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## **“UNDERSTANDING THE SOIL OF TERRORISM” – THOUGHTS ON NATO COE DAT’S INAUGURAL EXECUTIVE LEVEL DEFENSE AGAINST TERRORISM COURSE AND BEYOND**

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On 10 December 2016, an attack claimed by the Kurdish Freedom Falcons (TAK) in Istanbul used a car bomb and a suicide bomber to target Turkish National Police following a football match at the famous Besiktaş stadium in central Istanbul, killing 44 and wounding 149. This heinous attack followed a seemingly unending string of high-profile and lethal terrorist attacks in Turkey since the middle of July 2015, with numerous attacks causing casualties on the scale of the 10 December bombing, including attacks at the Ankara train station in October 2015 (103 killed, more than 500 wounded); the March 2016 bombing in Ankara (37 killed, 125 wounded); and the June 2016 attack at Istanbul’s Atatürk Airport (45 killed, 230 wounded). The 10 December attack was followed a week later by the terrorist attack in Kayseri (14 soldiers killed, 55 wounded), the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, Andre Karlov, on 19 December, and the New Year’s Eve attack claimed by the ISIL / DAESH on the Reina nightclub in Istanbul (35 killed, 70 wounded). These highly visible terrorist events tell only part of the story, though, with the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) and the ISIL / DAESH campaigns of terror impacting southeast Turkey on a daily basis, with hundreds if not thousands more civilians and security service personnel being killed and injured in rampant and widespread acts of terrorism over the last eighteen months and more than 300 killed and 2,100 wounded in the 15 July 2016 coup attempt carried out, as characterized by Turkey, by the Fethullah Follower’s Terrorist Organization (FETÖ, in its Turkish abbreviation).

In a security atmosphere greatly impacted by recent terrorist attacks, the NATO Center for Excellence – Defense against Terrorism in Ankara, Turkey hosted its inaugural Executive Level Defense against Terrorism (DAT) Course on 6 and 7 December 2016. At least some course attendees reflected on the impetus of the course and the need for continued study of terror and counterterrorism once they learned of the 10 December attack just four short days after the course finished and the cluster of terrorist attacks in Turkey in the last weeks of December.

Domestic and international counterterrorism should be a civilian-led effort that incorporates all elements of national power. In cooperation with civilian stakeholders and competent authorities and based on the rule of law, senior military leaders need to understand the diverse and complex issues that surround terrorism in order to better advise politicians about the ends, ways, and means necessary to counter this threat. This Executive Level DAT Course aimed to expose senior officers to emerging trends and best practices as presented by preeminent experts in relevant counterterrorism fields. The course fully met this broad objective, as evidenced by both the course participants and topics covered. Led by Lieutenant General Tahir Bekiroğlu, Commander of the Turkish Land Forces Training and Doctrine Command, the twenty-eight course participants included seven other Turkish general officers from the Turkish Land Forces, Turkish Air Forces, and Turkish Gendarme and fourteen colonels or colonel-equivalent participants from across the Turkish military, defense attaché offices in Ankara, and defense or service staffs of nine NATO Allies and Partners.

Topics covered in the two-day course ranged from the broad to the specific, with discussion focused on the historical, present, and future challenges associated with terrorism and counterterrorism efforts. During the first day of the course, counterterrorism expert Dr. Afzal Ashraf of the Royal United Services Institute and Nottingham University's Centre for Conflict, Security, and Terrorism presented on the changing nature of conflict and security and terrorist ideologies, motivations, and recruitment. A discussion on global so-called jihadist movements and the status, as well as the challenge presented by foreign fighters, followed Dr. Ashraf's presentation, both of which provided detailed and current information on the state of global terrorism. Russell Howard (Brigadier General, Retired, U.S. Army), Senior Fellow at the U.S. Joint Special Operations University, led a session on research about and experience with countering violent extremism that sought to provide course participants an understanding of potential counterterrorism best practices.

The course's second day focused broadly on the strategic level, with Ms. Elena Beganu, from NATO Headquarters' Counter Terrorism Section, discussing the coordination mechanisms of international organizations in accordance with their respective counterterrorism mandates (EU, OSCE, Global Counterterrorism Forum) and explaining how these address the global counterterrorism threat within a comprehensive approach, as outlined by UN's Global Counter Terrorism Strategy. She stressed how each organization brings specific added value to this endeavor – NATO's Counter Terrorism Policy Guidelines underpin the Alliance's work through building awareness of the threat, development of capabilities to defend against it, and engaging with partners. Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Major General, Retired, British Army) of the Optima Group discussed developments in civil and military counterterrorism strategy and their application. Day Two also provided an opportunity to expand the course's focus beyond traditional military-centric processes. An in-depth discussion on terrorism and counterterrorism finance and a discussion led by Professor Caroline Kennedy, Head of Politics, Philosophy, and International Studies and Professor of War Studies at the University of Hull, on the humanitarian and social impact of terrorism, were among other topics discussed.

Finally, Professor Kennedy led a moderated discussion focused on major lessons learned in attempts to answer how NATO could or should respond better to the threat of terrorism. Four themes emerged during this discussion: 1) the threat of terrorism is not new, is widespread, and will be a challenge for many decades to come; 2) defining victory in counterterrorism is nearly impossible; 3) the drivers of terrorism are complex, with economic, social, political, and ideological factors playing important roles, and analysts and observers disagreeing on its root causes; and 4) aligning counterterror ends, ways, and means with reality requires cultural and political understanding and the limiting of ambitions.

### **Terrorism: A historical, current, and future challenge.**

The use of terror as a tactic – in NATO military terms “the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives” – is rooted in thousands of years of human history as an unfortunately often successful means for realization of goals. The discussion of global so-called jihadist movements highlighted the ever-present threat posed by terrorism in 2015, in which more than 12,000 terrorist attacks by 274 active terrorist organizations around the world produced more than 30,000 deaths. The data for 2016 may prove even worse, with ISIL / DAESH and ISIL / DAESH-inspired attacks occurring worldwide – potentially related to the

return of ISIL foreign fighters to their homes from Syria and Iraq. With social media saturation and ease-of-use providing terrorist groups unprecedented messaging platforms, terrorism has achieved a “mediagenic” status, as described by Dr. Afzal Ashraf, that facilitates the dissemination of the terrorist message – cinematic quality photographs of the assassination of Ambassador Karlov provide a recent example. That Ambassador Karlov’s assassin reportedly decried the on-going conflict in Syria in part illustrates a larger point postulated by Dr. Ashraf: that modern nation-state support of proxy groups (and, perhaps, the nuclear deterrent) play a major role in spreading the concept and use of terrorism. Considering these developments, NATO, its member states, and its partners accept that the use of terrorism as a tactic will continue far into the future.

### **Victory: What does that look like?**

Although global societies have suffered from terrorist attacks for thousands of years, the destabilizing impact and message related to a single terrorist attack today is conceptually unacceptable: zero-tolerance for the terrorism perspective exists, in which the execution of even one terrorist attack is considered failure. Furthermore, defining victory against terrorism is extremely difficult, as even establishing benchmarks or measures of effectiveness for evaluating the success or failure of policies and operations presents challenges. The concept of resilience, which involves recognizing vulnerability to attacks and aims to both reinforce protective and defense measures and to ensure societies are able to function adequately post-attack, may be helpful in resolving this zero-tolerance approach

These issues are compounded by the concept of terrorist organizational flexibility in which terrorist groups elastically evolve from terrorism to insurgency to pseudo-states (a la the ISIL / DAESH and back again, depending on a bevy of factors, from external opposition to internal organizational issues and everything in between. In responding to such elastic organizations in the strategy formulation process, considering terrorist groups like the ISIL / DAESH or al Qaeda more like state entities than terrorist groups might allow a better alignment of ends, ways, and means.

For example, in analysis of the ISIL / DAESH, no agreement exists among strategists – much less NATO, its member states, its partners, or its adversaries - regarding the ISIL / DAESH’s center of gravity. Some propose territory while some propose ideology; others propose a combination of the two, in the form of a ‘caliphate.’ Others propose leadership, communication or any number of other potential factors that describe "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act," in Clausewitzian terms. In Dr. Ashraf’s explanation, the DAESH center of gravity is territory, which is convenient for strategists as alliance, national, and military powers are optimized to seize and control territory, making a military-led approach an arguably fitting counterterrorist endeavor. However, if ISIL’s center of gravity is ideology, or a combination of ideology and territory as in the caliphate, then the question arises as to the appropriateness of using military power to target an ideological center of gravity, highlighting a potential mismatch between the ways and means being used to counter terrorism.

Refocusing counter-ISIL operations on the ideological over the territorial center of gravity would be an enormous adjustment to the current ‘whack-a-mole’ approach to global counter-terrorism efforts for which military operations are ideal. As Brigadier General (Retired) Howard explained, examples of successful counter-terrorism military operations exist. A combination of special operations forces, intelligence, and air power offer the best available approach to

defeating the ISIL / DAESH, in his eyes. While acknowledging the validity of BG Howard's conception in certain historic cases, the five-plus years of experience in Iraq and Syria from 2011 to 2016, and the decade-and-a-half experience in counter-terrorism efforts since 9/11, suggest that 'winning' against terrorism is not so easy. Even defining 'victory' in Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield, which in its first 160 days has been wildly successful in seizing territory from ISIL and Syrian Kurds through the partnering of conventional armored forces and special forces (and other combat multipliers) with the Free Syrian Army, is extremely difficult. This situation is evidenced by the continued ability of ISIL to resist the Turkish advances and conduct attacks in Turkey, regionally, and globally. As Professor Kennedy argued, wars waged predominantly against terrorists by air attack do not ultimately address the root causes of terrorism. Also, while air attack may provide short-term satisfaction derived from "doing something" against ISIS or Al-Qaida, they may not ultimately alter the longer-term conditions on the ground.

### **How to counter the drivers of terrorism?**

An effective counterterrorism strategy targets the root causes of terrorism, as opposed to the manifestation of these causes in the form of active terrorist organizations. Course speakers and presenters suggested the base drivers of terrorism are complex, with economic, social, and political factors playing important roles, and poor governance, limited opportunity, dispossession, corruption, and high unemployment providing fertile ground for ideological recruitment and radicalization.

Speakers and course participants questioned the efficacy of the use of military power to counter these drivers of terrorism, with Major General (Retired) Shaw leading a discussion of why the military is often the means of choice: Civilian governments are highly inefficient (bumbling, even, as described in his book *Britain in a Perilous World: The Strategic Defence and Security Review We Need*) and the military is generally the only tool available that is both trained, ready, and able to implement policy in austere and challenging environments (for more on this topic, read Rosa Brooks' *How Everything Became War and War Became Everything*). BG Howard offered perhaps the most logical way to counter the economic drivers of terrorism: economic and development programs and initiatives, perhaps in the form of expanded international aid (not only from the United States and its NATO Allies, but also from rich Arabic-speaking countries that can shoulder more of the load) implemented in a whole-of-government approach using all elements of state power (in its classic DIME form: diplomatic, information, military, and economic). With an ideal, effective methodology for countering the drivers of terrorism not yet fully developed, it is likely that terrorism will remain an issue far into the future, until and unless these drivers are resolved. As MG Shaw expounded, there are no solutions, only problem management.

In managing the problem of terrorism, in the context of understanding that reacting to and countering the terrorist groups that emerge from the underlying conditional drivers is necessary but insufficient, the key concept for the future fight is to ask, as U.S. Secretary of Defense, General (Retired) James Mattis, is known for asking, "what next?" In current operations in Iraq and Syria, asking "what next" means thinking past the fall of Raqqa or the fall of Mosul; understanding that neither ISIL nor the offshoots of al Qaeda active in the region will simply cease operations just because they lose territory. One should remember Mr. Barrett's point on the elasticity of terrorist groups and recognize that a hundred years' worth of issues of Iraq and Syria – and the broader Middle East – derive from flawed, Western-imposed geographical (mis)conceptions at the end of World War I, and that these themselves are built on centuries

more of imperial conflict and the end of empires. These are further anchored in the historic split between Sunni and Shia Islam and the competition and conflict between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity that dates back hundreds years further. Asking “what’s next” is difficult; answering the question is even harder.

### **Considerations for Better Counterterrorism Plans, Practices, and Strategies**

Major General Shaw offered a compelling five point process for effective counterterrorism activities: 1) develop situational understanding; 2) operate within the bounds of that understanding; 3) limit ambitions; 4) align ends, ways, and means with reality, policy, and resources; and 5) split terrorists into those that can be reconciled and those that cannot.

MG Shaw provided an horticultural anecdote—Mrs. Shaw is an avid gardener and throughout the Shaw family’s many moves in MG Shaw’s career, house selection criteria always included soil quality and productivity discussions, because it is pointless to plant vegetation that will not thrive in the given soil or climate conditions. As an analogy, understanding the cultural and political “soil” from which terrorism derives or in which terrorism thrives is critical. Developing an understanding of the operating environment requires extensive education and continuous learning, along with personnel policies focused on assigning the right personnel with the right knowledge, skills, and attributes to the right job, at the right time. It does NATO and its member states little good to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars to train and develop regional specialists capable of not only understanding the culture and politics of a region but also able to speak the language or languages and advise senior military and civilian leaders only to then assign these personnel to other, unrelated regions, as is the common case. Training for military forces – and their civilian counterparts – needs not only to focus on their key competencies (closing with and destroying the enemy for military maneuver units, for example, or conducting diplomacy, for diplomats) but also on the culture, language, religion, politics, economy, and the like extant in the operating environment. Such training is not cheap, fast, nor easy. It is hard, expensive, and lengthy. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on one’s perspective), the counterterrorism fight is already hard, expensive, and lengthy, so sufficient time, resources, and approaches are likely available to adjust perspectives to ensure that a proper understanding of the operating environment can be achieved. A short-sighted perspective to developing and preserving expertise undermines counterterrorism efforts.

As MG Shaw noted, without such proper understanding, counterterrorism operations conducted with an approach not grounded in the culture, history, and politics of the operating environment are akin to trying to grow seaweed in the Sahara Desert: futile and doomed from the outset. Unfortunately, many examples of contemporary counterterrorism efforts exemplify this skewed approach: attempts to empower women in Afghanistan without understanding the role of women in Afghan society, as described by Professor Kennedy; funneling development money through extremely corrupt governments in Iraq and Afghanistan with the expectation that some sort of result and accountability could be accomplished; and misunderstanding the history of foreign, Christian occupation and meddling and its negative connotations for Arab society, for example.

According to MG Shaw, limiting counterterrorism ambitions leads to the development of a quality counterterrorism strategy. For example, attempting to create liberal democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan as responses to the September 11 terrorist attacks provides an example of an improperly limited counterterrorism ambition. Believing that the ISIL / DAESH can be destroyed or defeated provides another such example, as does expecting that counterterrorism efforts will

lead to the end of terrorism or that it is possible to completely prevent terrorists from successfully executing terrorist attacks. As noted, terrorism is an historic tactic that will persist far into the future; counterterrorism ambitions should account for this reality.

MG Shaw explained that such properly limited counterterrorism ambitions allow for the development of successful counterterrorism strategy, which requires the proper alignment of strategic ends, ways, and means with reality and policy and the capabilities of the components of national power, as in NATO's Comprehensive Approach, which notes that **“military action alone will not be enough to counter the terrorist threat and that military operations must be implemented in a manner coherent with diplomatic, economic, social, legal and information initiatives.”** Sending special operations forces to rescue Yazidis from Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq or the bombing of consequential locations in Syria to stop Syrian chemical attacks and prevent future such attacks potentially represent examples of properly limited counterterrorism strategy that employ realistic and available means and ways to accomplish a limited strategic objective. The quagmire that has emerged in Syria and Iraq since the early days of Coalition counter-ISIL operations, with unclear, unrealistic ends pursued through inadequate or inappropriate ways and means potentially represent the opposite end of the spectrum. The focus of counterterrorism efforts must be the desired political end state. Terrorism is arguably fundamentally political; as such, the strategic plan to counter terrorism needs to be political, using the military as *an* (not the only) element of national power. In choosing the desired political end state, the choice is limited to political systems compatible with the political/cultural/anthropological/religious/etc soil of the given country or region. Imposing liberal democratic processes onto tribal, religious, autocratic, or misogynistic societies is simply not going to work in any realistic timeframe. In Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S.-led coalitions attempted cultural change on management consultant timelines and failed. By this political logic, the military should not lead campaigns such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, once the opposing force has been defeated or military objectives achieved. Military forces are designed to kill people and break things; while capable of conducting other activities, military forces should not be used to allow foreign policy experts or other elements of national power to avoid responsibility for owning the relevant parts of the political plan, or its success or failure.

The ultimate challenge of a successfully conceived counterterrorism strategy likely arrives at the end state that a binary choice exists, according to MG Shaw: terrorists capable of or willing to be de-radicalized and reintegrated into society should be; those that are not should be prosecuted through due judicial processes that respect the rule of law, human rights, and values, or, if need be, eliminated. Splitting terrorists into reconcilable and irreconcilables is what U.S.-led coalitions attempted to do in Iraq and Afghanistan; it was what the United Kingdom did (and still does) in Northern Ireland. This is extremely difficult, especially if as in current counterterrorism strategy execution, operations are not focused on the root causes of terrorism and are conceived, led, and/or conducted by those without a sufficient understanding of the operating environment in which they occur.

This course was an excellent opportunity for senior officers to discuss the challenges in countering terrorism within NATO.

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