Chapter 32
Messengers of Death:
Cyber and the Root Structure of Terror

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the cyber environment of mass violence and terrorism globally. More specifically, it uncovers the role of cyberspace at the root of terror. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and conclusion of the Cold War, the United States (US) has been perceived both domestically and globally as the single super power capable of anything, but it remains vulnerable to a not-so-new tactic of destruction. 9/11 made that clear and spawned an immense architecture of countering terrorism, which as of this writing has been successful in the limited sense of defending the country from the sort of catastrophic wreckage that occurred that September morning. From mass shootings to "lone wolf" terrorist attacks, the US and the international community remain quite vulnerable to terror. While the role of cyber is not deterministic, its importance is as overwhelming as it is overlooked by policymakers and scholars alike.

INTRODUCTION

The central research question of this chapter is how cyberspace works as the root structure of contemporary terror.

The historian Henry Adams noted that "politics is about the systematic organization of hatreds" (Reinhart & Reinhart, 2020, p. 94). The US continues to be an outlier in both exporting violence globally, and absorbing it at home domestically—it is simultaneously an exporter, and self-inflector, of violence (Braumoeller, 2019). It is a general truism that we live in an "age of fracture" (Rodgers, 2011); a "fantasyland" (Andersen, 2017); one of a "new conspiracism that assaults democracy" (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019); indeed, one wherein "democracies die" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018); where "fascism" is gaining (Albright, 2018); where "fear" (Robin, 2004) and more "fear" (Woodward, 2018) lead to "rage" (Woodward, 2020), where we are in general "terrified," especially of the Islamic world (Bail, 2015), where they are "dying to kill" (Bloom, 2005), and "dying to win" (Pape, 2005). A critical theorist

might even say that US foreign and domestic policies of violence are Exhibit A of its sadomasochism (Kaplinsky & Geller, 2015).

This chapter interrogates what links the analysis of the well-respected scholars, journalists, and policymakers of the sort who were just cited above. Such a move requires a deeper look at what spreads terrorism and mass violence, and most importantly in this chapter, the affective notion of terror and the role of cyberspace in mass violence and terrorism. How does it work? Cyber's role in the root structure of terror will be the focal point. Georgetown Professor Ben Buchanan writes on cyberspace, "This is a new form of statecraft more subtle than policymakers imagined, yet with impacts that are world-changing" (2020, p. 3). Terror-inducing cyber threats are international in scope. Stanford University's Marietje Schaake (2020, p. 27) has written that recently,

a host of public organizations as varied as the Norwegian parliament, the New Zealand stock exchange, and the Vatican all came under attack. No shots were fired, no doors knocked down, no bombs exploded. Instead, the attackers managed to intrude into these institutions' internal networks in attempts to commit espionage, disrupt daily affairs, or ransom or blackmail victims. Incidents of this kind are just the tip of the iceberg.

States, and non-states, poor states, and rich states—each has its own place in this puzzle, and the whole effect is greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, contextualization and an eye toward synthesis must be focused to get a glimpse of the phenomena. This turns out to be something akin to cartography. The chapter will provide a map of the terra incognito we face domestically and internationally. The root system of how terror forms and spreads relates to the theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who problematize this type of an assemblage as a rhizome: "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (2009, p. 7). Professor Elspeth Probyn of Sydney University clarifies that, "in real and theoretical ways, a rhizome is a wonderful entity: it is a type of plant…that instead of having tap roots, spreads its roots outward where new roots can sprout off old. Used as a figure to map out social relations, the rhizome allows us to think about other types of connection" (2000, p. 17).

What we are dealing with here can be pictured as a landscape involving hierarchies, or topographies of power, which have become so omnipresent as to be nearly invisible from critique. Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical matrix is rarely used by US international relations scholars, but its importance in helping to analyze questions of terror and its spread is not lost on others. The Israel Defense Forces, for example, use this approach as a guide to learn how to more effectively mitigate terror in its territory (Weizman, 2006). This theory also parallels Buchanan's (2020, p. 8) contention that, "The best way to conceptualize cyber operations is not through familiar signaling centric paradigms, but through the framework of shaping, rooted in concepts like espionage, sabotage, and destabilization," all of which fall under the umbrella term that this chapter focuses on, to wit, terror, which is fleshed out below. Cyber's connection to the applications of state and non-state terror becomes our terrain, and the lines, linkages, and conjunctures are the coordinates we can use to answer, albeit always incompletely, the questions this chapter seeks to elucidate as one part of a more holistic project.

The realm of cyberspace will be the focus point of this chapter because its increasing importance is, unfortunately, directly proportionate to the failure to pay due attention to it. It is complex, nuanced, and a general pain for policymakers. In the words of former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), John Brennan, "The intelligence community failed to tap into social media sufficiently, depriv-

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