

RESALE TERRORISM

Ian Lesser



IAN LESSER is a senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington, and leads GMF's work on security issues in the Mediterranean, Turkish, and wider-Atlantic regions. His books include 'Beyond Suspicion: Rethinking US-Turkish Relations' (2008), and 'Countering the New Terrorism' (1999)

It is clear, based on the experiences not only of past decades but of centuries, that terrorism is a very old phenomenon. It has of course taken on different forms in different places at different times. At the turn of the century, governments and societies everywhere were terrorized by anarchists. During the 60's, 70's, and 80's, hijackings by organizations such as the PLO were viewed as spectacular events, and given due coverage by the media – an aspect that would only grow in importance and of course culminate in the September 11th attacks in 2001.

I think that today we are now in a post-modern period with regard to this relationship between the media and terrorism. There has been an increase in lethal attacks but we have also seen the rise of what we might call 'resale terrorism' –

attacks conducted by individuals or small networks that are less capable but potentially more frequent and widespread. **Increased publicity is inevitable. Nowadays, anyone with a camera in a mobile phone can publicize something. But this has also made people more vulnerable, for example, to cyber-terrorism, which can be even more effective than traditional terrorism.** The emergence of Wikileaks is proof of this development.

The temptation to leak documents and to leak information from governments has been in fashion all over the world pretty much as soon as governments started creating classified documents. It is nothing new, and there have actually been far worse and more significant leaks in the past. In the case of Wikileaks, there was such a massive leak that some part of it was bound to be of interest to the general public. What is unique today is the potential for leaked information that can be spread very quickly with little potential to be controlled.

After September 11 there was a recognition that information needed to be shared across all security departments within America. Information, it was realized, should not be compartmentalized or withheld, as other departments may recognize something as significant that

There has been an increase in 'resale terrorism' – attacks conducted by individuals or small networks that are less capable but potentially more frequent and widespread

was previously overlooked. So departments began to share information and networks were created that allowed even low-level employees to see a lot of messages and information that they might not have seen ten years ago. And it was one such employee who copied the documents and put them online. But just imagine what would happen if something more valuable had been made public instead of a collection

of low-level routine communications.

The problem that Wikileaks represents is one that governments around the world will simply have to live with. It's very difficult to both share information effectively and keep it behind an impenetrable firewall from the outside world. There will be leaks, and there is no clear way to stop them. Nevertheless, the long-term effects are likely much less than people imagine. There is truly nothing surprising with Wikileaks, neither the fact that it happened nor the content of what was leaked. Things like this happen and will continue to happen. Ultimately, what is more important in the modern world is cooperation. Right now we are facing some serious challenges. First among them is the global financial crisis, which is certainly not over and has the potential for even greater and very negative surprises. The second biggest problem is preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to countries such as Iran, Korea, and Pakistan and dealing with all other issues in general that have to do with nuclear proliferation. In this regard, it is very important that we ratify START with Russia. This is extremely important. Of course, there are

many other issues we could name, and among them I think I would put global health near the top. It is often forgotten, but food security is becoming a tremendous issue in much of the world. So Wikileaks may continue to frustrate governments but it pales in comparison to the much larger problems that we need to deal with. ■

Exclusively for Yaroslavl initiative