

**Getting terrorism in proportion is the way to defeat it: reflections on terrorism on the third anniversary of the attacks of 11 September 2001**

Conor Gearty – article for The Tablet, September 2004

Terrifying though they were, the two most recent episodes of terrorism to have engaged world attention show up the limitations inherent in this kind of political violence. The taking of two French journalists in Iraq by an organisation calling itself an Islamic army was designed to compel France to withdraw its new law prohibiting all conspicuous symbols of religious faith, including Muslim headscarves, from state schools. The kidnappings have proved wholly counter-productive; a nation divided over this controversial policy has come together in its determination not to be bullied by outsiders, and an international community that was once highly critical of France's actions now expresses its solidarity with yet another nation facing a fresh terrorist threat. The horrific attack on the Russian school in Beslan is of a different order of seriousness altogether, but at its core there is an identical, perhaps an even more evident, futility. The hostage-takers demand that President Putin withdraw from Chechnya needs only to be articulated for its absurdity to be laid bare, and it is hard to detect any strategy in these mass killings other than a desire to spread anguish and destroy lives.

Beslan was at the margins of terrorism, far closer to a socio-pathic than a purposeful act. The kind of sub-state political violence conducted by covert forces that we now routinely call terrorism is usually more focused than this but has always been (as both these actions were) the "weapon of the weak". It is often desperation at some large but ignored justice that drives such actions, and it is perfectly true that if the terrorism is spectacular and vicious enough, with the right kinds of victims (e.g. children; Israelis or westerners of any age) they are often able to command massive media attention. We should be careful not to mistake this for effectiveness. The Catch-22 into which such violence invariably falls is that the means used to secure attention for the message are so morally repugnant that the message itself will, precisely on account of those means, continue to be disregarded. An ignorance which was once unconscious is now intentional and morally charged. The IRA realised this in the mid 1980s (with, it is true, plenty of help from John Hume) and the organisation has, to its great credit, sought to back out of its bloody, blind alley. More normal is the vacillation so evident in Yasser Arafat, aware of the way the violence plays into his opponent's hands, but without the imagination to work out what to put in its place.

It is often said that Al-Qaida and Al-Qaida-inspired violence is of a different order of seriousness to other kinds of terrorism, and in terms of the willingness to kill the innocent on a vast scale this is certainly the case. The lack of central control is a real problem here, since there would seem to be no set of organising minds capable of maturing into any kind of moral coherence. We are left with a collection of personality types capable under cover of religious slogans of amounting attacks of the brutality of Beslan, Madrid, Bali and the World Trade Centre. Terrible those these acts are, it is not obvious that such violence is at all likely on its own to achieve any medium to long term success, just so long as we are careful in how we react to it. Since 11 September 2001, Al-Qaida has (with barely a military murmur) lost its national base in Afghanistan and suffered an array of effective police and military action against it across the world. Without any serious political or military clout, and with international and Arab opinion alienated by its actions, the movement is reduced to sporadic violence on the bloodiest end of the terrorist scale, with whatever banal political message was intended to be conveyed being entirely lost amid the surfeit of innocent blood.

It is also worth forcing ourselves to remember that the problem of terrorism is usually noticed only when Western society is otherwise generally relatively free of political violence. There were many League of Nations meetings about terrorism in the 1930s and the IRA campaign of violence in Britain at the end of that decade received acres of political and press attention – until the invasion of Poland and then of France quickly made these preoccupations seem rather quaint. Similarly the modern era of “international terrorism” got under way when the success of colonial independence movements had been conceded and as a result Europe was settling into a long period of military calm. Being largely free of domestic political violence, a strand to the American narrative has always sought to focus on the potential for destruction by the enemy without, and here too the war on terror has filled a gap left by the end of the Cold War which had in turn superseded an earlier Red Scare. Anxiety about terrorism is the price we in the West pay for being lucky enough to have no other political violence to be concerned about (unlike many in the developing world and those caught up in the violence in which we engage, in the name of counter-terrorism).

Nor should too much be made of the novelty of the contemporary terrorist's access to modern weaponry. A feature of anxiety about terrorism has always been concern at the horrible new weapons available to such groups: once it was dynamite, later it was Semtex, now it is, allegedly, weapons of mass destruction. But as 11 September and innumerable suicide-bombers demonstrate, you don't need to be innovative in your choice of weaponry if you are imaginative in your tactics and brutal in your execution of them. And insofar as weapons of mass destruction are a problem in the world at present, it is surely obvious that

the main concern should be with countries that either have them or are developing them or selling them on, rather than with sub-state actors who may (or may not) secure a few crumbs from such feasts of illicit national aggrandisement.

For all these reasons, it is very important not to be steamrolled by talk of a “war on terror” into the belief that liberal democrats society needs somehow to change fundamentally to ensure its survival. Therein lies the only route of success available to the terrorist, to reduce the opponent to the same immoral level as him- or herself. There are two ways in which this trap can be sprung, and it is not impossible that the West has begun unwittingly drift into both. First, there is the well-known temptation to meet violence with violence, to match terrorism with counter-terrorism. So foolish is this that many terrorist groups rely on it as a way of giving force to their otherwise futile acts, by alienating vast tracts of people from government and therefore (they hope) into their arms. This is what makes the excesses of the US “war on terror” and that country’s ham-fisted invasion and occupation of Iraq so damaging in the eyes of so many. It is also why it is vital that internment should not be permitted to grow into an ordinary counter-terrorist policy in this country.

The second point is a subtler one. When attacks occur of the ferocity of Beslan and its precursors, not to mention 11 September itself, it is hard to resist talk of evil, iniquity and sin. No other language seems available to describe such acts; sociological explanations emphasising the bigger picture and the deprivation suffered by the killers seem particularly beside the point. But in succumbing to the temptation to present its resistance to political violence as a war against evil, the West risks dehumanising its opponents, alienating ethnic and minority religious groups, and elevating all of its own actions – however heinous – to the realm of moral necessity. The language of moral superiority leads directly to Guantanamo and thence to Abu Ghraib. The terrorist wants this to be a moral crusade, where the whole world is forced to take a position in a global fight to the end. The West must deny this by reasserting its pluralist values and stressing that what unites all our cultures – mutual esteem; respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law – means that we can never be beaten by a gang of thugs.