

Putting Terrorism in Perspective

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1. Terrorism is connected to two dominant notions - terror/intimidation and violence. Political terrorism is terrorism that is politically driven, i.e. for political ends or purposes. Depending on how one understands these two notions of terror/intimidation and violence there can be broader or narrower conceptions of terrorism. It is generally useful to distinguish between terrorist regimes and terrorist acts and campaigns (regular, repeated or frequent acts as part of an overall tactic or strategy of combat). The former involves the institutionalisation of terror/intimidation and would therefore pertain to deeply undemocratic regimes, while the latter is often carried out by democratic regimes, usually as a part of their foreign policy behaviour. I am going to be talking about the latter not the former, or more precisely about international political terrorist acts and campaigns.

2. The agents of terrorist acts/campaigns can be the individual, the group or larger collectivities like state apparatuses or agencies. The terrorism of states is different in many key respects from that of individuals or combat groups, i.e., those agents that are non-state actors. When talking of state terrorism this can be state sponsored or state directed. Historically, state terrorism came first and then later there emerged the terrorism of non-state actors. When carried out by the latter it is essentially 'propaganda by the deed', i.e., publicity is its lifeblood. These acts are meant to be publicly conducted, and responsibility for it is usually publicly acknowledged. It is carried out to send messages in two directions - against the enemy and its support bases, but also to the home population whose morale is thereby supposed to be raised. State terrorism is by contrast usually (though not always) uni-directional aimed at sending a message of futility in the struggle by the enemy opposed to the state in question. If the first is the terrorism of the weak, the second is the terrorism of the strong. States usually do everything they can to avoid their terrorist acts from becoming public knowledge since this would often be damaging politically to them. Finally, the scale of state terrorism is far greater than that of non-state terrorism. The main reason for this is not because the means available to states are that much greater than those available to non-state actors (which they certainly are) but above all because the ends to which the terrorism of the state is harnessed are so much more grandiose - protecting the 'national interest', defending the free world, defeating the Communist threat, fighting against capitalist imperialism, etc. - that the scale of such acts is not only much greater but also more capable of being justified or not seen as terrorism at all. Al Qaeda, ironically, confirms this point since the aim of Sept. 11- a general message to the US Satan rather than an act with a more specific purpose, e.g., release of some prisoners - is what made it so different from other non-state terrorist attacks in the past. The biggest danger that confronts us today and tomorrow is not non-state terrorism but the capacities and frequencies with which states carry out terrorist acts and campaigns!

3. Terrorism, then, is a universal problem demanding not a selective but a universal response - morally, emotionally and politically. Morally there can be no double standards. You cannot condemn the terrorism of Al Qaeda on Sept. 11, 2001 and then remain silent about the terrorism unleashed by the US government on Afghanistan and Iraq, or condemn suicide bombings by Palestinians and not the brutalities of the Israeli government. In Afghanistan the US used means that they knew were going to kill large numbers of civilians and nevertheless went ahead claiming that this was not terrorism where there is an intent to kill civilians. However, the philosophical gap between intentionally and knowingly killing civilians is not so great as to allow such hypocrisy to get by, especially when the number of Afghan civilians killed were more than three times the number of those killed on Sept. 11, 2001 in the US. Indeed, double standards means the stronger party gets away with their terrorism while the weaker side is condemned and attacked which is politically disastrous because it only reinforces and widens the anger of the aggrieved side and its actual and potential support base, that the only way to hit back at those who get away with their terrorism, in the absence of international and impartial mechanisms of just punishment for all agents of terrorism, is to continue terrorist behaviour against those who otherwise are unpunished. Emotionally, a universalist response to acts of terrorism is not "never again to my people" but must be "never again to any people". Precisely because the response of too many Americans and Israelis is the first and not the second, their governments can hope to carry out the most blatant atrocities with confidence about getting substantial domestic support. Politically, it must be recognized that the only effective way to tackle and eventually eradicate the problem of political terrorism is precisely to recognize and tackle the political context which gives rise to such actions. There can only be a political, not a military or 'deterrent' solution to terrorism. Terrorism is not a pathology and its perpetrators are not pathological. Similarly, terrorism is not a specific or cultural phenomenon but a universal and political phenomenon. The tendency today in many circles to see terrorism as a special characteristic of Islam or Muslims or the Muslim world is absurd and obscene, and deeply counter-productive.

4. Evaluating the danger of terrorism today, our greatest problem is the shield that is being provided by the US-led "war on global terrorism". It provides the disguise, the great ideological banner, behind which the US is pursuing its Empire-building project. Indeed, the US government saw Sept. 11 as an opportunity for it to push forward much more aggressively and unilaterally this imperial project. Its immediate response within 24 hours to that attack was to declare that act, not as an international crime against humanity whereby all efforts must be made to capture and punish the criminals responsible. Instead, it declared it as a first salvo in a war against it, which therefore had to be countered by a "war against global terrorism". The two words war and global were not accidental or incidental. In a war you are entitled to act militarily at any time as long as the war is on. You do not have to wait for an attack on yourself to retaliate. Since it is global the US can attack anywhere it decides. It is the US of course that decides who the enemy is, and since no distinction is to be made against the actual terrorist perpetrators and the host country, countries themselves can be directly attacked regardless of international law. In effect, the US gave itself a carte blanche to attack anyone it decides is guilty, to do so whenever it wants, wherever it wants, for how long it wants, and with whatever means it decides. Note, the US declared its "war on global terrorism" to be a just war project, not simply or merely its war on Afghanistan which being a part of this, automatically becomes a just war. It was left to other pro-American intellectuals to do special pleading for

justifying the assault on Afghanistan when the government itself was justifying a much larger global project! A better ideological banner behind which to disguise its imperial project it would be difficult to find, particularly since it feeds into the fear of its domestic population and thus serves to mobilize the American public most effectively behind it. Of course, in the nineties there have emerged five distinct ideological banners to provide cover for US imperial behaviour - 'humanitarian intervention', 'weapons of mass destruction', 'war on global terrorism', 'regime change', 'failed states'.

5. How do we move towards resolution of this problem of international terrorism? There are no surprises here, nor any shortcuts. We can only hope to resolve this problem or at least greatly diminish its significance and impact in the longer run if we a) confront our biggest and most general problem conducive to perpetuating terrorism in its most widespread, deepest and dangerous form - the US Empire project which must be defeated. b) We must recognize and address the specific political contexts in which terrorism occurs, whether by states or non-state actors, whether in Kashmir or Israel-Palestine, by searching for politically just solutions in these cases. c) Finally, we have to work for effective international laws and institutions with the powers to punish all wrongdoers, no matter how powerful, and to broaden our national laws (a la the Pinochet case) to weaken prospects of successful refuge for leaders/people most responsible for such criminal acts and campaigns.

P.S.

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