

Dreams about Terrorists: Wolves, Wolf Packs and Resources

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Terrorists provide alibis for hungry security establishments in search of themselves. Their physical effect is always small relative to the psychic disturbances they cause. Know thyself, urges the Delphic maxim, but self-knowledge implies an acceptance of ignorance. Nothing doing when it comes to the issue of finding the elusive “lone wolf” terrorist, a creature that has become more irritant than reality in security circles.

The efforts on the parts of lone wolves, and more importantly, terrorists in general, are never entirely calculable, reliable or clear. Yet they remain ever useful for policy makers, think tanks and pundits bloated on the largesse of the national security state.

Money may not have smell, claimed Emperor Vespasian, but one can never deny its allure. (In the emperor’s case, it was reaped from an infamous urine tax.) Bodies and entities receiving it will always operate on that truest of public service mentalities: more is always better, whatever the cause.

With the Orlando killings, another spike in speculative assessment was bound to take place, charging the strategic boardrooms and think tank workshops with the next model, framework and means of assessment. What matters in such workings is that they are sold as scientific, positivist formulae, methods that clarify a murky, sodden world of incalculable variables.

Bruce Riedel from Brookings makes his contribution to the world of counter-terrorism chat by considering the threat of “wolf packs”. In the scrounging for the exceptional term in a field of re-invented wheels, Riedel is thrilled to have come across terminology that was used for the German U-Boats of the Second World War.

Showing no sign of awareness about its origins, he enthusiastically applies the term to understand the “greater threat” of having “small groups of terrorists” operating on home soil. Be wary of ostracising the followers of the Prophet or “the wolf pack threat will grow”.^[1]

Judging from the body count occasioned by guns, the threat to the modern US republic seems far more a case of individuals who believe that mediation is best left out of the dispute resolution process. Grievance is primary; ideology is secondary. The issue of marauding packs of Allah-inspired lone wolves revives a frontier motif that is charmingly anachronistic, but typical of this field.

Nonetheless, Riedel insists that there was an attempt to mount “a wolf pack” assault on the New York City subway system in 2009 that “was foiled because our intelligence services detected the conspiracy.”

Amy Zegart, whose interests lie in the areas of intelligence history and theory, sees the response to the killings in Orlando in terms of process and assessment rather than the type of terrorist. Keep it smooth, informed and reliable and all will follow. Ask the right questions, she seems to be suggesting, and you will be set free.

Zegart takes as her point of reference the 2009 attack in Fort Hood, and smugly proclaims how the FBI got it wrong. (Naturally, she is also flogging her findings in a forthcoming book chapter.)

Questions, she asserts, should be raised in four areas, though all of these seem steeped in the structure and resources of countering threats. The big word common to all? Radicalisation and with that gathering and acting upon “early intel” about its noxious consequences.

In Fort Hood, the Bureau dragged its feet about early signs about Nidal Hasan, “a radicalizing Muslim Army officer who was emailing AQAP’s Anwar al-Aulaqi nearly a year before the officer went on a shooting rampage at Fort Hood”.^[2] Much of this dragging on Hasan’s emerging plumage was largely occasioned by cluelessness, a lack of coordination.

Forward the historical wheel to Orlando, and Zegart asks if the FBI was similarly confused in its 2013-4 investigations into Omar Mateen. Sharing information is all, though Zegart then proceeds to wonder what the FBI’s version of an “investigation” (in the Fort Hood case, four hours was given) is.

Pinching the hat of FBI recruitment, she wonders whether adequate staff were also at hand to assess Mateen’s case. (Are they ever?) In terms of Fort Hood, the relevant personnel had “no serious counter-terrorism experience.”

Her greatest scolding is reserved for last. The FBI erred in treating Hassan’s case “through a law enforcement lens, not an intelligence lens.” The right question to ask about Hassan was whether he “might in future be involved in terrorist activities”. What Zegart clumsily sidesteps is the obvious point that intelligence agencies have hardly covered themselves in glory in the soothsaying department. The future is unknowable – even the Bureau can only act in accordance with what has happened.

Staff, resources, making the right decisions; these points characterise the remarks of Garrett M. Graff, whose *Politico* pitch makes clear that the national security state is suffering from a lack of personnel. Graff does not take the cane to FBI assessments as Zegart does, but suggests a growing “surveillance gap”.^[3]

Such observations seem extraordinary in a country boasting such agencies as the NSA, whose penchant for unwarranted surveillance has been pressed home since Edward Snowden spoiled the party.

For Graff, those wise men and women of the counter-terrorism brother and sisterhood insist that the Bureau “isn’t big enough to tackle the new era of online radicalization and independent acting lone wolves.” Policing No-fly lists and the Terrorist Screening Database consume resources at a voracious rate, a veritable “resource crunch”.

There you have it; the age old appeal for greater resources and personnel when facing crises new and remarkable. When a justification to feed a security habit is needed, it is sufficient to simply call the emergency exceptional.

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/06/17-orlando-lone-wolves-riedel>
- [2] <https://www.lawfareblog.com/lessons-fort-hood-and-asking-right-questions-orlando>
- [3] <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/06/orlando-terror-fbi-surveillance-gap-213967>

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