient the populace of the target country and

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<sup>11</sup> Hoffman, Bruce Inside Terrorism. Columbia University Press. New York © 1998. p. 14.

demonstrate that the government is unable fulfilling to provide its primary security functions of safety and order for its populace. Once the target government has been shown to be unable to provide security for its populace, the terrorists demonstrate that they have a viable political alternative that is able to offer the required stability. Thus destroying the solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence on which social functioning is based, and substituting insecurity and disorder.<sup>12</sup> This allows the terrorists to achieve the tactical purpose of creating disorientation and provoking repressive measures of an illegal and unconstitutional nature by the incumbent rulers, or to force the intervention of a third party. If the government uses extralegal methods, or methods which restrict or deprive ordinary citizens of their human rights in order to suppress the terrorists, it loses both its legitimacy and public support and confidence.<sup>13</sup> Thus, fighting terrorism is not a “policy option” but a necessity for the survival of democratic societies and freedoms.<sup>14</sup> Politicians and governments should use the four instruments of counterterrorism policy in conjunction with the five instruments of counterterrorism to curb the terrorist threat.

### COUNTERTERRORIST STRATEGY

The threat of terrorism is fractured and heterogeneous in nature, therefore counterterrorist strategy and policy must be flexible in order to respond to it. The goal of

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<sup>12</sup>Wardlaw, Grant. Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics, and Countermeasures. Cambridge University Press © 1989. New York. p. 34-35.

<sup>13</sup>Wardlaw, Grant. Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics, and Countermeasures. Cambridge University Press © 1989. New York. p. 37.

<sup>14</sup>Netanyahu, Benjamin. Fighting Terrorism: How Democracies Can Defeat Domestic and International Terrorism. Faarrar, Straus, and Giroux Publishers © 1997. New York. p. 4.

counterterrorism is to save lives.<sup>15</sup> There are four elements of counterterrorism policy: cutting the roots of terrorism; capabilities; intentions; and defenses. It is important to note that none of the elements alone will act sufficiently to eradicate the threat, but the combined employment of two or more of the elements below may suffice. Diplomacy, the criminal justice system, interdiction of financial assets, military force, and intelligence (including covert action), are the instruments of a counterterrorism policy.

#### SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND CUTTING THE ROOTS OF TERRORISM

Poor living standards and weak socio-economic potential of populations is the second root condition. These areas have become the breeding grounds of terrorists. The profiles of terrorists today indicate that they are usually young, unemployed adult males with weak social and familial support; and with poor prospects for economic improvement or advancement through legitimate work.<sup>16</sup> The provision of economic reforms and aid can help reduce this second root condition of terrorism.

Cutting the roots of terrorism is the first element of counterterrorism. Two types of conditions can lead to the creation of a terrorist. The first condition is political repression, which is often identified with a lack of self-determination; it consists of the issues expressed directly by the terrorists and those who sympathize with their cause.<sup>17</sup> Terrorism is a form of psychological warfare. All terrorist acts involve violence or the threat of such designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the object of

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<sup>15</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p. 1-2.

<sup>16</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 31.

<sup>17</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 30.

the terrorist attack.<sup>18</sup> Terrorism is designed to create power where none exists or to consolidate power where there is very little. Terrorists seek to obtain the leverage; influence and power they otherwise lack to effect political change on either a local or an international scale through the publicity of their actions. International terrorists travel from country to country attacking innocent civilians from other countries who often have nothing to do with the terrorist's cause or grievance. They are used to attract attention and publicity to shock the public, and by shocking, stimulating worldwide fear and alarm. Terrorist campaigns seek to achieve the fundamental asymmetry between the terrorists' apparent ability to strike anywhere, at any time, and the security forces' inability to protect all conceivable targets, all the time. The omnipresent and powerful the terrorists appear to be as the move visible and enveloping security forces become to restore order to the public life. The exercise of authority by any government requires the participation of all: not the active participation of everyone, but sufficient to satisfy those who are interested. Eradicating a group that embodies broad popular desires may mean that a main political force is unrepresented. Excluding a group from a political system leaves it free to demand unrealistic solutions to national problems and may increase its mystique among the public.<sup>19</sup> Unrepresented persons who are angry over such issues are more likely to resort to terrorism than those who are not. Using acts of violence to create an atmosphere of alarm and fear, terrorists are able to gain recognition of their cause and project themselves as a group that must be listened to and taken account of.

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<sup>18</sup> Hoffman, Bruce Inside Terrorism. Columbia University Press. New York © 1998. p. 44.

<sup>19</sup>Wardlaw, Grant. Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics, and Countermeasures. Cambridge University Press © 1989. New York. p. 142.

DILOMACY, INTELLIGENCE AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Manipulating and knowing the intentions of terrorists is a key element of effective counterterrorism policy that politicians and governments should utilize to curb the use of terror. Diplomacy, intelligence, and the criminal justice system are the key instruments of a counterterrorism policy that is effective in accomplishing this objective. Diplomacy, articulating policy to foreign governments, persuading them to lend their support, and reaching an understanding or agreement with them, is crucial to international counterterrorism efforts. The most effective counterterrorist measures require extensive foreign engagement.<sup>20</sup> Persuasion of foreign governments may be aimed at curbing the activity of either terrorist groups or state sponsors. It can be aimed at getting foreign governments to provide better protection of allied nations' interests, and can also pertain to defenses.<sup>21</sup> Diplomatic efforts to counter terrorism have produced agreements between the United Nations, the United States and the European Union to cooperate and coordinate efforts in the freezing of the assets of terrorists and their supporters; increased assistance in investigation; increased sharing of information among law enforcement authorities; coordination of measures to strengthen aviation security; an exchange of ideas on tightening border controls; and contact between key judicial and police organizations.<sup>22</sup> Diplomacy is linked with all the other instruments of counterterrorism.<sup>23</sup> It can reduce the intelligence tasks of monitoring terrorist groups by assisting the other

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<sup>20</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 67.

<sup>21</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 74.

<sup>22</sup>[www.fas.org/irp/threat/unsc.html](http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/unsc.html)

<sup>23</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 75.

instruments in the negotiation of treaties on extradition and mutual legal assistance as well as discouraging other countries from letting a suspect group operate on its territory.

Multinational agreements are the most important aspect of counterterrorist diplomacy in which the UN is the perfect conduit. Multilateral diplomacy helps counterterrorism in three ways. First, multilateral resolutions can provide a formal structure for making demands and implementing responses. Second, it can be useful in reinforcing the international status quo condemning the use of terrorism.

(Counterterrorism is contained within international humanitarian law as it has evolved for more than a century, and has been codified in The Hague and Geneva conventions on the conduct of warfare.<sup>24</sup>) Finally, counterterrorism diplomacy can provide standards that facilitate cooperation on other matters. This can come in the form of diplomats stressing the importance of a certain request that may arise in a time of crisis.

Politicians and governments should make no concessions or cede to any demands made by terrorists. Any withdrawal from current commitments to reduce the danger of terrorism, risks being seen as exactly that and being interpreted by terrorists as a success.<sup>25</sup> Negotiating with, and making concessions to, terrorist groups may inflame groups elsewhere and encourage them to use terrorism as a means for getting their demands recognized.<sup>26</sup> Not rewarding terrorism will give terrorists less incentive to conduct their style of warfare. As U.S. involvement in the Iran/Contra affair has shown, no government can strictly adhere to the tenet, “Make no concessions to terrorists and

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<sup>24</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 78.

<sup>25</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p.66-67.

<sup>26</sup>Wardlaw, Grant. Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics, and Countermeasures. Cambridge University Press © 1989. New York. p. 142.



strike no deals” under all circumstances, when such adherence poses a risk to the lives of its citizens. Unless the terrorists are demanding some irreversible act, a concession made in the face of an immediate threat of great harm need not constitute a reward for terrorism. The terrorists can be hunted down and brought to justice once the immediate peril is over.<sup>27</sup> This is an aspect of the criminal justice system that can be employed as an instrument of counterterrorism.

Much of the most effective disruption occurs early in the terrorist cycle of planning and preparation; thus a key to combating terrorism is interagency cooperation between intelligence agencies and the criminal justice system, where both operate as instruments of counterterrorism. The criminal justice system, as such an instrument, can contribute to a nation’s counter terrorist effort in four ways. First, putting a terrorist in jail or prison prevents the person from committing further acts of terror. Bringing terrorists to trial before the international court of justice can serve as a forum. Second, the movements of terrorists still at large are impeded by their knowledge that they are wanted men and women. This is compounded by the fact that most western nations have demonstrated the ability to apprehend criminals thousands of miles from their own territory. Third, the evidence and publicity that accompanies a terrorist prosecution may encourage other governments to act against terrorist organizations within their borders. Finally, the criminal justice system contributes to the counterterrorism effort by acting as a deterrent to other terrorists, preventing them from committing acts of terror, for fear of being caught and punished.<sup>28</sup> Coordination and cooperation between a nation’s law and

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<sup>27</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 36.

<sup>28</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 74.

intelligence communities must exist in order for the criminal justice system to become an effective instrument of counterterrorism.

*MILITARY FORCE AND PHYSICAL DEFENSES*

The United Nations Security Council can play a main role in regards to the next two elements, the criminal justice system and military action, in curbing the nature of terrorism. The UN Security Council is the UN's enforcer, charged with making the world a safer, more stable place by preventing conflict among and within Nations and is the only UN body whose resolutions are legally binding. It has the authority to decree matters affecting the fate of governments, establish peacekeeping missions create to tribunals to try persons accused of war crimes, and in some cases call on UN members to take military action as a corrective measure in the internal affairs of a state, as in the case of Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

The defense element of a counterterrorism policy includes the erection of physical defenses and the use of military force as an instrument. Military force may be employed as an instrument of counterterrorism in rescuing hostages held captive or as a retaliatory action following a terrorist attack. There are four possible benefits to be derived from the use of military force in order to curb the nature of terrorism. Military attacks from one government on terrorist targets may stimulate other governments to further their own efforts in combating terrorism. Strikes may disrupt the operations and hamper the capability of the terrorist organization targeted. The threat of future military strikes in

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<sup>29</sup> Fasulo, Linda. An Insider's Guide to the UN. Yale University Press © 2004 p. 42.

retaliation for terrorist attacks may act as a deterrent to other groups that are planning to launch such attacks. Finally, military strikes in retaliation against one terrorist group or organization may act as a deterrent to other terrorist groups or organizations that have yet to launch an attack.

The implementation of security countermeasures could persuade terrorist leaders not to attack certain targets, as they would think that such an attack would be unsuccessful. Such security countermeasures include physical barriers and security personnel. However, there are two main limitations to the use of security countermeasures. The first is their cost. There will never be enough money to do all that should be done, and so governments will have to live with partial solutions and in turn, accept a high level of threat and vulnerability. The second limitation of security countermeasures is the terrorist resourcefulness and adaptability in overcoming antiterrorist defenses.<sup>30</sup> Attempts to pass through airport security with explosives hidden in the soles of their shoes demonstrate the ingenuity of terrorists.

### TERRORIST FINANCING

Money enables terrorists to conduct their business. In 1999, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted to adopt the International Convention for the Suppression of the financing of terrorism. This convention made it a crime to participate in the raising for funds for terrorist activity, even if no terrorist act ensues. The interdiction of financial assets can greatly contribute to the war on terror in many ways.

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<sup>30</sup>Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 36.

First, it limits the capabilities of terrorists, another element of effective counterterrorism. Blocked assets of state sponsors can become bargaining chips in renegotiating future understandings with those states, such as ending their support to terrorists. “The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 pushed the council to act quickly in creating a broad resolution aimed at cutting off all support to international terrorists. Resolution 1373, approved on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2001, requires that all member states prevent their citizens and banking institutions from providing money to terrorists or give terrorists safe haven, and it requires each member state to report steps it has taken to the Security Council’s new Counterterrorism Committee.”<sup>31</sup> Underlying each nation’s obligation to deny financial and all other forms of support and safe haven to terrorists, the United Nations Security Council called on all states to take urgent steps to implement resolution 1373 and help each other in doing so.<sup>32</sup> Interdictions of money can reduce a terrorist organization’s ability to operate since their “lifeline” is severed. The threat of interdiction may complicate a group’s financial operations, and the criminalization of support to terrorists may deter potential supporters of terrorists.<sup>33</sup> Tracking the financial transactions can lead governments to the knowledge of which terrorist organization was responsible for an attack.

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<sup>31</sup> Fasulo, Linda. An Insider’s Guide to the UN. Yale University Press © 2004. p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> Aita, Judy and Brown, Laura. Security Council Foreign Ministers Discuss Counter-Terrorism. Washington Post 12 November 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Pillar, Paul. Terrorism and US Foreign Policy. Brookings Institute © 2001. p 94.

## **SUMMARY**

In order for a nation to preserve its integrity from the threat of terrorism, its politicians must successfully implement the tools of counterterrorism within the four elements of a counterterrorism policy. If they take action contrary to the framework previously discussed, they may inadvertently further the terrorists' goals of disrupting the society and gaining concessions. If that happens, then those nations will never be rid of the terrorist threat and their governments may lose legitimacy and public support.