Terrorism and the 'Invisible'

By Michael Barkun

Much of the fear terrorism evokes is connected to its invisible character. Unlike states tied to fixed geographical locations, terrorists have, as is frequently said, "no return address." The organizations are clandestine, the members melt into the general population, and "sleeper cells" may lie dormant for long periods waiting for the opportune time to strike. Although the weapons terrorists actually employ are visible enough – bombs, box-cutters, and the like – governments and citizens are often obsessively concerned about tools and tactics they might use, particularly those with means of dispersal that are invisible: biological, chemical, and radiological. Thus, fear of the unseen, both in terms of perpetrators and methods, provides contemporary terrorism with a particularly sinister edge.

Yet it is not automatically clear what it means to say that something is "invisible." This article employs the term in a broader sense than its common usage. Here, it refers not merely to what cannot be seen, but to anything that cannot be detected by the unaided senses. The dangers connected to invisible terrorism are those that are either produced intentionally by terrorists or believed by potential victims to be produced intentionally. Thus, the invisible dangers associated with terrorism may be real, in the sense that they reflect the actions of actual terrorists and weapons; or they may rest on false attributions, for example, the frequently cited but specious link between Sadaam Hussein and the September 11th hijackers.

Terrorists can secure intentional invisibility through four principle means: organizational secrecy; secret communications; technical invisibility; and crowd invisibility. Organizational invisibility occurs through such well-known means as cellular organizations; the careful vetting of recruits; tests of loyalty; and other techniques through which secret societies of many kinds have historically maintained their boundaries against spies, informants, and surveillance.

Similarly, secret communications within clandestine groups has a long history. Much of it involves forms of encryption, ranging from the primitive to the sophisticated. Some organizations have kept secrets from their own members through internal hierarchies with differential levels of knowledge. This creates a form of invisibility even within the organization, to the extent that the organization as a whole may attempt to be invisible vis-à-vis the outside world, while creating degrees of invisibility within, depending upon what has been revealed to different classes of members.

The more hostile the relationship between a group and the larger society, the less adequate these techniques will be for maintaining invisibility. Where terrorists are concerned, therefore, one often finds two additional modalities, technical invisibility and crowd invisibility.

Technical invisibility refers to invisibility that systematically seeks to defeat the human senses and the attempts of authorities to artificially enhance them. Especially since September 11th, terrorists and governments compete; the former seeking to conceal, the latter seeking to unmask. Airport screening has become increasingly elaborate and with more attention being given to technologies that can detect minute quantities of dangerous chemicals and biological agents. Large cities are also using closed-circuit television to monitor public spaces. Research continues for ever subtler ways to detect behavioral cues that might separate terrorists from innocent members of the public. But however much the technology of detection has advanced, it has not produced the desired results. Neither governments nor the general public believe that all terrorists or weapons can be detected, or that the threat of a major attack can be reduced to something approaching zero. To that extent, terrorists are perceived as having maintained some degree of technical invisibility. Each new attack validates the perception.

Terrorists may utilize crowd invisibility, a condition encapsulated by the well-known phrase, "hiding in plain sight." When the qualities that differentiate individuals can no longer be detected, as in a crowd, one person seems very like another. This is true by extension whether the class is made up of airline passengers, luggage, or shipping containers. Small differences cease to be noticeable in large groupings made up of superficially similar members.

Differences become of great importance if some members of a class are more dangerous than others. In that case, their ability to melt into a population and take advantage of crowd invisibility becomes an acute problem. Among the alternatives are either to carefully examine each member of the class, a laborious process, or to find some technology that ferrets out those that present dangers. Much of the attention given to the technological extension of the senses to defeat technical invisibility is also driven by the dilemma of crowd invisibility. To an extent, then, the two forms of invisibility are often linked. The challenge is to distinguish the particular suitcase, passenger, or shipping container that matters from all the rest, an enterprise that seeks to frustrate both technical and crowd invisibility. The same may hold true for so-called "sleeper cell," whose members live conformist and superficially blameless lives, melting into the environment. This sub-group maintains a functional invisibility until such time as they are activated, unless members falter in their conformity to the community's mores.

While these modalities are intentionally chosen by groups with hostile intent, putative targets may also identify invisible dangers where none in fact exist. These are cases of attributed invisibility. They occur in three principle ways: through over-inclusive classes, belief in conspiracy theories, and as a result of false or fragmentary intelligence.

Over-inclusive classes occur as a variant of the crowd invisibility problem. In this case, however, because observers' difficulties are compounded by situations in which there is contact between groups with dissimilar cultures or belief systems, there is a strong likelihood that dangers will be invented as opposed to being recognized. At least one side, and sometimes both, will be burdened by substantial ignorance of the other. As a result observers lack the ability to correctly interpret behavior and intentions, and are

likely to impute risk and danger where none exists. In such a condition of ignorance, the entire observed group may seem both sinister and partially "invisible" due to its opaqueness to outsiders. This invisibility and particularly the associations of dangers with an amorphous "other" will be amplified when some of its practices cannot be publicly viewed because they take place behind the doors of homes, houses of worship, or other facilities. The effect of observers' ignorance is to project danger on the other based on their own fears rather than on clear evidence.

Conspiracy theories are a more straight-forward form of attributed invisibility, because they offer a world-view built around imagined secrets. They do so because the conspiracist makes three cardinal assumptions: that nothing happens by accident; that everything is connected; and that nothing is as it seems. Thus the visible world, seen naively through the senses, is said to hide the real but invisible workings of evil. With the theory as a template, the conspiracist can then, as it were, "decode" the clues available in the visible world. Indeed, one can imagine situations in which both terrorists and their potential victims conceptualize each other through mirroring conspiracy theories, each imputing invisible perpetrators and weapons to the other.

Fragmentary or erroneous intelligence provides a clearer case. The cliché metaphor of "connecting the dots" presumes that enough pieces of valid information exist to construct an accurate representation. However, not all of the information may be valid, or there may be too few pieces from which to produce a coherent narrative. Whether or not it is possible to determine the validity of the information, the temptation may be to interpolate enough potential "facts" to create a plausible picture, but one which will presumably be consistent with pre-existing prejudices and expectations, including expectations about invisible perpetrators and weapons.

It remains only to emphasize that the fear invisibility engenders in potential victims is not lost on terrorists, who recognize that invisibility can be manipulated as a weapon. While the obvious advantage of invisibility is avoiding detection, there are two additional benefits. The first is the likelihood that potential targets will significantly over-estimate terrorists' numbers and capabilities. Such mis-estimations were commonly made by nineteenth-century governments facing dissident secret societies, and there is little reason to think that this tendency has ceased. The second and more subtle effect, alluded to in much of the preceding, is the fear generated by the invisible. For those who live in a culture imbued with a materialist and scientific ethos, the presence of unseen dangers is particularly disturbing. They fill the world with mysterious and malevolent forces, transforming benign environments into, to use the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's evocative phrase, "landscapes of fear."

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