Terrorism: How Dangerous is the Threat?

Terrorism has been around since the dawn of history. It has not just been invented. In the twentieth century, terrorism was a familiar phenomenon. Many countries suffered: France, Northern Ireland, the UK, Spain, India, Pakistan, the Middle and Near East and Russia. The list could go on and on. Some countries were more fortunate than others and have had less of a terrorist problem. Until recently, the United States could be numbered amongst them.

Although terrorism has always been with us there is still no common agreement on how to define a terrorist. Politicians, the military and the United Nations cannot agree. There is well known saying, an unhelpful one but which has some truth in it, that one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter. Palestinians, who take their own lives when killing others, are described by some as heroes going on martyrdom operations and by others as evil suicide bombers. It was only a short time ago that many United States citizens advocated and funded the cause of the IRA who were killing British soldiers and civilians. I am not going to attempt to give you a definition but have some sympathy with the Judge who said he could not define pornography but knew what it was when he saw it. The paradox of terrorism and violence is that most of us both condemn it and condone it. Violence is widely abhorred, yet frequently employed.

Are we now, since 9/11 in New York, really living in a different world? Are the Russians really living in a different world because of Chechneyan terrorists? Is the world at war with terrorism? There is a serious divergence of
opinion. Many do not accept the idea of a ‘war’. They believe good policing, good intelligence, justice, human rights and good governance solve terrorism. Many fear that the United States is engaging in an endless war and became engaged without considering all the possible consequences. The Americans use the term war more freely than we do. They talk about ‘a war on drugs’, ‘a war on poverty’; neither of which incidentally look like being won.

I don’t think we should be surprised that attitudes are different. What happened in New York created an urgency and a reaction, which was not replicated elsewhere, where it was felt that in the recent past terrorism could be managed with democratic measures. Moreover, the rhetoric of the United States – ‘Axis of Evil’, ‘crusade’, ‘smoke them out’, ‘kick butt’ and the very term war itself – was less than helpful. Understandably, many governments in Europe and elsewhere were also anxious not to stir up or frighten their own Muslim populations, who needed to be calmed down rather than excited.

These differences do not help, but I do believe we need a new and more international approach. I speak as someone who spent a surprisingly large part of his forty-four years as an army officer on active anti-terrorist operations in different parts of the world – in Malaysia, Cyprus, East and West Africa, the South Pacific, the Yemen, Oman and Northern Ireland. Unlike some of today’s terrorists, none of those I was operating against, though some were Islamic, wished to die for their cause like some Muslims do today. I was never confronted by a suicide bomber.

We may not be at war, but much of today’s terrorism is, in some ways, different to what we knew about; and I suggest we should have faced up to this some time ago. The signs were there well before 9/11. But the Twin Towers brought brutally home to us what the problem was. Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden were known about in the 1980s. They committed atrocities, but governments were very coy about doing anything about it: about spending money, about cooperating internationally with intelligence and defining threats, about even discussing the problem, and about having a common approach to terrorism. They hoped the problem would go away; at the very least it would be another government’s problem, not theirs. How often did the USA or UK discuss Al Qaeda with Russia or vice-versa? How often did we share intelligence? I was very struck how when I retired my Russian opposite number told me that he felt we, the British, should wake up to the threat from Islamic terrorism, and that we had Islamic terrorists living in England plotting against Russia. Russia, I think, was more aware of