The Threat: A historical perception

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Everyone in this room knows that discussions on the definition of the concept of terrorism are endless. I will not go very much into this discussion, but only raise a few points concerning the understanding and the discourse of the threat of terrorism:

If we can't agree on a definition of terrorism it follows that an understanding of the level and the size of the threat is hard to analyze and communicate: Looking at facts it seems that threats of terrorism in real terms are a very minor problem. In Europe we do not have had major incidents since the tragic London bombings. The plots that have been toppled have – except from a few (the Heathrow plot) – been rather amateurish. The same goes for USA: The latest, the Detroit plot, was indeed very amateurish in its orchestration and except from the Ford Hood massacre it was the most severe attempt in years. Even if we take the very nasty incidences, like the Mumbai attack, into account, it seems that there is a gab between on the one side the rhetoric of al-Qaida – who celebrated the Detroit case as a great victory – and the Western States anti-terrorism communities and on the other side the facts on the ground: Compared to traffic, health problems as a result of consuming bad food, alcohol and tobacco, terrorism is in the Western world a diminishing source of

mortality. That means taking security in a broader sense and incorporating infrastructure, travel, climate, consumerism, prostitution, war; terrorism measured in casualties is a minor security problem.

Still terrorism creates enormous fear, a fact that to an extreme degree is exploited by the today's terrorists. Even a minor attack or foiled plot creates a climate of fear in societies that forces states to robust action and sometimes even to go to war as we have seen in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places. On the one side it means that the political discourse on terrorism threat is very important with enormous consequences both politically, sociologically, economically and in international relations. On the other side it is impossible to provide exact methods and figures of the level of terrorism activity or the size of the threat: They are always a result of interpretation in a given political and cultural context. One example: When the then newly established National Counterterrorism Center, an outcome of the U.S. Intelligence Reform in 2004, preliminarily in April 2005 published its figures for death casualties from terrorism, it listed 1907 globally in 2004. In the same publication the Center outlines its theoretical considerations and methodology for collecting data, but after a discussion and political storm inside the beltway in Washington, D.C. the Center revised its methods and in June adjusted the figures to 28.433 wounded, injured or kidnapped. One problem was defining the casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan: Were they victims of war or of terrorism?

Obviously it would be hard to make the argument of an increasing threat from terrorism in 2005 if the total figure of victims globally in 2004 was 1907, which is more than thousand lesser than the amount of victims from 9/11 in Washington and New York City in 2001. So making the argument that the Western World in 2005 is facing a severe threat from terrorism, it was necessary to revise the methodology by which data is collected and interpreted. But still you could in a scientific way make

the argument that the level of victims of terrorism and therefore the threat of terrorism is lesser in 2005 than, say in the 1970's where Europe was terrorized by political violence from ethnic as well as right and left wing extremists. Especially Brigate Rosse in Italy was very brutal.

The counterargument would rightfully be, that even if the total figure of victims in the Western World is lesser after 9/11 compared to 1970's, so are the figures of terror incidents, meaning that today's terrorism is much more brutal aiming at mass murder: 9/11, Madrid 2004, London 2005, Mumbai 2008. Measuring the threat of terrorism in pure figures of victims could thus lead to the conclusion that the threat is lesser today, but measured in the way terrorism today is conducted aiming at killing an increasing amount of civilians in each individual terrorism incident, the threat is bigger and much more serious.

The analysis of the threat from terrorism cannot therefore exclusively be based on pure figures or on solid methodology that guaranties objective results: Pure figures needs interpretation and a solid objective methodology is unfortunately not available. We are always looking at reality in a political and societal context that prefigure our understanding of the facts and as the example from the National Counterterrorism Center shows, the facts are in them selves results of interpretation. We would therefore need to build in other perspectives on the evaluation of the threat like targets, intentions of mass casualties, capacity of terrorist organizations, popular support, effectiveness of dissemination of ideological propaganda, and possibilities of transnational organization of terrorism. And we could, as shown, end up concluding that even if the evidences seems to point at a decreasing activity in terrorism, the threat is actually increasing.

In this respect, 9/11 was an eye-opener: Planned and organized in the mountains of Afghanistan, operators recruited in Europe, trained in the USA, and the terrorist act conducted in Washington and New York City thousands of miles away from the Jihadi battlegrounds in the Middle East and South Asia with the said intention of trigging an Islamic revolution in the Arab Middle East,

we witnessed a new form of terrorism not seen that developed before, although with the al-Qaida attack on the U.S. Embassies in East Africa in 1998 as a kind of a rehearsal. Some researches labeled this new way of organizing terrorism postmodern terrorism or simply the new terrorism which referred to, that is was able reaping the fruits of globalization: The softening of borders after the Cold War and the advanced developments in Information technology making the world smaller and opportunities of communication and financial transactions bigger. Exactly these globalized features transformed terrorism from being an international crime to be a globalized enterprise. The latest example of this globalized threat is the Chicago plot involving a Canadian-Pakistani businessman in Chicago, an American citizen travelling as an employee in the company gathering information on possible terror targets, connections to AQ and militants in Pakistan with bonds to a homegrown network somewhere in Europe, planning an attack in Denmark as revenge for some drawings of the prophet Muhammad published in a Danish daily. We have at least three geographically different centers located here: In America, in Europe, and in Asia working on the same plot in Scandinavia.

In a historical perspective, which I was asked to do in this important event, I would say that this globalized feature of AQ and AQ affiliated terrorism is the most important trait of today's threat compared to former modes of organizing terrorism. Let's take a historical view: The concept of terrorism originates during the French revolution. Up to the famous speech of Robespierre in 1794 where he claimed the necessity of using terror against the contra revolutionaries we did not have the word

terrorism in our language. From the second century during the reign of the Roman Empire the concept terror, which is Latin for 'fear', was used to describe a certain technique state authorities conducted in order to control and deter subjects from organizing revolt against the ruler or to gather information from slaves and prisoners almost in the same way that we today use the concept torture. In this way, it were used by thinkers and philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and Voltaire and clearly when Robespierre orchestrated the Reign of Terror his intention was to deter people from working against his idea of the revolution. In the discussions among the people around Robespierre the concepts terror and virtue became coupled in a strange way that is still the core argument for many today to legitimate terrorism: It was a duty of virtue to use terror in order to create the just state. This was also the idea behind the speech of Robespierre, but as you know he himself became a victim of this ideology as he ended his days in the guillotine in July 1794. But the discourse combining the concepts of terror, virtue, and political order lived on but strongest by people opposing the state: Since the French revolution it became more and more illegitimate for the state to use visible violence against the citizens unless it was formalized through the rule of law or between states conducted due to the increasing codifications of rules of war while the political opponents of the states increasingly adopted the strange idea of the virtue of terror which the French enemies of Robespierre already in 1794 named terrorism.

While terror at least up to the French revolution was connected to the state, terrorism increasingly became a non-state enterprise conducted by opponents of the state. At least that was the way it was interpreted from the perspective of the state. But also in many of the writings of the anarchists in the nineteen's century. Terrorism was a tactic, a tool or a method that the rightful suppressed could use against unjust rulers or occupation nations. Since WW2 groups in Israel up to 1948 made that argument blowing up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946, as did the Algerian

Liberation Front in the 1950's against the French State, The South African ANC against the Apartheid regime, and IRA against the British rule. They were all liberation wars using terrorism as a tactic legitimized as a virtue of the just people. The same goes for the Palestinian struggle and their use of aviation terrorism since the late 1960's and 1970's.

In the late sixties the argument of terror as virtue was sophisticated by especially left wing groups who gathered inspiration from Third World thinkers and strategists like Franz Fanon or Carlos Marighella and developed an idea of Urban Guerilla combined with Tiersmondism: The suppressed in the capitalistic systems in the West should align up with revolutionaries or liberation groups in the Third World to support simultaneously an emancipation from the colonists in the Third World and the Capitalists in the West. Ho Chi Min and Che Guevara became the heroes of the day. Many of these groups as well as liberation groups in the Third World were supported from states: Rote Armee Fraktion from DDR, Palestinians from the Communist bloc, Mujahidin in Afghanistan from USA, and many cooperated across borders: IRA with ETA or RAF with PFLP. Therefore it is fair to name their activity international terrorism because they cooperated internationally. But their agendas were basically local or regional. Even the program for a World Revolution propagated by RAF was in rhetoric and content coined in German history, philosophy and dogmatic ideology of Marxism.

Otherwise with AQ and AQ affiliated groups: Osama Bin Laden's world view and way of framing his analysis of international conflicts in a simple scheme of a fundamental war between the Christians and Zionists on the one side and the (true) Muslims on the other side echoes in the Muslim diasporas and societies everywhere whereby a discourse that claim a direct course between local grievances and global conflicts is made available to the opponents of the western way of life. This message

is repeated daily on the jihadi discussions forums, it has some resonance by people perceiving them selves as marginalized all over the world, and to a degree it nourish from the wars in the Middle East and South Asia – and the political rhetoric on immigrants in the Western societies, including the printing of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. It has given rise to a transnational network that establishes it self in the virtual cyber world, but acts in the real world, sometimes orchestrating terrorism. It is up to you to decide and discuss whether this new development in the history of terrorism also is a bigger threat than earlier forms or it is just business as usual. I think it is new development.