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Terrorism, Homeland Security and the National Emergency Management Network

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Abstract

On September 11, 2001, officials and agencies that are part of the national emergency management system orchestrated the responses to the collapse of the World Trade Center towers and the fires at the Pentagon. The efforts of local, state, and federal emergency agencies were augmented by nonprofit organizations, private firms, and organized and unorganized volunteers. The system reacted much as it would have for a major earthquake or similar disaster. In the rush to create federal and state offices to deal with the threat of terrorism and, ultimately, to create a Department of Homeland Security, the very foundation of the nation's capacity to deal with large scale disasters has been largely ignored. Although the human and material resources that the emergency management network provides may again be critical in a terrorist-spawned catastrophe, the new Homeland Security system may not be capable of utilizing those resources effectively. The values of transparency, cooperation, and collaboration that have come to characterize emergency management over the past decade seem to be supplanted in the new command-and-control-oriented Homeland Security system. If that occurs, when the resources of the national emergency management system are needed most, the capacity to utilize the system may be severely damaged and cultural interoperability will be a serious problem.

Introduction

The events of September 11th demonstrated the vulnerability of American society to political attack and the willingness of our enemies to kill thousands, perhaps millions, of people. Other capitals and other national and cultural symbols may also have been targeted. The first lessons from the tragic events were that open societies are vulnerable to attack from within and without and that we have to be prepared for future threats and future attacks. It cannot be assumed that attacks on the scale of the September 11th tragedies will not be repeated or that the attacks will be similar in terms of instruments and targets. Clearly, the anthrax attacks that followed demonstrated that the threat goes beyond Osama bin Laden and his terrorist networks and the use of hijacked aircraft as weapons. Consequently, investing our resources in countering the al-Qaeda networks alone will not address the threat of terrorism and investing in prevention alone will not address the risk that terrorism poses.

Terrorism and related forms of political violence are certainly not new and certainly not uncommon threats for Americans. We have experienced long

periods of political violence throughout our history (see, for example, Gurr, 1989) and we have dealt with the violence in a variety of ways. As a policy problem, terrorism has been defined as a law enforcement or police issue, a national security or military and intelligence issue, a social and economic issue, and a cultural issue—the latter in terms of violence resulting from distrust of government and authorities in general. How we define the problem is critical because it determines which agencies have principal or lead responsibility for addressing it and it largely determines the means we employ to prevent or punish acts of terrorist violence (see Waugh, 1982, 1990). Law enforcement agencies focus on preventing the crime and, when they cannot, on punishing those who commit the crime. National security agencies focus on defending the boundaries of the nation and on reducing the potential for violence to jeopardize the continuity and stability of the state and the health and welfare of the people. Development and economic agencies may focus on the socioeconomic precipitants of the violence in order to reduce the likelihood that it will be the weapon of choice.

In the United States, the lead agencies for dealing with terrorism are the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Justice (DOJ) and Defense (DOD) and the focus has been on the law enforcement and national security aspects of the so-called ''war on terrorism.'' As might be expected, the problem has largely been defined by the lead agencies and the effort has taken on their character. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is lead agency for dealing with bioterrorism, but its role has largely been in support of DOJ and DOD. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a major coordinating role, as well as serving as the lead agency for consequence management.

Law enforcement and national security approaches to terrorism are common in other nations, particularly when almost any major act of terrorist violence can constitute a threat to the security of the nation. If the problem of terrorism is defined in those terms, it stands to reason that governments should rely on their law enforcement and national security agencies to deal with threats and acts of terrorist violence. However, terrorism poses a larger problem. While the acts are criminal and the impact may damage the security of the nation, the potential for large scale, mass casualty terrorist events suggests that a far broader approach should be taken. To deal with the hazard of terrorism requires the involvement of the national emergency management network.

Why is a broader approach necessary? Terrorism is an old and frequent threat. It has been practiced since mankind gathered in communal groups. While the weapons of terrorism and the motivations of terrorists are potentially much more lethal than stones and sticks and even conventional military weapons, the hazard posed by terrorism remains much as it has for millennia. Therefore, we have to deal with terrorism much as we deal with other kinds of environmental hazards by institutionalizing mechanisms to prevent or reduce their impact and to deal with their consequences (Waugh, 2001). We need to use the capabilities we already have in place, the national emergency management networks, more fully.