2 Terrorism: Sources and Cures

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Terrorism is a method of political struggle or warfare available to any player, including individuals, groups, and states. Its history is as old as human conflict. Yet terrorism has taken on greater salience with the increasing ability of small groups to employ ever more dangerous and lethal forms of attack against the public or the state.

Furthermore, terrorism is a great equalizer of power. It is, colloquially put, the poor man's weapon. Not surprisingly, great powers tend to be far more distressed at the potential equalization of power afforded by terrorism than are small powers. This was clearly demonstrated when the United States was itself targeted by terrorism; only then did the U.S. government define terrorism as a serious global problem. Before terrorism was directly targeted against its own homeland, Washington did not consider it a serious problem, even though many other countries had suffered such attacks for decades.

In addition, America's international strategy under the Bush administration has increased both the profile and the problem posed by terrorism. Dominated by a neoconservative philosophy and a strategic global vision of unparalleled ambition to remake the world, U.S. policy has, ironically, increasingly become a lightning rod for global terrorism, propagating the "global" nature of the problem. This increase has become even more evident as American soldiers on patrol in Iraq can now be attacked by foreign guerrillas on a more level playing field than ever before.

In short, terrorism is, and has always been, a problem; but it is the victimization of the United States itself, which sits atop the international power hierarchy, that has made terrorism a more prominent and pressing issue. The reaction of the United States in launching the global war on terrorism has raised the profile of the terrorism issue to unprecedented heights, so that it now dominates most aspects of the Bush administration's foreign policy.

Problems of Definition

Analyses of terrorism—and ascriptions as to its causes and remedies—are hampered by an absence of any agreed-upon definitions. As a consequence, casual and arbitrary invocations of the term *terrorism* tend to serve the interests of the speaker. Those who possess the power to define the problem are well positioned to define the solution, even when there is considerable disagreement on the matter.

Nonetheless, at a minimum, most observers would agree that terrorism involves attacks against "innocent" civilians and noncombatants in the fulfillment of political goals. Many insist that terrorism, by definition, can be conducted only by nonstate actors, but a serious treatment of the phenomenon

cannot exclude the use of "terror" by the state itself against its own or other citizens. In this case, the broader definition is better: the failure to include terror perpetrated by the state exculpates the state from what may be one primary cause of terrorism.

Westerners socialized into certain articles of faith about the nature of the Western state have trouble accepting the idea that the state itself could be capable of terrorism. Specifically, we learn from Weberian traditions that the state, by definition, has a "monopoly over the legal use of violence." Such a definition enjoys understandable resonance in the West precisely because most Western states represent the will of the public as expressed in free elections. Electorates have the ability to remove unwanted or dangerous leaders. The democratic state is expected to act in a fair and impartial way and hence should be the sole instrument entrusted with the use of violence against its own citizens.

In most of the rest of the world, however, regimes are not elected, lack basic democratic legitimacy, cannot be removed by the public at large, and routinely employ forms of intimidation and terrorist brutality to maintain a monopoly of political power. The terrors of the Stalinist, fascist, and Maoist state are obvious historical examples. Beleaguered populations often turn to violence or terrorism as a response to the illegitimate and repressive state.

Thus, a key psychological notion lies behind much of the perception and use of terror: terrorism is often seen in the developing world to be more "justified," or at least less morally reprehensible, when the weak use it against the strong as their main, or only, weapon of resistance. Ironically, contemporary values of human rights and democracy, and concepts of national self-determination and social justice, may have stimulated the use of terror among oppressed or frustrated groups

in a misguided search for "justice" on the international and national level. Many oppressed peoples used to take their condition for granted; they no longer do.

In addition, for both descriptive and policy purposes, analysts of terrorism distinguish among *types* of terrorism. One important basic distinction concerns the dimensions and specificity of the group's goals. Groups with millenarian, apocalyptic goals with global ambitions (al Qaeda, Aum Shinrikyo, Baader-Meinhof, and such) differ from those with regional, local, and finite goals (usually nationalist goals, such as those of Chechens, Palestinians, Tamil Tigers, Basques, and so on). The limited and concrete goals and grievances of some groups can be negotiated—even resolved—in ways that millenarian goals cannot.

Of course, discussion of the *causes* of terrorism can never justify reversion to terrorism. However, discussion can suggest possible lines of approach to try to lessen terrorism. Modern societies, after all, *do* legally treat quite differently the various ways in which human lives are taken, distinguishing among first- and second-degree murder, manslaughter, criminal negligence, and capital punishment.

Nor does the existence of genuine grievances automatically lead to terrorism: Witness the deplorable conditions extant in much of Africa, where indigenous terrorism directed against the state is rare. The state in Africa is weak, however, making guerrilla war from the bush more effective than terrorism against a pudgy state. In Latin America, anti-U.S. terror was at one time widespread, but is currently minimal. This change has to do partly with the democratization of governance across most of the region.

Looked at side by side, the two examples of Africa and Latin America teach us something important: terrorism is ineffectual when the state is transparent, and it is unnecessary

and unsustainable when the state is democratic. This brings us to the Muslim and particularly the Arab world, where states are, in the main, neither transparent nor democratic.

Definitions Applied

There is no doubt that today the Muslim world is the primary source and locus of terrorism. The reasons for this are complex and can be long debated, but the very existence of a vast "Muslim world" is itself one factor. In today's wired world, the international community of Muslims—the *umma*—is exquisitely attuned to the grievances of Muslims everywhere. Muslims can directly identify with the problems of other Muslims and are inclined to see themselves as a civilization under siege on a global level.

The echo chamber effect of the wired *umma*—reinforcing a sense of collective grievance—is a distinctive feature not found in other violent cultures around the world. Africans, for example, rarely speak with a common African voice about "African grievances," even in very violent cultures.

Many more reasons can be adduced to help explain—*but not explain away*—the salience of terrorism in the contemporary Muslim world: a millennium or more of periodic geopolitical clashes between various European forces and their most immediate cultural neighbor (the Muslim world); the historical uniqueness of the founding of the state of Israel, populated by people coming mostly from Europe on territory that was seen as inherently Muslim; and the high economic stakes swirling around vital energy resources that have facilitated a history of Western intervention in the Muslim world. And finally, we have the pervasiveness of authoritarian rule, sometimes facilitated, sometimes merely tolerated, by U.S. policies. A Muslim sense of helplessness, cynicism, frustration, and

impotence in being unable to change any feature of domestic repression, or to affect the international forces that bolster that domestic order, clearly contributes to radical and violent responses.

The phenomenon of national liberation movements among Muslim minorities seeking freedom from harsh non-Muslim rule is especially important at the local level: Bosnians, Palestinians, Kosovars, Chechens, Kashmiris, Uighurs, Moros, and others all have turned to local violence in struggles that eventually become internationalized into yet another "Muslim cause." (Note that *intra-Muslim* separatist movements, such as those of the Kurds in Turkey or the Berbers in Algeria, do not fall into the category of "Muslim causes" and are also more amenable to solution.) These cases of local terrorism are quite distant from the phenomenon of al Qaeda, even if there is some incidental or opportunistic interaction. In this context, the crucial distinction between terrorism (against civilians) and guerrilla war (against authority) becomes vital. All terrorists are unprivileged combatants according to international law, wearing neither uniform nor insignia, but not all unprivileged combatants are terrorists.

The grievances, challenges, and conflicts of the Middle East are, of course, not new. They all long precede the modern phenomenon of international terrorism in the name of Islam. Yet grievances always find vehicles for expression, and today it is Islam, or Islamism, that serves as a vehicle for grievances and aspirations earlier expressed by Arab nationalism or Marxism-Leninism. Indeed, Palestinian terrorism has gone through each of these iterations in which one and then another ideology was adopted as a vehicle and later cast off. But all were aimed at achieving the same thing: an independent Palestinian state. In Uzbekistan, Islam was all but dead after seventy years of Communist repression. However,

within less than a decade after independence, Islam became the vehicle of choice for combating a new, neo-Stalinist "national" Uzbek regime.

The success of the Islamist *mujahideen* in their jihad in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation lent special adrenaline to the Islamist cause, demonstrating that Islamism could even defeat a superpower (with a little help from U.S. arms). In other words, a disparate collection of local Muslim grievances has come to be reconfigured into one grander, more resonant, more global, and "civilizational" cause. These accumulated regional grievances—some legitimate, others ambiguous, a few fanciful—reached a head in the horrific events of September 11. Does that event represent a watershed, a high point of terrorism in international politics, or is it merely the most dramatic early expression in what may be an era of ongoing terrorist violence?

What Is to Be Done?

The answer to the question of what is to be done matters, because it should size and define the U.S. response. The trouble is, the answer is not obvious.

After the drama of September 11, the U.S. government made a good beginning at harnessing the moral indignation of the world to work in greater concert against *international* terrorism. Important progress has been made in identifying individuals, their modus operandi, and their mechanisms of travel and funding. New counterterrorism measures have immensely complicated the task of the terrorist, even if these measures may never completely eliminate terrorism. (This is another reason for treating terrorism as crime and not war: war comes to an end, but crime does not.) This kind of inter-

national cooperation needs to be enhanced and deepened, routinized and institutionalized.

International terrorist movements, as proclaimed by the Bush administration, should be the primary target of such global cooperation, but what constitutes "international" is in part a political judgment. Are locally based movements with local goals that nevertheless maintain international contacts part of international terrorism?

If we do not maintain the distinction, we risk stoking the kind of terrorism most dangerous to us. One of the major failings of the Bush administration's global war on terrorism (GWOT) is that it is too expansively defined, permitting nearly all dictators and regimes to embrace it and to declare their own local opponents all to be terrorists—and hence legitimate targets of the larger antiterrorism struggle. In effect, the GWOT has given license to many nasty regimes to depoliticize and then criminalize any local resistance and ethnic movements that have recourse to political violence—and this in countries where nearly all resistance to the state is treated violently. Across the globe, states like Russia, China, Israel, India, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, the Philippines, and others have exploited the GWOT for their own ends, and in so doing, they have usually increased internal repression. In most of these cases, the criminalization of legitimate political grievances has worsened the problem, heightened tensions, and intensified anti-American feeling.

In the Middle East, the problems associated with this dynamic are particularly complex and problematic. Few regimes in that area are legitimate in terms of popular support and electoral legitimacy. Until legal channels exist for the expression of grievances—often not just by minorities but also by the majority of the population against unpopular authori-

tarian regimes—there will be latent sympathy for acts of violence against the repressive state.

Of course, nearly all Muslims are aware that true acts of terrorism are criminal and violate the principles of Islam, but because of widespread anger against regimes, or against U.S. interventionism, these acts are rationalized as understandable and hence justifiable in some way. This very mood of frustration, anger, helplessness, and impotence creates a social environment of acquiescence toward many terrorist acts, especially those of an anti-American or antiregime nature. There will be no serious progress against terrorism until this environment of social permissiveness toward terrorism is altered. Unfortunately, force is the least effective tool in altering this mood of permissiveness and acquiescence.

How might terrorism come to be perceived differently by society in ways that will facilitate its disappearance? The United States itself might be a hypothetical case in point.

The bombing in Oklahoma City was condemned by nearly all Americans as an outrage, without qualification. But suppose such an incident had been perpetrated in the 1960s by African Americans? There would, of course, have been widespread condemnation of the act, but there would have been plenty of "buts," just as there were in discussing race riots in Watts, Detroit, and other places. Many Americans, while condemning the act, might have reasoned that the event was not surprising given social conditions among African Americans. Many African Americans would have felt considerable ambivalence about such an act.

This hypothetical case resembles the attitudes of most Muslims today toward terror against the United States and against repressive regional regimes: awareness that it is wrong, and against Islam, "but . . . ." This socially sanctioned "but" will be altered only when the broad public perceives that

such an act is unjustifiable by *any* standard and that the cost to society from such acts is unacceptably high.

Punishment visited from abroad, as in the GWOT, may impose high costs upon Muslim societies, but it is unlikely to carry moral persuasiveness. It is more likely to touch off counterproductive consequences elsewhere. In realistic terms, a broad social reaction across the Muslim world against terrorism will regrettably be a long time in coming, at least in a number of societies where conditions are especially conducive to frustration and violence. To be successful, that type of reaction will require action by *elected Muslim leaders* who enjoy the legitimacy to move against such criminal acts. Leaders lacking this legitimacy will find limited popular support in crushing perpetrators of political violence. Chechen, Kashmiri, and Palestinian leaders, for example, will enjoy popular support in stamping out terrorist action from within their ranks *only* when the public at large feels that such acts are not only against religious principles, but also no longer justifiable because they are unnecessary in light of the ascent of legitimate state power.

The United States thus needs to combine reformist and punitive measures in meeting this complex challenge. As to the latter, the failure of the United States to respond to attack, or to those regimes that abet and encourage attack, would display a dangerous weakness. But punitive measures have little demonstration effect, so they should be used only when absolutely necessary. Even more than punitive measures, we need to engage in both conflict resolution and the promotion of genuine institutional reform abroad.

Local grievances that breed violence, though complex, are manageable, particularly when combined with the legitimizing weight of international cooperation as opposed to unpopular unilateral action. When local grievances are dealt with,

local actors will be less drawn to the "internationalization" of diverse and abstruse "Muslim causes." Nonlocal millenarian terrorists will then find a much more limited pool of recruits available for their quixotic causes and a much greater local willingness to deal with such terrorists harshly.

In addition, we must work to reduce the number of nondemocratic regimes that repress and terrorize their own people, thereby giving rise to the legitimation of apocalyptic terrorist responses. That is a very difficult task, and, regrettably, we are a long way from achieving it right now. President Bush has recognized this facet of the problem, notably in his November 6, 2003 speech at the National Endowment of Democracy. But whether the administration, or its successors, can match wise action to soaring rhetoric in a serious way remains to be seen.

This analytic framework will not satisfy a policy maker looking for a quick and efficacious way to win the war against terror. There is no such way. Heightened police work and international cooperation can make international terrorism more manageable, but as long as radical conditions and grievances exist, especially in the special conditions of the Muslim world, radical vehicles to express them will be found. If the "solution" to the problem of terrorism will be long in coming, let's remember that the problem that exploded on September 11 was a long time in coming, too.