

THE CITIZEN

Get a life, for heaven's sake! Terrorists are no big threat

Jonathan Power | Wednesday, 22 August 2012

British Prime Minister David Cameron (pictured) has ordered the continuation during the Paralympics that begin next week of the deployment of anti-aircraft guns surrounding the Olympic Park. In a move that caused much outrage in Britain Cameron argued that the country must always be vigilant in case of a terrorist attack. Yet there was not one bit of evidence that international terrorists and certainly not Al-Qaeda were gearing up for what would have to be a sophisticated and highly complex assault on the Olympics.

Since 9/11 Western governments have indulged in terrorism paranoia. The evidence suggests there is little substance in these much exaggerated worries – except in India where the Pakistani government and military appear to more than tolerate anti-Indian terrorist groups.

According to the US Department of Homeland Security, terrorists “have proven to be relentless, patient, opportunistic and flexible.” In reality, according to case studies of all the terrorist actions worldwide since 9/11 made by professors John Mueller and Mark Stewart, appearing in an article in this month’s “International Security” (published by Harvard University) terrorists are “incompetent, ineffective, ignorant, inadequate, unorganised, muddled and amateurish.”

As Shikha Dalmia has written (quoted in the article) terrorists need to be “radicalised enough to die for their cause; Westernized enough to move around without raising red flags; ingenious enough to exploit loopholes in the security apparatus; miraculous enough to attend to the myriad logistical details; self-sufficient enough to make all their preparations without enlisting outsiders who might give them away; disciplined enough to maintain complete secrecy; and, above all, psychologically tough enough to keep functioning at a high level without cracking in the face of their impending death”.

These characteristics do not abound in humanity. Indeed the only method since 9/11 by which Islamist terrorists operating in the US have managed to kill anyone is by the use of gunfire. (And let it not be forgotten that pre 9/11 the 1970s witnessed 70 terrorist incidents.) Europe is not much different.

Dana Priest, an experienced reporter with the Washington Post, says that she listened to the claims of the intelligence services of the likely astronomical growth in terrorism, meant to justify their fast increasing budgets, and she “asked them to share with us anything they could, plots that were foiled that we could put in the paper because we didn’t have many examples...we didn’t receive anything back.”

If undisclosed plotters have been set on violence why have they committed so little of it before being waylaid? Why were there so few plots in the months and years after 9/11 before “enhanced” security measures were effectively deployed? In 2002 the US intelligence agencies told Congress that the number of trained Al-Qaeda operatives in the US was between 2,000 and 5,000 – a wilful, distortion.

It seems very unclear whether central Al Qaeda of around 100 people, holed up in Pakistan after they fled Afghanistan once 9/11 was a done deed, has done very much except issue videos with delusional threats. This is not to say their offspring (rather than affiliates) in Iraq, Yemen and Somalia have not done serious harm or their imitators, as in the London bus attack and the Madrid train bombing, are not a cause for concern. Outside war zones the annual death toll has varied between 200 and 400 a year – about the same number as bathtub drownings in the US.

The one thing that Al Qaeda has been successful at is alienating the overwhelming majority of Muslims for its kind of jihad. Even radical Islamists have turned against it. In the US itself Al Qaeda has had great difficulty in recruiting Americans. Perhaps the only success was in Lackawanna, an upstate New York town, when an operative tried to convert Yemeni-American men.

Mueller and Stewart, after examining their extensive datasets on terrorism, have concluded that the chance of someone dying because of an attack is one in 3.5 million per year. In 2007 New York mayor, Michael Bloomberg, the only senior politician to put the threat in perspective, told New Yorkers “to get a life”. And told them that they have a greater chance of being killed by lightning than murdered by a terrorist.

There is much loose talk that terrorists might one day get their hands on some sort of nuclear weapon or explosive. But the computers seized in the raid that left bin Laden dead reveal no such activity. The only fear these days is that home grown – but not Al-Qaeda – militants may infiltrate one of the sites storing Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. They may but with the locks on weapons installed by the US at the request of the Pakistani government they would not be useable. Only three senior, trusted, people, including the president, possess the codes to unlock them.

Prime Minister Cameron: “Get a life”!

Mr Power’s column on world affairs is syndicated internationally.