CHANGING NATURE OF TERRORISM

By

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Etiologically, terrorism as an organized phenomenon originated in the second half of the 19th century Europe in the backdrop of the Enlightenment, which challenged many fundamental assumptions of political authority, rooted in the theological doctrines of the medieval period. The methods of challenge to the traditional authority of the Kings and the Church varied among the radical nationalist groups. While the Germans and Italians were successful in establishing unified nation-states, others like the Irish, Serbs, Macedonians and Armenians adopted terrorist methods in their struggle for national independence or political autonomy.\(^1\) Again in the aftermath of the World War II, terrorism came to be closely associated with national and anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa. During this period religion proved to be a potent technique of mass mobilisation for the liberation efforts of the secular-nationalist leadership.\(^2\) By evoking historical and sacred themes, employing religious slogans and symbols, nationalists sought to whip up revolutionary fervour among the unlettered masses. In brief, religion was used functionally to reach certain goals, which were not immediately derived from it. Instead, religion itself became an expression of protest against imperialism, and protection against grave forms of injustice.

At the end of the Cold War, what was traditionally considered as “ideological” terrorism—the phenomenon that brought terrorism to the global stage via hijacking and bombings—perpetrated by such groups as the Shinning Path and Tupac Amaru in Peru, Italian Red Brigades and Red Army in Japan lost its support and raison d’etre. In the early 1990s, the world came to witness an entirely new phase in the evolution of terrorism. A series of spectacular terrorist violence including the 1993 WTC bombing in New York, the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo attack of the Tokyo subway through sarin nerve gas, the 1995 Oklahoma city bombing, the 1998 simultaneous bombings of US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-el-Salaam marked the beginning of what is now popularly known as New Terrorism or the post-modern terrorism. Unlike the earlier period when most of the terrorist groups had secular nationalist/separatist goals or revolutionary ideals, many deriving their inspiration from the ideas of Marx and Lenin, the predominant motivation behind this new terrorism have been the religious zeal tinged with messianic fervour. The call for jihad (holy war), for instance, has become the battle cry for the soldiers of Islam in their struggle to end the era of Jahiliyyah (pagan ignorance of the pre-Islamic Arabia), and the killing of uninvolved bystanders is justified in defence of their faith.

The religious motivation is not confined to Islam alone, though the pan-Islamic Jihadi movement represents an enduring source of global security challenge. Timothy Mc

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\(^1\) See Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (London: Little, Brown, 1987), pp. 11-17; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 13-44. Laqueur in his seminal work also contends that terrorists' targets up to the 1970s included the kings, ministers, heads of states, generals, and other political figures but never the innocent bystanders. The famous guerrilla leader Che Guevara was in principle opposed to military operations in urban centres to avoid large-scale casualties.

\(^2\) Instances abound; Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey at the end of the World War I; Indonesian President Sukarno; PLO leader Yasser Arafat in the early 1970s and a galaxy of Indian nationalists in the early days of freedom struggle, particularly the Khilafat movement led by Gandhi.
Veigh who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City was motivated by the Christian patriot movement; Yigal Amir, the assassin of the late Israeli Premier Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 was guided by Jewish messianic ideals; Aum Shinrikyo (The Supreme Truth), which carried out the Tokyo subway attack, was inspired by similar worldview to destroy the “corrupt world”. So did America’s Christian anti-abortion activists who justified the bombing of abortion clinics in Alabama and Georgia in 1997 as defensive actions on behalf of the unborn. By the mid-1990s, the proportion of terrorist groups motivated by religious considerations increased manifold.

Thirty five years ago there was not a single religious cult or terrorist groups animated by religious beliefs. Even as recently as 1980, only two out of the world’s 64 terrorist groups were religiously motivated. It was mostly the Shi‘ite Muslim groups active in Middle East since the 1979 Iranian revolution that accounted for a quarter of all terrorist-related deaths. The phrase “Islamic terrorism” was coined after the 1979 Islamic Revolution when a group of Iranian students claiming themselves as followers of the Imam Khomeini occupied American embassy compound and kept fifty-two diplomats as hostage for 444 days. Throughout the 1980s, Iran, Syria and Libya headed a new Comintern of subversive movement in Middle East with Beqa Valley in Lebanon as the headquarters of international terrorism. By contrast, there has been a virtual explosion of identifiable religious terrorist groups from none in 1968 to today’s level, where over half of all terrorist groups active throughout the world are predominantly motivated by religious concerns. It is worth mentioning that in the year 1968 the hijacking of an Israeli Airliner in July to Algiers by the Marxist-Leninist Palestinian factions marked the beginning of modern global terrorism. In fact, approximately 20 per cent of all international terrorist incidents during 1970-73 periods were related to the Palestinian cause.

Despite an unprecedented growth in terrorist acts in the name of religion, attention of the international community was not sufficiently focused on combating this menace until the events of the 11 September 2001. The airborne terrorist assaults on the American cities demonstrated not just the scale of violence or lethality of attacks, but also the operational reach of new terrorism. As the subsequent investigations reveal, Osama bin-Laden’s Al-Qaeda (the base) is truly global in terms of its networking, recruitment patterns and operational areas. The movement’s cells are found at one time in 60 countries and its activists drawn from a host of nations. The assassins responsible for the death of the Afghan warlord Ahmed Shah Masood were Algerians with Belgian passports, whose visas to enter Pakistan had been issued in London. Of the 19 hijackers involved in the 11 September suicide mission led by Muhammad Atta, an Egyptian architect trained in Germany, and 15 were Saudi citizens from the mountainous province of Asir. Likewise, over a quarter of the Kashmiri fedayeen (those who sacrifice their lives for a cause) are recruited from various Muslim countries ranging from Chechnya, Sudan and Algeria to Pakistan.

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The distinction between state and non-state terrorism is no longer valid. Instead, what appears in the current phase of global terrorism is an amorphous network that defies labels. It consists of dispersed organisations, small groups and individuals who communicate, co-ordinate and conduct their campaign in an internetted manner, often without a central command. The al-Qaeda, for example, presents a united front of Islamist factions transcending their regional divisions and other particularistic properties in pursuit of establishing the nizam al-Islami (Islamic order) in the world modelled on the Medinian Caliphate. Over the years, it brought together under the banner of the International Islamic Front for Jihad a diverse range of terrorist groups active worldwide, notably the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al Gama Al-Islamiyya, the Pakistan-based Harkat ul-Mujahideen and Jamiat ul-Mujahideen, the Ittihad al-Islami of Somalia, Algeria’s Armed Islamic Group or the GIA, Abu Sayyaf of the Philippines, and the mujahideen of Chechnya and Dagestan. For these terrorist organisations, martyrdom is a compelling lure, and self-sacrifice valued above many other virtues including mercy and pity. Dehumanisation of the enemy is dominant theme in their belief system; elimination, not its defeat, is their prime objective.

My lecture will focus on the following changes in the nature of global terrorism: ideological motivation, organisational structures, targets and objectives, the lethality and the operational area. It will also deal with the causation of the phenomenon of terrorism and the dichotomy arising from combating terrorism on the one hand to protect citizens and the risk of demonising a specific religion and community on the other. Finally, it will end with my observations as regards the ticklish issue of function of democracy in eliminating the “roots of terrorism.” Is it a mere Western propaganda or a genuine antidote? The question that is often raised is if democratization eventually brings the Islamists to power (viz. Hamas electoral victory in the Palestinian elections and the upsurge of neo-Taliban in Pakistan), what will happen then?

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5 For a discussion of the struggle between the West and Islam over who will provide the definition to the post-Cold War world order, see John Kelsay, Islam and War: The Gulf War and Beyond (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), Chap. 5; also see Bassam Tibi, The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Order (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 54-55.