

## 6<sup>th</sup> Xiangshan Forum, Beijing, China, 16-18 October 2015

### Contribution of ICCT Director Mark Singleton

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to take part in this high-level conference on regional security.

My name is Mark Singleton and I am the director of ICCT. The International Centre for Counter Terrorism is based in The Hague and was founded in 2010 by three institutions:

- The Asser Institute for International Law
- The Netherlands Institute for International Relations “Clingendael” and
- The University of Leiden’s Centre for Terrorism and Counter-terrorism.

We are a fast growing “think and do tank”, focusing on Preventative and Rule of Law based approaches to counter-terrorism. We have published on many related topics and engage in policy-relevant analysis, advice and implementation in Europe, Africa, the MENA region and Asia. ICCT also hosts the Administrative Unit of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF).

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Moving on to today’s topic, *challenges to regional counter-terrorism cooperation*, let us **first** reflect on the scale and scope of the threat of terrorism itself.

Following the Global War on Terror, we have come to believe that terrorism is a **global problem**. For many years, that was an exaggeration. But with the rise of ISIS, the resurgence of Al Qaeda and other affiliated groups like Boko Haram and Al Shabaab, we are witnessing an unprecedented wave of terrorism. Compared to a few years ago, the situation is deteriorating. In 2014 alone, more than 16,800 terrorist attacks took place, killing more than 43,500 people and wounding more than 409,000 while more than 11,800 people were taken hostage in terrorist attacks.<sup>1</sup> Compared to 2013, there was a rise in the number of attacks by more than one third and a rise in fatalities of more than 80 percent. Almost than half of the world’s countries - 99 out of 193 – have experienced terrorist attacks last year. Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Syria are the main victims of terrorism. People in these five countries took more than 60 percent of all attacks and 78 percent of all fatalities.<sup>[1]</sup> After the MENA region, Asia and the Pacific are the next-most affected region. In some countries the situation is deteriorating, especially in South Asia. In others, such as Indonesia, it is improving.

But besides the cost to human life, the **economic costs are dazzling**. According to the 2015 Global Peace Index, in 2014 the economic impact of violence on the global economy was US\$14.3 trillion, or 13.4% of the world GDP. Countries affected by terrorism see their GDP drop by tens of percentages.

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<sup>1</sup> START, *Background Report: Overview: Terrorism in 2014*, August 2015, [http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_GTD\\_OverviewofTerrorism2014\\_Aug2015.pdf?utm\\_source=START+Announce&utm\\_campaign=270cadb341-START\\_Newsletter\\_Aug2015&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_a60ca8c769-270cadb341-45663445](http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_GTD_OverviewofTerrorism2014_Aug2015.pdf?utm_source=START+Announce&utm_campaign=270cadb341-START_Newsletter_Aug2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_a60ca8c769-270cadb341-45663445). Note: the fatalities figure included killed terrorists such as suicide bombers. 24 % of the fatalities were terrorists.

Depending on your definition, there are between 4000 and 7000 “terrorist” organisations. In India alone, there are more than 250. Between them, there are more differences than commonalities. But the **one characteristic they share is that they are rooted in local conditions**. Their goals, their tactics, their capability, their levels of violence, their sectarianism, all tend to reflect the places they’re fighting in, even if they have transnational ties, even if they attract foreign fighters. Violent extremism plays into local competition for power, land and other resources. Most of these groups prey on tribal or clan politics, co-opting some, threatening others.

Many of today’s extremist groups combine terrorist tactics with conventional or insurgent warfare. They are more sophisticated, with advanced weaponry, than before. They control territory and govern populations living there, collecting tax and providing basic services. They use terrorist attacks to destabilise areas they don’t control. They are resilient, flexible and agile, adapting tactics depending on how much territory they control.

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While there seems to be a consensus on the gravity of the threat posed by terrorism, there is no such thing on the remedy, i.e. counter-terrorism.

Despite the billions of dollars spent by governments to combat terrorism, there has not been a strategic breakthrough. Why not? My colleague Professor Alex Schmid, who has studied terrorism and CT for more than 50 years, identifies five reasons for that, which he calls:

- (i) the definition problem;
- (ii) the political problem;
- (iii) the communication problem;
- (iv) the religious problem;
- (v) the radicalisation problem.

Unless we overcome these challenges, nationally as well as regionally, we are **unlikely** to make any **strategic** progress. So let’s have a look at each:

### **1. The Definition Problem - When is an organisation a terrorist organisation?**

**Definitions matter – the way you perceive the problem, determines how you address it.**

Nations still haven’t agreed on a universally accepted legal definition of terrorism. There are more than 250 definitions of terrorism<sup>2</sup> and the United Nations General Assembly has not been able to come up with a concise legal definition that is acceptable to all its 194 Member States.

That’s because terrorism, like other politically contested terms, is a **label** attached to individuals and groups in the political debate without much concern for definitional precision. For the British in 1947,

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<sup>2</sup> 260 definitions are listed in J. J. Easson and A. P. Schmid, “250+ Academic, Governmental and Intergovernmental Definitions of Terrorism. Appendix 2.1”, in A.P. Schmid, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, pp. 158 – 200, London & New York: Routledge, 2011.

Menachem Begin was a terrorist. And for the apartheid regime in the sixties, Nelson Mandela was also a terrorist, only to be hailed a global statesman upon release from prison.

The broader we define terrorism, the bigger the terrorist problem becomes. Various governments use the label terrorism for the **whole spectrum**, from low – or non-violence political protest to sabotage, and more serious forms of political violence. That, then, becomes a problem, which I will touch upon later.

## **2. The communication problem**

A second problem when it comes to tackling terrorism more effectively is the role played by the (mass) media.

Let us not forget that “Terrorism” is a **tactic**, deployed by terrorist groups to generate “terror”, which is a “...**state of mind**, created by a level of **fear that so agitates body and mind** that those struck by it are not capable of making **objective assessments of risks** anymore”.

The more attention a terrorist attack gets, the better it serves the terrorist’s purpose.

The main **messengers** for the terrorist’s publicity have, until recently, been our mass media, and, more recently, also our Internet-based social media. Without the “oxygen of publicity, terrorism would simply not be an attractive strategy. In fact, the media coverage of terrorism actually leads to more terrorism.

**This brings us to the third problem:**

## **3. The political problem - playing Politics with Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism.**

*The political problem manifests itself in various ways:*

First, we see that the threat of terrorism and public outrage after a major terrorist attack are used by politicians and others to advance their own particular agenda and short-term interests. Those politicians who promise more forceful measures against non-state terrorists usually win from those who do not fall into the trap of terrorist provocations.

Forceful measures have led to the securitisation of terrorism – which before 9/11 had been widely seen as a law enforcement problem – with the military taking charge, at the expense of civilian institutions. We see how these forceful measures infringe on civil liberties, stigmatise minorities and polarise society. Commenting on developments in Pakistan, The International Crisis Group states that “Reliance on blunt instruments and lethal force to counter terrorism risks doing more harm than good when they undermine constitutionalism, democratic governance and the rule of law and provide grist to the Jihadis’ propaganda mill”. The same applies to many other countries. A security-dominated, enemy-centric approach putting the state apparatus’s security above people’s security, is without a doubt, counter-productive.

Another way in which politics manifest themselves is in the event of **state-sponsored terrorism**, ranging from passive tolerance of use of a country's territory as safe haven to active support, offering arms and training facilities as well as financial, logistic and intelligence support.

But not only governments sponsor terrorists; increasingly **non-government actors** do so too, with Syria being a clear example.

#### **4. Religion and Terrorism:**

While there is right- and left-wing terrorism, ethno-nationalist and single issue terrorism, it is religious terrorism, and in particular Islamist Jihadi terrorism that is the biggest source of worry in recent years. Today, seven out of ten acts of terrorism are conducted in the name of religion.

#### **5. The Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation problem**

Since nobody is born a terrorist, how come people, especially young people – male and female - become terrorists? The explanation usually given is that there is a **process** called **radicalisation** that is responsible for this.

The process of radicalisation is puzzling since the vast majority of young people sharing identical background characteristics of violent extremists never become terrorist. On the other hand we see that there are well-educated, affluent and apparently well-integrated individuals who become susceptible to radicalisation. So what's happening? For that, we need to distinguish between the micro-, meso- and macro level drivers, the so-called push and pull factors:

The list of factors that can **push** or **pull** young people towards terrorism is long and varies from community to community and from person to person. Here are some general observations:

##### **Push Factors**

- Desire for **revenge** based on **humiliation** or experience of **perceived injustice**;
- **Alienation** and **identity** crisis of uprooted migrants families in refugee camps and diasporas,
- **Marginalisation** or **political exclusion**;
- **Difficult life situations** (e.g. unemployment, discrimination, inequality);
- **Unresolved conflicts, disillusionment** with unbearable situation and perceived absence of other available instruments to bring about change.
- Mental health problems

##### **Pull Factors**

- **Ideologies** that provide **justifications** for attacks against out-group members (e.g. non-believers);
- Presence of a **charismatic leader** who translates grievances into incentives to engage in violent actions/jihad;
- **Imitation** of apparently successful and highly publicised terrorist tactics;

- **Opportunity to upgrade one's identity** from “zero [in own country] to hero” [in the land of jihad].

Given these (and other) factors at work: how can we **prevent radicalisation** to violent extremism and terrorism? The short answer is: **through education and community work**. There is a growing consensus that solutions have to be found at the level of communities. It is vital to involve parents, families, friends, schools, youth clubs, religious leaders etc. in dealing with the problem of radicalisation. One must steer the dissatisfaction of young people into constructive channels. This requires a **massive investment in engagement at the local level**.

The good news is that for quite some time now, we know how to do it: the UN's 2006 CT strategy, UNSCR 1624 and 2178 and the GCTF Good Practice documents provide us with the right policy recommendations. The forthcoming UN Global Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism is due any moment now.

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You may have noticed that I have not touched on regional counter-terrorism cooperation. Not because I don't think cooperation can and should be improved, but because I'm convinced that we first need to agree on the strategic objectives of counter-terrorism, taking into account these five challenges, before designing new and better cooperation mechanisms. Sharing intelligence, coordinating efforts to weaken international terrorist connections is necessary, but it cannot replace local and regional conflict resolution through political means. Neglecting that and focusing almost exclusively on military operations - by investing in more security forces, more counter-terrorism hardware and more surveillance and repression - will only help terrorist groups increase their influence. Disproportionate responses aggravate the conflict. Once societies are polarised, radicalisation on both sides tends to increase. And once people are radicalised it is very hard to de-radicalise them. It is for this reason that prevention of radicalisation and inclusive political dialogue should be our top priority.

Thank you.