

BUILDING RESEARCH CAPACITY TO ADDRESS TERRORISM

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Abstract

It is surely true that research on natural and technological hazards is relevant to the task of coping with terrorism. There are overlaps among the respective risks, responses and actors as well as much to be gained by a mutual exchange of insights. At the same time there are also significant differences that limit the applicability of information which can be transferred between the problem sets. Most laypeople do not confuse the workings of a hurricane with those of a terrorist's mind nor hope to achieve similarly levels of predictability for both!

I am less concerned about obvious similarities and differences than with those for which decisions about relevance are difficult. For example, contradictions about the interpretation of 9/11's hazards are already apparent but few have made their way into public debates on appropriate policy responses. I am also troubled about the roles that scientists are being hurried towards, in support of a national campaign on terrorism, without enough of the searching and dispassionate analysis that has been the hallmark of the National Research Council at its best.

In this presentation I suggest that terrorism presents the scientific community with far-reaching challenges on a number of levels. Some of these are about science policy as well as the content of research. For example, if we are to properly engage with the very real problem of terrorism it would be well to first decide the intellectual boundaries of the task. The present emphasis on risks and risk-management (rather than the construction and alleviation of vulnerabilities) and the front-loading of policy alternatives onto emergency management (despite copious experience that demonstrates the value of broad integrated policy initiatives) both signal needs for a wider scope of investigation and consideration of the full range of alternative policy and management choices. In addition, it is evident that there will be a two-way flow of information - from terrorism studies to hazards research as well as in the other direction; this should prompt early consideration of the present and future organization of hazard research's entire theoretical domain.

The problem of terrorism will tax the resources of hazards researchers about topics that have heretofore been relatively understudied. We do have useful insights to offer about visibility, values, symbolism, hazard landscapes and a variety of other subjects that are deeply implicated in terrorism but have usually been of peripheral interest to hazards analysts. Now is the time to expand the amount of effort that is devoted to such matters in the context of natural and technological hazards, not just terrorism.

Finally, terrorism challenges us to: (1) individually learn about a new (for most) hazard; (2) put in place the research information-handling infrastructure that will be necessary to grapple with this problem; (3) begin the neglected collective task of training a new and expanded generation of hazard researchers; and (4) dismantle some poorly-conceived bureaucratic barriers that hamper the conduct of quick-response research on human dimensions of terrorism.