Does Homeland Security Exist Outside the United States?

Nadav Morag

Homeland security is a uniquely American concept. It is a product of American geographic isolation and the strong tendency throughout American history to believe that there was a clear divide between events, issues, and problems outside US borders and those inside US borders. Among other things, the legal and institutional tools with which the United States is able to deal with threats outside its borders (in the context of what is referred to as “national security”) differ markedly from those it is able to employ inside its borders. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, American leaders realized that they would need new tools to deal with large-scale terrorist threats and yet they were constrained by the Constitution, legislation, and federalism. Consequently, they largely could not apply tried and tested national security tools and methodologies to the domestic arena. Homeland security policies, institutions, and methodologies thus developed to fill this void between what the US could do overseas and what it was unable to do domestically. The subsequent inability to deal with large-scale disasters, such as that produced by Hurricane Katrina in late August of 2005, led to a broadening of the definition of homeland security to include large significant disasters, major public health emergencies, and other large-scale events that had the potential to endanger the citizenry, economy, rule of law, and the general functioning of government and society.¹

America’s sister democracies around the world did not undergo the dual shocks of 9/11 and Katrina; thus, these countries did not face situations of significant social or economic chaos resulting from such a wide range of threats. Some of them, like Israel and the United Kingdom, had to cope with significant terrorist threats while others, such as Japan, had to cope with significant natural disasters, but none had to cope with massive and unprecedented terrorist events and natural disasters in the space of only a few years. Moreover, countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, France, the UK, Israel, Japan, Italy, the Netherlands, and others had never really viewed domestic threats as qualitatively different from overseas threats and were able to use tools – such as the military – both externally and internally (though, of course, not in precisely the same way). Given the above, it is not surprising that the concept of homeland security, as an integrative idea that brings together domestic preparedness, response, and recovery efforts with respect to threats ranging from large-scale terrorism to natural disasters to pandemics (to name a few) was largely alien to these countries. It is not that other democracies did not prepare for, attempt to mitigate, respond to, and recover from terrorism, natural disasters, public health emergencies, threats to critical infrastructure, and the like; it is just that they did not view all of these activities as interlinked and part of a common effort designed to head off and, failing that, cope with and recover from events that could produce massive social and economic disruption.

With the creation, in the United States, of homeland security as a policy framework and practitioner and academic discipline during the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century, other democracies took notice and some began to use the terminology of homeland security without, necessarily, understanding its scope or raison d’être. Most countries have still not truly come around to the idea that counter-terrorism, emergency management, critical infrastructure protection, public health, combating large-scale crime, etc. are part and parcel of the same overall problem: that of maintaining social and economic stability and governmental functioning in the face of events that threaten to overwhelm the capacity of government and society to cope.

A case in point is the United Kingdom. The UK is one of the most, if not the most, prolific producer of national and local governmental strategies. It has an elaborate
and well-thought-out counterterrorism strategy known as CONTEST with four elements: Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare.² Counterterrorism, as used in the UK, is a broad policy area that also includes maritime, aviation and border security, critical infrastructure protection, and resilience but it is not entirely equivalent to homeland security both because it does not address as broad a range of functions and because it is focused on preventing, preparing for, responding to, and coping with terrorism. London and other local jurisdictions have also developed emergency management plans based on a three-tier incident management system (the tiers are referred to as gold, silver, and bronze) that separate the strategic functions from the tactical and operational ones.³ These response systems will kick in during major terrorist incidents as well as disasters (the UK suffers from flooding on occasion), but they are not necessarily seen as integrally related to the counterterrorism effort.

From an organizational standpoint, a significant segment of the homeland security enterprise is housed in the Home Office, which is the national-level department that oversees aspects of the law enforcement mission. Although the UK’s regional and national police forces are administratively independent, the Home Office does have oversight and funding influence over them. Moreover, the country’s premier investigatory agency, the Serious and Organized Crime Agency (SOCA) is under the direct purview of the Home Office. The domestic intelligence mission, carried out by the British Security Service (MI5), is also under the authority of the Home Secretary. Finally, border security (the UK Border Agency operates under the auspices of the Home Office) and immigration are also within the Home Office’s remit.⁴ Nevertheless, functions such as those carried out by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and housed within the US Department of Homeland Security are not within the scope of Home Office operations. Moreover, at the state level, most homeland security agencies in the United States have a large emergency management component and many also include a public health component (though public health is primarily a local governmental function in the United States) and all of these do not exist in any one institution in the UK. In short, in terms of doctrine, policy, and organization, the UK does not view counterterrorism and emergency management (not to mention other elements of the homeland security enterprise) as part of a common operational sphere.

At the other end of the spectrum lies Canada, influenced as it is by its proximity and historic relationship to the United States. Canada has moved closer to the US model of a homeland security enterprise. Canada’s national security policy (the reader will note this is national security more broadly, as opposed to just homeland security) incorporates the disciplines of law enforcement, intelligence, emergency management, public health, and transportation and border security, but it also includes aspects of international security that take it outside the sphere of the homeland security enterprise.⁵ Organizationally Canada takes somewhat of a middle ground approach between the UK and the US in that, while it does not incorporate security and emergency management under the same organizational framework, it does view these disciplines as part of the overall public safety mission. The premier federal security department in the country is Public Safety Canada, which is responsible for federal law enforcement (via the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, RCMP, which also contracts to provincial and municipal governments to provide policing services) and intelligence (via the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, CSIS). While Public Safety Canada does not have direct organizational responsibility for emergency management in the way that DHS does via FEMA, it will play a coordinating role with federal ministries responsible for health and critical infrastructures, as well as with provincial and municipal authorities and the private sector.⁶

Israel arguably lies at the center of the spectrum. Though it does not possess an articulated national security strategy, let alone a homeland security one (Israeli prime ministers do not like to be penned in by formal strategies), it has, in practice, adopted elements of a homeland security doctrine that tie together the police, fire, EMS, the health
system, and the military. Despite fighting major wars at least once a decade since independence, the country’s civilian sector was largely exempted from military attack (though not terrorism). However, the current presence of long range/high payload surface-to-surface missiles, as well as short-range/low payload rockets, has made Israel’s civilian population highly vulnerable. In the wake of the SCUD attacks on Israel in the 1991 Gulf War, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) recognized that the civilian sector had come to be part of the battle space (if not, indeed, the primary battle space) and created a fourth regional command (in addition to the Northern, Central and Southern Commands): the Homefront Command (HFC). The HFC was created to improve interagency cooperation between the military, first responders, and government ministries, to free the three IDF regional commands to focus exclusively on the front lines, to provide military resources to the civilian sector (capabilities such as search and rescue, WMD detection and response, etc.), and to enable the centralization of response efforts.7 In normal times, the HFC is responsible for establishing emergency procedures, supervising preparedness exercises, and monitoring the preparedness of the health system, municipalities, the transportation system, and critical infrastructures. During periods in which Israel is facing an active wartime scenario (or potentially, a WMD terrorist attack or other mass casualty event), the Cabinet can declare a “limited state of emergency” whereupon the HFC is given command and control over the other response agencies. The integrative Israeli approach however, is focused primarily on the response piece of the homeland security mission. In terms of prevention and organizational structures, the police (Israel has a single national police force) coordinate with the domestic intelligence service, the Israel Security Agency (ISA, also known as the Shin Bet or Shabak) and the military (which has law enforcement powers in the West Bank), but each entity largely functions in its own operational sphere and according to its own operational doctrine.

Overall then, as the above examples have shown, homeland security is not really conceived of abroad as an “enterprise” and overarching discipline in the manner in which it is viewed in the United States. Whether or not it is entirely viewed in this manner in the United States is arguable since, at least from the organizational perspective, the homeland security mission is not even strictly confined to DHS at the federal level or to state or local homeland security offices at their respective levels of government. However, the homeland security enterprise is being actively developed as a discipline in the US and this is likely to continue to impact policies, strategies and institutions. Whether or not other countries will eventually adopt the same logic and view their disparate homeland security efforts as part of the same set of objectives requiring a joint policy, doctrinal, and organizational framework remains to be seen.

Notwithstanding the present absence overseas of homeland security as a coherent policy sphere, other countries are still engaging in homeland security-related policymaking and strategizing. Learning from other countries’ experiences and approaches in this context is important not only because it makes sense for American decision makers to learn from the experiences of foreign governments (of which there are many) and thus avoid trying to “reinvent the wheel,” but also because, in many cases, the threats are transnational and consequently safeguarding homeland security requires cooperation with other countries. Whether the threat emanates from radicalized Europeans accessing the United States under the visa waiver program in order to execute terrorist attacks, or aircraft passengers flying in to the US from an Asian city carrying the latest viral mutation with them, many homeland security threats emanate from abroad. Examples of such threats abound. In the terrorism sphere, in addition to the 9/11 attackers, Ahmed Resam (the “Millennium Bomber”), arrested in 1999, used Canada as a staging area for his plot to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport. Richard Reid (the “Shoe Bomber”) boarded a Miami-bound flight in Paris in December 2001. The 2006 transatlantic liquid explosives plot (the “Overt Plot”) was hatched and prepared in the UK and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (the “Underwear Bomber” or “Christmas Bomber”) boarded his Detroit-bound flight in Amsterdam in
December 2009. The potential and actual spillover of Mexican criminal violence into the US has also been an issue of concern for some time. In the pandemic sphere, the SARS outbreak in China led to the US public health system being put on alert in December 2003 and the outbreaks of avian influenza and swine flu in Southeast Asia and Mexico respectively led to pandemic concerns in the US. In short, there is no lack of examples of homeland security threats emanating from overseas. It therefore follows that addressing these threats will not only require international cooperation, but also an understanding of how other countries, particularly allied democratic nations, address these issues within their own borders before those issues reach US shores, and what their respective laws, institutions, and modes of operation allow those countries to do.

Ultimately then, as homeland security becomes more of a global enterprise, other countries may realize the logic of having objectives supersede tools and methodologies. In other words, they may come to adopt American logic that the ultimate objectives of ensuring social and economic stability and the continued rule of law in severe crisis situations means that operational spheres as seemingly disparate as counterterrorism, law enforcement in the face of massive criminal activity, securing transport systems, borders, and critical infrastructure, and coping with public health emergencies and the management of crisis situations are all essentially part of the same effort. If and when this does occur, it will make it considerably easier for the United States to improve its ability to safeguard homeland security because it, and its global partners, will be viewing the problem in the same way and integrating their respective resources and strategies accordingly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nadav Morag is a faculty member and deputy director for policy research at the Center for Homeland Defense and Security, Naval Postgraduate School. He is the author of Comparative Homeland Security: Global Lessons (Wiley & Sons, 2011) and is a former senior director at Israel’s National Security Council.

1 See the differences in emphasis in the 2002 and 2005 versions of the National Strategy for Homeland Security as well as changing White House definitions of what falls within the Homeland Security mission space.


4 See the Home Office website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk


