HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS AND STUDY OF TERRORISM

José María Blanco Navarro
Centre of Analysis and Foresight, Guardia Civil
Madrid, Spain

Keywords: terrorism in Europe; prevention; holistic approach.

Abstract: Thirteen years after 9/11, the production of expertise about terrorism, by members of the academic world and law enforcement agency (LEA) analysts has increased. Despite this fact, it has had no influence either on the methodologies used or in the need to integrate the huge amount of fragmented knowledge that already exists. This article proposes a new holistic approach for the prevention of and fight against terrorism.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Thirteen years after 9/11, the production of expertise about terrorism, by members of the academic world and law enforcement agency (LEA) analysts has increased. Despite this fact, it has had no influence either on the methodologies used or in the need to integrate the huge amount of fragmented knowledge that already exists. The same topics are studied over and over again, and they obey to opportunity criteria and to the interest to monitor current events. Moreover, the general ‘recipes’ to fight terrorism are always the same: international collaboration and cooperation, or fostering intelligence. Besides, counter-terrorist policies are not measured or assessed in more depth.

How can we move beyond? Is there any room for other approaches, or have we exhausted all our resources? How can we broaden our horizons?

Surveys about terrorism usually offer interesting perspectives, but they are partial. Although this issue is approached from different academic fields (history, philosophy, sociology, psychology or criminology), they do not offer a full picture that explains the whole phenomenon. Surveys only show parts of it, but not the so called ‘Big Picture’.

The philosopher Edgar Morin (2011) underlines the existence of a ‘cognitive blindness derived from a way to acquire knowledge which, by compartmentalising knowledge (and I would add, by compartmentalising ‘our actions’), disintegrates fundamental and global problems that require a multidisciplinary approach’. We are equally blinded by our ignorance and by our knowledge, because they are always partial. Morin goes further when he states that in our current world there is a conjunction of egocentrism (the horizon we perceive responds to our own interests and not to the general interest), specialisation (it moves us away from global things) and compartmentalisation (it isolates us in bureaucratised jobs).

Flaws can also be identified at methodological level, and they derive from the lack of creativity regarding new approaches, and from an excessive confidence in case study and terrorist profiles. Some authors highlight the obsession for details (Lowenthal, 2013; Sageman, 2013). The so called ‘Big Data’ is a revolution because it is a source of development that allows managing huge amounts of information and applying predictive techniques. When studying the phenomenon of terrorism or analysing intelligence, this obsession for details can let us know what is going on, but not its causes or the most appropriate measures to be implemented. In the best-case scenario, we can guess that some event will probably happen in the
future, or we can compare patterns, but it does not guarantee that the future will be that way (Taleb, 2012). In addition, if analysts get used to having every possible detail before making a diagnosis, this might result in an excessive dependence that might lead to paralysis (Lowenthal, 2013).

Stern & Horgan (2013) discuss Sageman’s conclusions about the relative stagnation in terrorism studies, as Bruce Hoffman had already done, providing significant and very interesting examples for analysis. This discussion continues in 2014, with several papers published in the journal ‘Terrorism and Political Violence’, by Sageman, Schmid, Taylor, Stern, and Schanzer.

Ranstorp (2009) also highlights this paralysis in research that requires new theoretical and methodological models. In 2000, before the events of 9/11, Martha Crenshaw (2000) stated that these new challenges are limited due to the lack of a commonly agreed definition of ‘terrorism’, the inability to build a comprehensive theoretical corpus, and the nature of those researches that follow every event taking place at a given moment, continuous in the case of terrorism.

The fragmentation of knowledge pertaining to terrorism (Ranstorp, 2009) points out the need to combine classical and critical approaches. The old debate about the need of generalists versus specialists is gaining momentum again. A global picture is critical to integrate and relate so much scattered knowledge. We consider that it would be necessary for generalists to specialise in this task.

THE FUTURE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

Political decision-makers take counter-terrorist measures without objective analysis, mainly responding to opportunity or social alarm, triggered by some event and without designing future scenarios that will ever take place during their term of office.

The International Centre developed important research for Counter-Terrorism (Bakker, 2012), analysing the references to the future evolution of this phenomenon in 60 surveys conducted by well-known institutions and experts. This survey reaches a conclusion: most of them lack a methodological basis; in general, they do not even mention possible dynamics of change that allow establishing indicators to monitor the evolution of the phenomenon. At best these surveys are a goodwill gesture based on personal opinions and intuition based on experience or trend forecasting.

Lia (2005) points out that literature about the future of terrorism has lacked a systematic way of thinking on how social change creates new environments for terrorism. Normally individual events or cases are used and extrapolated, but no analysis is carried out about the evolution of those factors determining the environment where terrorism can increase or be tackled.

The report about 9/11 stressed in a chapter devoted to prospective analysis (‘Foresight and Hindsight’), that the lack of imagination was the major mistake when trying to prevent terrorist attacks.

NEED FOR HOLISTIC APPROACHES

New approaches are required, more predictive and based on structured analysis and forecasting methodologies and techniques, both quantitative and qualitative that include creativity in logical reasoning processes, combining intuition and critical thinking when studying a phenomenon, especially when resorting to it to make decisions in situations of uncertainty (Kahneman, 2011).

Among the different attempts to create such a model, Brynjar Lia’s deserves special attention. The main advantage of this proposal is that it defines a framework to analyse the environment regarding the potential socio-political changes enabling the evolution of terrorism.

Lia basically mentions that there are factors such as international relations (leadership, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, democratisation, fragile states, multilateralism, peace support interventions, non-governmental actions), economic factors (inequality, relationship between economy and politics, organised crime, energy), demographic factors (growth and migrations), ideologies and technologies, that would allow identifying the causes of terrorism and predicting the future (target patterns, terrorism level, deadliness, ideological motivations, geographical location, etc.).
Therefore, the model we propose, already used by the Centre of Analysis and Foresight, Guardia Civil (Centro de Análisis y Prospectiva), is based on the following main pillars:

1. The need to focus intelligence surveys, analyses and actions on answering to the question: ‘what for?’ Decision-making is the major goal, from the point of view of police forces, both at strategic (policies) and operational level.

2. Including a time perspective. We shape the future through the decisions we make in every moment. Expectations introduce causal factors. The past projects in our everyday life following our training and life experiences, but our future prospects also condition our decisions at present. Consequently, we can state that these three moments overlap.

3. The integration of every applicable methodology, from a holistic time-based perspective. From a methodological point of view, it would start from the scientific method and social sciences, incorporating the structured techniques of intelligence analysis, and even including Big Data or a rigorous prospective concept.

4. As regards strategic and operational aspects, the use of global systems and models that allow supporting early warning systems. The starting point would be using methodologies such as Environmental Scanning and Horizon Scanning.

5. Benefiting from the synergies among studies about intelligence and terrorism, with the involvement of police experts.

6. Creating a new intelligence cycle based on technology, modifying the classic one. Technology allows foreseeing the stages of such cycles and, as a result, after the scanning phase would already comprise functions such as information classification, source assessment, integration and relation, as well as pre-analysis (geo-location, patterns, etc.).

7. Continuous efforts aimed at training analysts in fields such as cognitive biases, critical thinking, analysis methodologies, information visualisation, drafting of reports, etc.

REFERENCES


