The New "Gray" Terrorism

Mass shootings persist within the walls of American institutions.

As of this writing, 17 innocent people—14 children and 3 teachers/coaches—were just killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, by a former student. Per the Broward County Sheriff, the shooter was dropped off by an Uber driver, entered the school and started shooting into classrooms, at students he saw in the hallways and on the school grounds. This marks the 18th school shooting in the United States so far in 2018.

In December 2017, in a country church in Texas, an individual killed 26 unsuspecting worshippers and wounded dozens more. In early October, a gunman killed at least 58 people and injured more than 500 at a country music concert in Las Vegas.

Whether the shooters are branded as domestic terrorists, violent extremists, lone wolves, gunmen or another type of terrorist, the persistence of mass shootings presents significant challenges for security analysts, law enforcement and fire-rescue professionals.

Security analysts and law enforcement require the analytical tools to assess and categorize such events in the hope of preventing or minimizing future incidents. But as mass violence has become a part of the social vocabulary of the age, violence against large groups of innocent civilians has been increasingly used by individuals who don't meet the traditional criteria to be accurately deemed *terrorists*.

According to the definition of terrorism by renowned terrorism analyst Bruce Hoffman:

> *Terrorism is the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or threat of violence in the pursuit of political change. Terrorism is specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack.*

Each element of this definition is as important as the others when considering applying the label of *terrorism* to an act of violence—violence must meet each of these specific criteria in order for the label to be properly applied.

In general, the absence of any one of these qualities would indicate that a different type of violence has occurred. However, incidents of mass violence in the United States increasingly bear specific resemblances to terrorism without meeting each of these criteria.

The incidents above share common characteristics that are important enough to warrant examination by analysts: the shooters selected highly symbolic target populations, while neither shooter in the two earlier events provided any immediately identifiable political or social motive to accompany their violence. (It's still very early in the investigation of the school shooting.)

So while these incidents don't fit a precise definition of terrorism by lacking explicit motive "to effect political change on either a local or international scale," they do utilize certain symbolic elements while causing mass deaths, contributing significantly to security concerns of Americans.

As these incidents persist, Americans tend to seek black-and-white categorizations of terrorism with clear explanations. But the emergence of this type of incident—in the *gray area* between domestic murder and terrorist mass murder—presents security and public-safety professionals with many analytical challenges.

Perhaps law-enforcement personnel would benefit from discussing this type of violence as *gray terrorism*—mass killings that don't fit squarely within the definition of terrorism but bear many important similarities to terrorism.

This violence is carried out in highly symbolic venues by individuals seeking to assert a sense of violent power intended to produce psychological effects similar to those of terrorism, but with no clear political, religious or societal motivation. The motivation in this type of mass violence is typically intensely personal in some way, making it distinct from true terrorism.

Our ability to predict the possibilities of gray terrorism is only limited by our imagination. Our capability to prevent all types of attacks is extremely limited by finite resources and the ability of adversaries to innovate and overcome protective measures.

Every day, we take actions to protect our personal relationships and our personnel against threats and hazards we identify and understand. The government can't protect all of us by preventing all threats and hazards from occurring, especially gray terrorism. When we're in public places, we need to understand we're vulnerable.

We need to become more aware of our surroundings. We need to communicate better with our law-enforcement agencies, along with training (in scenarios such as active killer, snipers, bombings, etc.) with them.

Many of our fire-rescue agencies work large-scale events; we must be vigilant, equipped and prepared to aid those around us and to ensure we remain safe.

Jo-Ann Lorber, EFO, CFO, CEM, is a battalion chief for the city of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and the chair of the Executive Fire Officers Section. She has been a member of the IAFC since 2005.