

Between Prevention and Preparedness The European Commission's Green Paper on bio-preparedness

J. Peter Burgess & Sonja Kittelsen*

The fortress approach to bio-threat

An essential starting point in any strategy aimed at addressing terrorist threat is the insight that such threat is fundamentally different in nature than other kinds of threat. Terrorist threat is unique in that its essential aim is not to do harm, but rather to create fear. Damage to life or property is, in the logic of terror, a *means* to an end and never the end itself.

While the various modes of **fortress logic** currently used and planned (control of populations through barriers, identification and surveillance, and safe-guarding of potential targets by prophylactic means) are to some degree effective, they easily lead to very costly and ineffective activities which have consequences contrary to their aims: they create fear and reduce the liberty of citizens. Military and police security tools cannot, and therefore should not, be simply transferred to the domain of terrorist threat.

The most clear everyday illustration of this effect today is airport anti-terror security. The considerable efforts made (mobilization of personnel, restructuring of airports etc.) have had the effect of keeping fear ('terror') alive and vibrant in our everyday experience while bringing doubtful marginal security benefits relative to costs.

It is **fear of danger, not danger itself** that is the centre of gravity of terrorism. Fear has obviously been the product of terrorism, but far more importantly fear is the cause, or at least the enabling condition of terrorism. Effective, efficient and just ap-

proaches to terrorist threat must therefore focus on disrupting the means available for creating fear in society. Reducing the potential for creating fear in society will reduce terrorism, since fear itself is the only objective of any given terrorist attack.

For this reason, current efforts to reduce biological risk and enhance preparedness and response can only be successful if they account for the experience of those **for whom** it is a question and by understanding the potential horizons of those **by whom** risk can be profitably created.

This requires not only the **technical expertise** necessary for collecting and analyzing empirical data, finding technical solutions for safeguarding certain installations, habitations, cities and regions, but it also means understanding the **cultural, social, psychological, and even emotional dimensions of fear and risk**. It implies a grasp of the **individual and collective values** that are engaged by threat and the way that these values are perceived and attempted to be manipulated by others, by potential attackers and by our own policy makers. Thus policy initiatives should be adopted focusing on how the aim of creating fear is addressed by those who would do us harm and how such fear can be addressed by social, cultural and scientific policies alike.

* J. Peter Burgess is Research Professor and leads the Security Programme at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo; Sonja Kittelsen is Researcher in the same programme. This brief benefited from funding from the Research Council of Norway within the framework of the project 'Europe under Threat: The New Culture of Insecurity'.

Effective and efficient policy toward terrorist threat in general should address the modalities of fear-creation. These include, first and foremost, the use of media, the exploitation of codes of cultural value, symbols and myths, emotional identifications, etc. Thus to the necessary technical solutions to bio-risk and other types, must be added the study of media, inter-cultural dialogue, analysis of social and cultural values and understanding, and other dimensions of cultural life that contribute to the determination of strategies of terror.

It is for this reason that it is important that the **'prevent, respond and recover'** approach currently adopted in Commission policy planning not limit itself to a style of thinking which incorporates the friend-enemy, aim-means **logic of traditional warfare and policing**, addressed through **technological solutions**. The creation and manipulation of risk and threat is not simply about a threat that is out there and from which we must be protected. It is far more about a fear that resides in our societies and which is the fertile ground for risk and threat.

Bio-preparedness in social perspective

Bio-preparedness means deflecting threat, not attacks

A bio-terrorist attack, conceived, informed and planned, **cannot be 'prevented'**. The technical challenges of protecting a major city from, for example, an avian-borne disease, are insurmountable. No resources are enough to 'protect' the population from such an attack. Moreover, there is broad public awareness of this fact. Once again, the variable is **fear**, both from the point of view of motivation, but also from the point of view of experience of threat. In this sense, the use of the term 'prevention' in the Commission's policy work and statement is somewhat unfortunate. Actual prevention is impossible. What can be 'prevented' is the fear of populations and the fear on which terrorism nourishes itself. A shift in orientation is called for, **away from prophylactic thinking and toward informational activities**. By the same token, 'bio-preparedness' should not be construed as a run-up to prevention. Preparedness for threat means dissipating threat through knowledge, understanding, analysis, and dissemination of information. Terrorism exists because **the terrorist attack has already happened in the minds of citizens**.

Confronting terrorism means first and foremost confronting fear of the unlikely

The Green Paper takes its point of departure in a threat assessment that links low probability of attack with high or extremely high levels of potential damage to life and property. This opposition is arguably not yet adequately understood in order to provide the basis for effective responses. Though the equation takes the form of a cost-benefit trade-off, it does not obey the logic of a simple efficiency analysis. Many analysts suggest that we live in a **'culture of fear'** in which not only those who potentially threaten us create fear, but also where ambient mechanisms of information dissemination and media contribute to a general culture of fear. This culture of fear, as we have said, nourishes terrorism, thus re-nourishing fear, in a never ending cycle. In this culture of fear the 'high potential damage' end of the bio-preparedness equation has an overarching tendency to be emphasized by both agencies of information and political interests focused, for a variety of political reasons, on enhancing the Fortress Europe approach to threat. Appropriate anti-threat policy must therefore comprise an assessment of the media potential for multiplication of the meaning of the highly unlikely. **The media front in the defence against terrorist threat is thus central**. The task of addressing this challenge is, in the field of bio-threat, considerably facilitated by the existence and pervasiveness of hard scientific knowledge about the nature and likelihood of outbreaks.

Consolidating preparedness for intentional and unintentional bio-threat can reduce insecurity

While the Green Paper does discuss the possibility of naturally-occurring outbreaks or accidental releases of agents, these tend to be largely overshadowed by concern for either the potential of a bio-terrorist attack or the potential exploitation of weaknesses in biological preparedness by potential terrorists. Though evidence is not decisive, the danger of **unintentional**, accidental releases of biological agents, either from laboratories or in various situations of transport, is apparently far greater than **malevolent, intentional** releases. Coordination of safety regulations for both these scenarios is relatively poor in Europe. Improving the coordination of such regulations will not only contribute to actually reducing danger, but will bring the threat of bio-terrorism 'down to earth', **return it to the scientific laboratories** from which it necessarily originates, thus eroding its status as something otherworldly, irrational, untouchable, and thereby increasing security and reducing imagined threat.

A thing is not a threat; a thing cannot be threatened

The Green Paper puts a strong emphasis on **technological solutions** and methods for detection, preparedness and response (i.e. improving disease surveillance and detection systems, enhancing cross-border cooperation/communication, international cooperation between research laboratory cooperation, sharing of medical countermeasures, etc). These are clearly indispensable. However, technological competence of this kind will remain ineffective if it is not directed toward, and indeed integrated with approaches that seek to uncover the **meaning and implications of technologies for human lives**. This means that we should not limit our understanding of either what threatens us or what is actually threatened to its status as a mere thing. Terrorism cannot be fully accounted for by technological solutions. Technology cannot fully comprise the range of ways and means of damaging or destroying and, accordingly, the range of ways and means of technically deflected and it from danger. Nor can the security of human beings be assured through strategies of deflection. Technological solutions that set aside the questions of culture do not moderate the risk and threat at the heart of terrorist potential and inevitably do little to project from the potential of attack. Reactive technologies of protection based solely on the technical properties of threat, remove only these. They cannot assure the well-being of humans whose security and insecurity are based on value-laden experiences, motives and imagination. **A thing, even a toxic bomb or a deadly virus, is not a threat until it engages something of human value**. Technological solutions, in order to be effective and efficient, should draw the consequences of this.

Response is already 'prevention'

The Green Paper is rightly concerned with response to biological attack or catastrophe. Yet here the notion of response is in many ways understood in quite a reactionary way, described as 'generic preparedness within overall crisis management capability'. Arguably, however, it is 'generic' thinking itself that produces a source of insecurity. It is generic thinking that tends toward the dehumanization of individuals and groups, thus reducing the thrust of the particular values that form the basis for their experience of threats.

Preparedness should imply cultural analysis.

The insecurity caused by the proposed strategy could be improved by seeking to account for the ways in which particular cultural practices and trends support certain types of fear and insecurity. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly for the global perspective, a cultural, 'locally' tailored approach to response, preparedness and crisis management will go far in addressing the insecurities that nourish terrorist ambitions in the first place. Appropriately conceptualized response, tailored to **local priorities, values and needs** will create a blanket of security that will act preventively.

Beyond 'prevention'

Global and local

Clearly an EU-level approach to biological preparedness is necessary, as is systematized 'generic' international collaboration. This should, however, be combined with a comprehensive approach to the specific, 'local' approaches to European biological risk reduction and preparedness based on an assessment of the value-based dimensions of risk, risk management and risk communication (Q1).

Common and specific standards

Prevention can be enhanced by the development of common standards in laboratory facilities as well as the establishment of common minimum bio-standards and exchange of best practices (Q11), promotion of bio-standards and best practices amongst researchers (Q24), professional codes of conduct (Q25), enhancing security measures in labs and other biomedical facilities, incorporating risk assessments and risk management strategies in the operation of labs, registering personnel (Q12), etc. This should not only contribute to enhancing measures aimed at preventing a bio-terrorist incident, but also on preventing accidental leaks, such as the latest foot-and-mouth outbreak in the UK. Yet this last case also reminds us of how the country and regional specificity of the bio-threat is essential to keep in bounds of the analysis.

Research and development

In terms of threat perception and prioritization of research and development, peer evaluation methods (Q5) would necessarily contribute to enhancing the specificity of approaches to threat, both intentional and unintentional, and would be an important component in establishing a common understanding of the threat. It would both facilitate discussion and the identification of gaps, differing threat percep-

tions, research cultures, etc. and enhance risk communication strategies.

Cooperation

With respect to cooperation between relevant authorities and agencies at Member State and EU level (Q31), efforts should be improved by further cross-sector collaboration in terms of enhancing risk communication between the different sectors involved in order to come up with a common understanding of security and threat perceptions. Current research under the EU 6th Framework Programme, such as the research being conducted as part of the CORPS project, is currently undertaking this type of work. Exercises and training courses (Q32) are relevant in this regard.



International Peace Research Institute, Oslo
Institutt for fredsforskning

International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO)
Hausmanns gate 7
NO 0186 Oslo
Norway
E-mail: info@prio.no
www.prio.no