Counterterrorism at a Crossroads

Ten years after 9/11, NATO and its partners have yet to perfect a strategy

by *per Concordiam* Staff

Two numbers illustrate the huge imbalance in resources needed to combat terrorists and their sponsors: The perpetrators of the September 11, 2001, attacks spent an estimated $250,000 to set in motion a worldwide counterterror leviathan that has consumed more than $2 trillion.

Yet despite multiple successes borne on the back of this large security outlay, allied counterterrorism strategy is "not as good as it should be," said Jamie Shea, Deputy Assistant Secretary-General in NATO's new Emerging Security Challenges Division. Fears of Mumbai-style attacks, further security breaches at airports and crippled computer networks have tempered NATO's self-assessment in the realm of counterterrorism and called forth demands for improvement.

"I would give us a 'B' rather than an 'A' in the 10 years since 9/11," Shea announced from the podium at the Counter Terror Expo in London in April 2011. Ten days after Shea spoke, U.S. commandos killed al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan after a nearly 10-year manhunt.

Viewing the past decade through the prism of al-Qaida, Shea said terrorists, despite repeated defeats on the battlefield, can take credit for creating persistent worldwide havoc. Al-Qaida has spun off franchises that act in its name with little guidance from the "home office," Shea noted. It's so well-known, it can claim credit for lethal acts it had no hand in. Even its failures, magnified by the media, can produce the destabilizing fallout of a mini-9/11. For example, the 2010 plot to ship explosives through printer ink cartridges cost $4,000 to finance, but has provoked countermeasures whose bill in the United Kingdom alone has topped $1 billion.

NATO

Jamie Shea is Deputy Assistant Secretary-General in NATO's Emerging Security Challenges Division, created in 2010 to counter problems such as cyber terrorism.

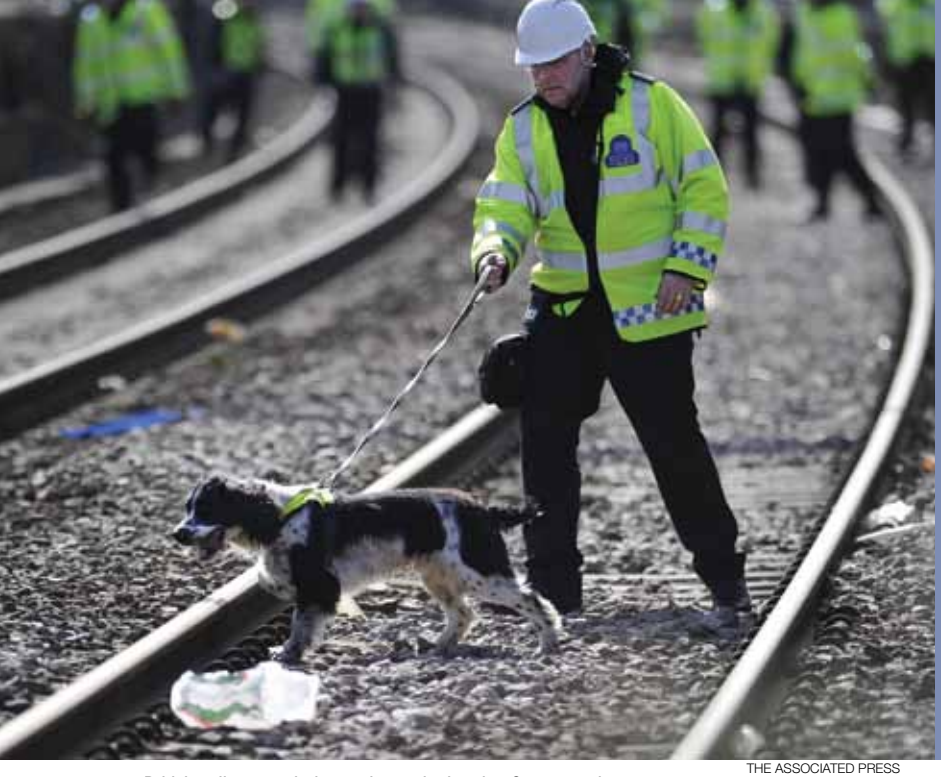
Shea's less-than-stellar evaluation came amid a call for the European Union to take a greater role in the fight against terrorism, whether it be sharing more airline passenger data, foiling terror finance networks or doubling down on cyber security. While acknowledging that counterterrorism is largely within the purview of national governments, Cecilia Malmstrom, European Union Commissioner for Home Affairs, accepted a wider role for the EU.

Sharing the dais with Shea at the London counterterror conference, she announced the creation in September 2011 of a Brussels-based anti-radicalization network to challenge terrorist propaganda that portrays killers as romantic freedom fighters and religious martyrs. The network will devise and share anti-terror approaches through an online forum and EU-wide conferences.

Malmstrom also described an April 2011 meeting in Budapest with U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano in which both sides recognized the "striking" similarities in their approaches to disrupting terrorist money transfers.

"A recent Eurobarometer study shows that four out of five Europeans want more EU action against terrorism and serious crime," Malmstrom said. "In line with this, I see a gradual shift from Member States towards the realization that even in a sensitive area like terrorism there is room for more EU cooperation."

Along similar lines, Muhammad Rafiuddin Shah, acting officer of the United Nations Counter Terrorism



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British police search the tracks on the London Overground as part of the counterterrorism exercise Operation Safe Return in March 2010.

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A security camera keeps watch on the Place de l'Opera in Paris in 2010.

Task Force, reiterated his organization's support for a 2006 counterterror strategy that has succeeded in "building libraries of counter narratives" on the Internet. A Pakistani, Shah asserted that his nation's military and intelligence agencies track al-Qaida's movements "day and night" and criticized U.K. citizens of Pakistani descent who have dabbled in terrorism, accusing them of lacking gratitude to their host country.

Shea himself cited advances in the global anti-terror fight. Civilians have adopted military anti-IED technology to protect public transportation. Ports, harbors and oil terminals are safer than they were before 9/11. Broadening the fight to the biological level, NATO has established battlefield forensics laboratories with which Special Forces in Afghanistan can gather DNA samples of terrorists and insurgents. Soldiers can share that information with law enforcement agencies around the world through Interpol.

But as one of the top officials addressing NATO's emerging security challenges, Shea complained that civilian agencies responsible for protecting computer networks lack the necessary military command structure to head off a cyber attack. He warned that cyber attacks have been "mostly the property of state organizations," but won't stay that way for long.

Dr. Paul Killworth, a British government computer expert, was not alone in predicting growing sophistication among terrorists when it comes to waging war online. A September 2010 computer virus could have been the first inkling that Islamist radicals are interested in the offensive capabilities of cyberspace. A Libyan hacker launched the "Here you have" worm that was briefly responsible for 10 percent of all global computer spam. The hacker described his actions as a protest against coalition activities in Iraq. Even iPhones and other hand-held communication devices provide a "rich seam" for terrorists to mine. Killworth noted that terrorists have focused on causing physical damage, but stressed that "a major cyber attack could change that … encourage others to go down that same route."

Counterterror strategy is complicated by the fact that individual threats don't disappear, but merely stack up and compound. Airports have to police themselves not only against the box-cutter-wielding hijackers of 2001, but the shoe bombers of 2002, the liquid explosives smugglers of 2006 and the ink cartridge attackers of 2010. "Our enemies are innovative. They certainly take lessons from previous attacks," said Patrick Mercer, an English Member of Parliament who served several tours in Northern Ireland with the British Army.

Shea foresaw a day when major international terrorist groups ceased to be a strategic threat to NATO members, a prediction partly confirmed by bin Laden's death in May 2011. But Shea cautioned nations against relying on a combination of skill and luck to avoid further 9/11s, attacks that could come as much from radicalized self-starters as from major players like al-Qaida.

Mercer re-emphasized the need for a nimble counterterror strategy to uncover the inevitable plots aimed at influencing governments even in the absence of casualties. He pointed to the disintegration of regimes in North Africa and the Middle East and the creation there of political vacuums conducive to extremists. Islamist radicals are also reportedly building alliances with narcotics traffickers in places like Mauritania and Mali, money from which can finance terror. "Violence," Mercer said, "is a thing of the future." □