INFORMATION SHARING

IN SUPPORT OF

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE

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As we plan and work to improve the quality and the quantity of intelligence to support actions to counter terrorism, we must distinguish between tactical intelligence and strategic intelligence. Tactical intelligence is sufficiently specific, sufficiently detailed, and sufficiently reliable to form the basis for immediate action; in fact, it is sometimes referred to as "actionable intelligence." Strategic intelligence, in contrast, lacks the specificity necessary to direct operations, but because its content is believed to be valid for a period of years, it can be used to support the allocation of resources – including decisions to invest in order to create future capabilities – or political measures which by their nature could be effective only over a period of time.

Some examples of tactical intelligence are: (1) Information that a known terrorist intends to take a particular flight, so that he can be arrested; (2) Information that a terrorist organization is storing weapons in a particular location, so that a police raid upon this location can be authorized and carried out; (3) Information that terrorists are planning to attack a particular building on a particular day, so that vehicles and people approaching this building can be searched for weapons or explosives; (4) Identification of an individual as the link among various cells of a terrorist organization, so that surveillance of this individual and identification of his contacts will lead to a short list of people to investigate; (5) Identification of a particular bank account as a vehicle for terrorist financing, which could support a variety of useful counterterrorist actions. Some characteristics of tactical intelligence are: (a) it must be used quickly, or it loses its value; (b) its sources are fragile, meaning that if the terrorists learn enough about a tactical intelligence source they can eliminate it; (c) it becomes valueless if the terrorists learn that we know it before we use it; (d) in many cases, there can be serious disagreements about how best to use the intelligence, or even whether preservation of a critical source dictates that a particular item of tactical intelligence should not be used at all. Because of these characteristics, tactical intelligence is generally shared only when sharing is absolutely essential for effective action.

Some examples of strategic intelligence are: (1) Information about the internal effectiveness (e.g. leadership cohesion, recruiting success, financial resources) of various terrorist groups, so that estimates can be made about which terrorist organizations or networks pose the greatest future threat and should therefore be priority counterterrorism targets; (2) information about collaborative arrangements among specific terrorist groups, so that tactical intelligence about one of them can be leveraged to obtain tactical

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intelligence about others; (3) information about state sponsorship of terrorism, so that pressure can be brought to bear against the offending state; (4) information about how the leadership of a particular terrorist organization defines its goals and thinks about the connections between terrorist acts and these goals, so that inferences can be drawn about the targets and techniques that this leadership would find most attractive; (5) information about the incentives a terrorist organization uses to obtain resources (recruits, money, and logistic support), so that its access to these resources can be disrupted or attenuated. Some characteristics of strategic intelligence are: (a) in many cases, accurate strategic intelligence remains useful for months or even years; (b) if the content of strategic intelligence is revealed to its terrorist subjects, they cannot easily act either to invalidate the intelligence or to shut off the sources and methods through which it was obtained; (c) it is obtained by the analysis of many pieces of fragmentary data, rather than from a single excellent source; (d) even when strategic intelligence analysis makes use of secret data about terrorists, it is valuable to consider it in the light of publicly-available information and academic analysis.

It should be evident that to counter terrorism over a period of years, we require strategic intelligence as well as tactical intelligence. This fairly obvious point needs to be emphasized because the understandable public demand that terrorists be arrested and that terrorist operations be prevented has made it more difficult to see the value of building strategic intelligence by methods that would be quite unlikely to generate tactical "actionable" intelligence.

How, then, can better strategic intelligence be generated?

We should begin by acknowledging that terrorists do not generally think the way most intelligence analysts think. It is not just that terrorists have different objectives, and different concepts of how human society ought to function. They also seem to have a different view of the relationships between ends and means, or the relationships between causes and effects. Furthermore, terrorists mobilize support from a population of sympathizers (that is, individuals who would not themselves commit a terrorist act, but are willing to facilitate or tolerate terrorist acts by others) by means that are different from the ways in which democratic political organizations (or, for that matter, autocratic states) mobilize support.

Consequently, some of the standard approaches to strategic intelligence analysis, which work reasonably well when the subject of the analysis is a state, do not work well when the subject is terrorism. Analysts cannot reason from the objectives of the terrorist organization and the objective situation that faces the organization to a manageable list of options for action. Partly this is because the terrorists' appreciation of the objective situation they face may be quite different from that analyst's view. But even more, it is because the terrorists' concept of what actions will advance their objectives may be one that the analyst does not share and does not understand. To some extent this difference may arise because the terrorist has an idiosyncratic view of the vulnerabilities of the power structure he wishes to attack. To some extent it may arise because the analyst does not understand as well as the terrorists do what behavior by the terrorists will strengthen

their support from sympathizers and add to their resources. But also, it seems that some terrorists have a concept of the nature of human society and human motivation quite different from what one would learn in a Western – or for that matter Japanese or Chinese – educational system.

Analysts must be very cautious about building a template of a hypothetical terrorist action, and then looking for data that would fit into this template. This analytical method – which can be used very effectively to sort through large quantities of data in working many kinds of intelligence problem – fails when the analyst does not understand the adversary well enough to judge which possible strategies the adversary would consider effective and appropriate. Similarly, the technique of seizing upon some data and inferring what additional data to look for – the technique of inferring that anybody who purchases an automobile must sooner or later purchase either gasoline or diesel fuel – fails to yield clues or warnings regarding a terrorist threat that we do not expect. Instead, strategic analysis must be based upon consideration of a very wide range of information, including information from a very wide range of sources. The metaphor of "connecting the dots" must be modified to recognize that strategic intelligence means reviewing several thousand dots in order to connect a few hundred of them.

In the light of these difficulties, there is a strong case to be made for departing from the traditional approaches to strategic intelligence. Ways must be found to consider simultaneously the information derived from secret sources and the information derived from open sources. Ways must be found to bring to bear simultaneously expertise regarding terrorists and terrorism and expertise regarding the societies and cultures from which terrorists and sympathizers are recruited. Ways must be found to expose tentative ideas or hypotheses to those with different backgrounds, skill sets, or pre-occupations in order to elicit the creative impulse o see the same facts from a different perspective. And, given the great difficulty we have in comprehending how terrorists view the world, analysis should involve collaboration of people from different cultures and educational systems who can effectively probe each other's assumptions and mental habits.

This would be a very substantial departure from the normal practices of generating intelligence. We would, to be sure, retain the existing staffs of intelligence analysts with security clearances, operating in a closed and secure environment and working to make sense of secret information gathered through a variety of sources and methods. (It is possible, however, that assigning a substantial number of them to work on strategic analysis, with no pressure whatever to produce tactical intelligence, would be a departure from existing practice.) But instead of having this tightly closed group produce its reports in secret and disseminate them directly to Government officials with security clearances and a need-to-know, we would ask this group of traditional intelligence analysts to work collaboratively with analysts drawing upon very different information sources and using very different analytical methods. Specifically, we would ask them to collaborate with academic experts – treating the academics not as "sources" to be queried and cited, but as colleagues with whom to engage in a two-way give-and-take of ideas, perceptions, and interpretations. In addition, we would seek out experts in drawing information from the Internet and from the mass media. We would ask them to try to

understand how the world appears to the sympathizers of the terrorists and the communities from which these sympathizers are drawn – in the hope that this would offer insights and clues to how the terrorists themselves understand the world. Here too, we would ask the traditional intelligence analysts to treat these experts not as sources but as collaborators.

Finally, in order to obtain the creativity that arises from the interaction of people with similar factual expertise and similar skills, but with different educational backgrounds and different assumptions, we would try to make this collaborative effort to produce strategic intelligence a multi-national one.

This program would probably not look very attractive to an intelligence agency focused on generating actionable – hence tactical – intelligence. To attempt to review very large amounts of diverse data would lengthen the intelligence cycle. To work collaboratively with experts outside the tight community of secret intelligence would jeopardize security. Security – or at least the traditional approaches to security – would also be jeopardized by multinational collaboration. But perhaps the strongest challenge to normal intelligence methods would be the abandonment of the principle of need-to-know, based on the idea that so long as we don't really understand how our adversaries think, we cannot say who has a need to know any given fragment of intelligence.

Accordingly, the Governments of countries concerned with terrorism should give consideration to organizing strategic intelligence analysis separately from the processes that aim to produce actionable intelligence. Both the strategic and the tactical would pursue the same aims of counterterrorism, and both would draw upon the same streams of raw data, but they would function very differently. If both produce useful results, we should expect these results to complement each other and enhance each other's usefulness.

There are a number of Governments that might benefit from setting up separate strategic counterterrorism intelligence processes, and the most appropriate form of organization would no doubt vary from country to country. I would argue, however, that three characteristics are essential:

1. The strategic counterterrorism intelligence effort should have a certain degree of autonomy, so that the people leading the effort on a day-to-day basis would understand that their mission is strategic intelligence and not tactical, "actionable" intelligence. Otherwise the continuity of effort that is necessary for high quality strategic intelligence would be jeopardized by the temptation to seek immediately useful results.

2. To make this autonomy secure, the strategic intelligence effort should have an identifiable stream of resources (people and money) that is separate from the resources devoted to tactical intelligence. Moreover, such a separate resource stream would allow the Government to consciously balance the strategic and the tactical. Readers of an early

draft of this paper noted an implication that strategic intelligence deserves more resources than it is currently receiving. I must disclaim any such proposition – because I have no idea what resources are devoted to strategic intelligence.

3. The strategic intelligence effort needs a set of security rules that are more flexible than those appropriate for tactical intelligence. If strategic intelligence is to have any chance of "getting inside the heads" of the terrorist leadership, or of understanding the world views of the communities from which the terrorists recruit, its practitioners must work collaboratively with their counterparts in many other countries. They must also be able to experiment with collaborative efforts with private citizens who share their abhorrence of terrorism, but whose backgrounds and motivations would disqualify them from receiving – or wanting – security clearances.

Following these suggestions would certainly not be free of cost, disruption, and even risk. I cannot demonstrate conclusively that the results would justify the effort. Nevertheless, given the importance and difficulty of the problem, and the disappointing quality to date of strategic counterterrorism intelligence, there is a strong case that efforts along these lines would at the least be a worthwhile experiment.