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UNRAVELLING THE COMPLEXITY OF TERRORISM

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ABSTRACT
Terrorism represents a multifaceted problem and attempts to elucidate it often succumb to oversimplification and abstract generalities. As a result, despite its massive human and material destruction over recent years, there remains a profound lack of understanding around terrorism. This leads to unproductive controversies and emotionally-charged debates. This article aims to conceptualize terrorism, considering its intricate definition, causes, objectives, and manifestations. It seeks to address questions such as whether terrorism is a means to an end or an end in itself, whether the label "terrorist" is interchangeable with "freedom fighter" depending on perspective, and if terrorism can ever be morally justified. Furthermore, it probes the role of religion in modern terrorism, the relationship between state violence and terrorism, and the existence of state-sponsored terrorism. Recent literature has seen heated debates on these issues, and while there remains discordance on certain theoretical aspects, a broader academic consensus has formed around previously controversial and emotive issues.
Keywords: Terrorism, Political Violence, Extremism, Religion, War, Guerrilla Warfare.

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism has evolved in contemporary history to currently become a major global concern, jeopardising security and peace within and beyond state frontiers. After the terrorist events of September 11, 2001, the United States has led major international wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of combating terrorism, rightly or wrongly. Yet, while the terrorist potential of organisations like al-Qaeda and Daesh may have consequently receded, a number of countries like Pakistan continue to be in the grip of terrorist violence. Moreover, despite its horrendous consequences, especially the loss of so many innocent lives, terrorism remains the most misunderstood term. The reasons are not difficult to understand.

Terrorism is a "label that no individual or group is willing to accept" (Townshend, 2002), while states retain the legal right to use force under international law, albeit under certain conditions. Hence, a consensus on defining terrorism is still missing. Yet, terrorism is readily identifiable when it occurs. It is the psychological impact of terrorism that differentiates it from other politically-motivated acts of violence, such as war and guerrilla warfare. This distinctive attribute of terrorism is what this study seeks to elucidate further, critically reviewing published works on the definition, justifications, motivations, roots and ramifications of terrorism.

Defining Terrorism

Terrorism represents one of the most disputed concepts in social sciences, and its definition is "highly contentious in legal and political domains" (Sezgin, 2007). As terrorism involves harming innocent individuals, no country wants to be accused of endorsing terrorism or accommodating terrorist groups. Conversely, no country wants what it perceives as a legitimate use of force to be labeled as terrorism. Hence, definitions of terrorism proffered by states, international organizations, and academics only mention non-state actors and individuals, excluding states as potential perpetrators of terrorism. For instance, the US Department of Defense (2002) defines terrorism as "the purposeful utilization or

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threat of violence to instill fear, with the intention of coercing or intimidating governments or societies in the pursuit of political, religious, or ideological objectives."

Likewise, international organizations, such as the United Nations General Assembly (1999), regard terrorism as "criminal acts deliberately designed to instigate terror among the general populace, a specific group, or targeted individuals for political purposes." Such acts are deemed unjustifiable under all circumstances, irrespective of any political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious, or other justifications put forth. In response to the terrorist events of 9/11, the UN Security Council issued a series of resolutions condemning terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. Although these resolutions do not provide an explicit definition of terrorism, they identify various acts of terrorist violence and impose obligations upon UN member states to adhere to a code of conduct, including measures aimed at preventing the financing of terrorism.

Scholars have also made endeavors to delineate the concept of terrorism. Jenkins (2001) defines terrorism as the application or threatened application of force with the objective of effecting political change. Whittaker (2002) characterizes terrorism as premeditated employment of violence by subnational groups or clandestine individuals, seeking to intimidate or coerce governments, promote political, religious, or ideological aims, and instill fear within the general populace. Schmid (1988) presents a comprehensive definition of terrorism as "an anxiety-inducing approach involving repetitive violent actions executed by (semi-)clandestine individuals, groups, or state actors, driven by idiosyncratic, criminal, or political motivations."

Nonetheless, these attempts to define terrorism are not without inherent challenges. Mockaitis (2007) argues that contemporary definitions of terrorism, including those proposed by scholars, typically classify terrorism based on three broad criteria: the target, the weapon employed, and the perpetrator. Nearly all experts and officials concur that indiscriminate attacks on civilians constitute terrorism, as do the use of weapons deemed illegitimate by the international community. Furthermore, experts and officials often evaluate the legitimacy, goals, and objectives of the perpetrators when determining whether their actions qualify as terrorism. Unfortunately, each criterion, alone or in combination, presents significant complications.

Terrorism and Political Violence

The obscuring of demarcations between terrorism and war adds complexity to the task of defining terrorism. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate terrorism from other forms of political violence. Both war and guerrilla warfare fall under the rubric of such, but they diverge from terrorism on the basis that the perpetrators presumably distinguish between armed forces and unarmed civilians, who are not to be directly targeted. Yet, in both war and guerrilla warfare, unarmed civilians frequently become victims.

In the context of war, such instances, as observed in Iraq and Afghanistan, are often referred to as "collateral damage" by the engaged state entities or international coalitions. During guerrilla warfare, there are often striking similarities between the perpetrators, the weapons used, and the victims as compared to those in acts of terrorism. However, the incidental targeting of civilians during war or guerrilla warfare does not justify categorizing these forms of violence as identical to terrorism. War predominantly remains a conflict between combatant armies or armed groups, even in the context of recent conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the late 1960s, guerrilla warfare has undergone significant transformations, shifting towards urban territories, which often results in higher civilian casualties and psychological impact. Contemporary terrorism has emerged in parallel with urban guerrilla warfare, thereby complicating the process of distinguishing between the two.

In recent instances, however, we observe groups engaging in premeditated violence specifically aimed at unarmed civilians, as exemplified by al-Qaeda, Daesh or Pakistan Tehreek-e-Taliban's strategy of maximizing civilian casualties. Such actions qualify them as quintessential terrorist organizations. The primary aim of such acts of violence is to instill fear in the population of the targeted region or country. Therefore, when discussing terrorism, our focus should be on non-state entities that rely exclusively on terrorism to achieve their objectives. However, this does not imply that instances of civilian casualties in war or guerrilla warfare should be overlooked, nor that the psychological impact of terrorism should be overemphasized. The latter could lead to an underappreciation of the more destructive nature of wars, civil wars, or regional conflicts in both human and material terms.

One of the fundamental hurdles in defining terrorism lies in its subjectivity. What one perceives as an act of terrorism, another may consider a legitimate act of resistance or freedom fighting. This subjectivity arises from the diverse range of perspectives influenced by political, cultural, and historical contexts. The adage "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" aptly describes this dilemma An act of violence against civilians perpetrated by a non-state actor may be classified as a terrorist act by the state against which it is executed, but as a fight for freedom by sympathizers of the non-state actor (Ahmad, 2012). This dynamic culminates in a blame-game, with each side accusing the other of terrorism while positioning itself as a freedom fighter or a protector of territorial integrity. However, an objective assessment of the issue requires exploring the gray area between the fight for freedom and terrorism.

As Townshend (2002) posits, it is possible for a freedom fight to include instances of terrorism, or for a terrorist organization to be motivated by a goal of freedom. By stating "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," the observer risks conflating the goal with the activity. Rizvi (2006) highlights a conundrum that emerges when a generalised interpretation of terrorism is contextualised historically and politically. Therefore, each movement must be examined in relation to history and politics, and the goals it pursues. If violence involving killing and destruction is used as the primary method, and civilians are targeted systematically and persistently, such a movement can be branded terrorist. Terrorism can be a tactic within a freedom struggle, but this does not provide a moral justification for terrorism, whether enacted by non-state actors or states (Weinberg, 2006).

While wars and guerrilla warfare do not involve deliberate targeting of civilians, terrorism strategically aims to instill fear and demobilize the general population. Therefore, the number of casualties alone cannot adequately capture the essence of terrorism, as its true significance lies in the aftermath and the psychological element. By understanding the nature of terrorism as an activity and the effects it produces, we can comprehend its distinctiveness and separate it from other forms of violence.

Psychological Effect

Various academic and legal definitions concur that terrorism is a form of violence or threat of violence designed to achieve a psychological effect. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between terrorism as an activity and the terror it instills as its effect, as these two concepts are not interchangeable. According to Laquer (2003), the primary objective of a terrorist act, whether it involves suicide bombing, targeted assassination, or hijacking, is to "create terror, intimidate, and demobilize the wider populace." Consequently, the number of casualties becomes secondary to the consequential outcomes following the act of violence.

Crenshaw (1995) highlights terrorism's distinctiveness by describing it as a conspiratorial style of violence meticulously crafted to alter the attitudes and behavior of multiple audiences. By targeting a select few, terrorists aim to capture the attention of the masses. Consequently, the resources deployed in a terrorist act may not correlate proportionally with the effects created. Terrorism's high symbolic and expressive value, coupled with the contrast between secretive planning and visible results, further amplify its impact. Jenkins (2001) echoes this sentiment, suggesting that terrorism comprises acts performed in a dramatic manner to attract publicity and generate a pervasive sense of alarm beyond the immediate victims. In many cases, the identity of the victims becomes secondary or irrelevant, as the primary target is the observing audience. This distinction between actual victims and the target audience serves as the defining characteristic of terrorism and sets it apart from other forms of armed conflict.

Defining terrorism, according to Sezgin (2007), is a challenge because states view the phenomenon from their political perspective and would be reluctant to accommodate an interpretation that contradicts their interests. The concept of terrorism, like many other social science concepts, is subject to interpretation, making it socially constructed. Yet, codifying these social values can be problematic. Although patterns can be identified across instances of terrorism, each case possesses distinct characteristics. The dynamic nature of terrorism arises from the ever-changing contexts in which it emerges, while the responses of governments and challengers vary in similar circumstances. Furthermore, the meaning of terrorism undergoes transformations as politics and society evolve.

Laqueur (1987) asserts that it is impossible for any single definition of terrorism to encompass the diverse range of terrorist activities witnessed throughout history. He cautions against

oversimplifications and generalizations when examining terrorism, highlighting the inherently subjective nature of the term. The labeling of an act as "terrorism" often reflects the moral judgment or justification attributed to it by individual observers. Consequently, designating a particular violent act as terrorism may be more reflective of social or political judgments rather than a comprehensive description of a set of phenomena. Given the relativistic nature of terrorism, a descriptive definition may be useful, but it falls short of providing absolute precision or complete satisfaction in capturing this complex concept.

Laqueur (2003) likens the study of terrorism to that of a physician dealing with a disease whose exact causes remain unknown or a drug whose precise mechanism remains uncertain. Despite these uncertainties, the absence of complete knowledge should not hinder scholars from diagnosing the disease and prescribing applicable remedies. Similarly, Whittaker (2002) argues that maintaining neutrality and analytical clarity in the face of emotionally taxing subjects is challenging yet essential for understanding terrorism. Guelke (1995) further contends that exploring the influence of terrorism on the modern world holds great value, even in light of the existing barriers to understanding the term. Schmid (2004) emphasizes that international terrorism can only be combated through international cooperation, necessitating a common definition or understanding of what constitutes terrorism. He offers ten characteristics of terrorism to aid in understanding the phenomenon and reaching a functional definition.

The debate about defining terrorism is likely to persist, reflecting a myriad of perspectives. In sum, even if a theoretical definition of terrorism lacks international consensus, its principal elements and attributes are generally accepted. As such, terrorism is an organized, deliberate, and politically motivated act of violence targeting unarmed civilians with the purpose of instilling fear in a targeted audience. The central dispute over the definition of terrorism remains identifying the perpetrators, who, according to existing definitions offered by governments, academics, and international organizations, are assumed to be non-state actors. To overcome such problems, we can contextualize the definition and explanation of terrorism on a case-by-case basis. This suggests that even if a general theoretical definition of terrorism is not feasible, a specific functional definition of terrorism is possible.

Religion and Terror

Religion has the potential to serve as a powerful motivator for individuals engaged in acts of terrorism. Religious ideologies, particularly when distorted or misinterpreted, can provide moral justification for violence in the minds of extremists. By invoking religious doctrines, terrorist groups can rally support, recruit individuals, and legitimize their actions within a particular religious framework. It is important, however, to distinguish between the religious texts themselves and the interpretations and manipulations that may be used to advance a violent agenda.

In recent history, Islam has been associated with terrorism as individuals and organizations instigating and perpetrating it originate from Muslim backgrounds. However, in characterizing religious terrorism, many scholars tend to blur the role of religion, depicting it as a goal rather than a tool. For example, they describe Islam as a motivator rather than a means when analyzing the root causes of terrorism waged by terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda. Hoffman (1999) contends that the high fatality rate associated with religious terrorism can be attributed to the divergent value systems, legitimization mechanisms, moral concepts, and worldviews embraced by the religious terrorist, a position similarly held by Stern (2001).

According to White (2002), "holy terror" encompasses a value system that is diametrically opposed to "secular terror." Secular terrorists function within a dominant political and cultural framework and aim to triumph over the political systems that oppress them. They aspire to replace the existing social structure with a new one, rather than fully destroy it. They are more inclined towards forming alliances than indiscriminately eliminating their enemies. Conversely, holy terrorists operate without such constraints, viewing the world as a battlefield between forces of light and darkness. Victory is not described in political terms, and they believe the enemy must be completely obliterated.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of terrorism carried out in the name of Islam, its root causes, and motivations reveal that religion largely serves as a means rather than an end. While the motivations of those who finance and train suicide bombers are hardly religious, the short-term and long-term objectives of organizations like al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups are essentially political.

Until the late 20th Century, only a few instances of terrorism could be described as having primarily religious ends. In contemporary terrorism, religion acts as a goal only in a few cases. Therefore, as per Juergensmeyer (2005), no single religious tradition has a monopoly on violence, and all religious traditions can be used to justify destructive and aggressive acts, such as the doomsday cults in Christianity.

Considering the predominantly political nature of international terrorism involving deviant Muslims and distorted Islam, drawing a rigid distinction between secular and religious terror based on an evil-versus-good thesis, as Hoffman does, is somewhat illogical (Ahmad, 2003). The portrayal of religion as a goal simplifies the fundamentally political nature of current terrorism and, therefore, prevents the adoption of political counter-terrorism policies. Juergensmeyer (2005) argues that while religion has been a significant factor in recent acts of terrorism, it is seldom the sole factor. Religious ideologies, goals, and motivations often intertwine with those of an economic, social, and political nature. In essence, terrorists misuse the name of religion to realize political ambitions. Religious terrorism can be most accurately described as the deliberate use of organized violence against unarmed civilians to achieve political ends by exploiting a dogmatic religious creed as a means.

Causes of Terrorism

Terrorism is a multifaceted phenomenon that arises from a variety of causes, reflecting the discontents and grievances of certain individuals and groups. Conventional explanations often identify poverty, absence of democracy, or historical factors as significant drivers of terrorist violence. However, a meticulous examination of the empirical data challenges these assertions. It is true that economic disparities and inequalities contribute significantly to the roots of terrorism. Poverty, lack of opportunities, and economic marginalization can engender frustration, hopelessness, and despair among certain segments of society. These conditions create an environment where extremist ideologies find fertile ground, promising radical solutions to socio-economic grievances. However, it is also a fact that while Africa is impoverished, and the Western world is affluent, the latter has experienced more terrorism.

In some instances, the non-existence of terrorism in authoritarian states—despite their repressive nature—and its prevalence in democratic states—despite their provision for peaceful conflict resolution—have been offered as key justifications for rejecting the notion that non-state terrorism is a reaction to state terrorism. Marginalization, discrimination, and political repression can create a fertile breeding ground for radical ideologies to take hold. However, it is crucial to note that one possible reason for non-state terrorist activity is not the internal democratic nature of the targeted country, but the specific foreign policy it employs that is disliked by the terrorist organization. Al-Qaeda justified 9/11 attacks against the US on this count (Silke, 2020). Although democracy may potentially mitigate terrorism, its absence or lack in a country or region cannot be unequivocally interpreted as a primary cause of terrorism. It could, at best, be considered a contributing factor. The presence of effective governance, democracy, rule of law, and social justice significantly reduce the likelihood of internal upsurges, including those involving terrorism (Schmid, 2005).

With regard to historical causality, South Asia did not witness any significant terrorist campaigns until the 1980s. Since then, the region has been besieged by a relentless wave of terrorist violence. Contrastingly, in the 1950s and 1960s, terrorism was more visible in Latin America, and parts of Asia and Africa. The Middle East has displayed a somewhat consistent pattern of non-state terrorist violence. Therefore, the terrorist threat to a particular country or region can vary depending on specific situational contexts and temporal dimensions. The root causes of terrorism must be analyzed with an understanding of issue-, situation-, and time-specific considerations. Moreover, historical patterns of terrorism suggest a cyclic pattern, whereby the immediate objectives of instilling terror may remain constant, but the broader goals and manifestations of terrorism have overtime evolved differently.

While poverty may not directly cause terrorism, it can indirectly contribute to it. Terrorism can manifest anywhere but is more frequent in developing societies, rather than in exceptionally poor or wealthy nations (Gurr, 2005). It is more likely to arise in societies characterized by rapid modernization. Economic changes can engender conditions conducive to instability and the emergence of militant movements and extremist ideologies. For instance, in the Muslim world, more traditional segments of the population disoriented by sweeping socio-economic changes are

particularly susceptible to movements that reinforce threatened identities, provide explanatory frameworks, and confer a sense of empowerment. A significant risk factor in developing societies is the 'youth bulge', a major increase in the proportion of young male population facing unemployment prospects (Huntington, 2001-2002).

The indirect role of poverty in fostering terrorism becomes evident when examining the case of madrassas in Muslim countries like Pakistan, which are afflicted with terrorist violence. The madrassa students are indoctrinated through consistent exposure to "hate literature", producing individuals predisposed to become extremists and commit violent act, including suicide bombing. However, it is crucial not to generalize this argument. Children from impoverished backgrounds, who lack access to state-provided educational facilities or whose families cannot afford mainstream schools, are the ones typically enrolled in these madrassas. Consequently, the key issue is the state's failure to provide basic education to its citizens, which indirectly contributes to extremist indoctrination by madrassas and the ensuing terrorist repercussions.

State Terrorism

Can state be a perpetrator or sponsor of terrorism? This is another contested issue in terrorism studies, since officials and academics generally specify non-state actors as the sole culprits of terrorist acts. Furthermore, under international law, the privilege of legitimate force usage is exclusive to the state. Under the stipulations of the Geneva Conventions, states engaged in warfare are prohibited from targeting civilian populations, and their use of force must be proportionate to the threat they face. Despite these regulations, instances of "collateral damage" in recent international wars to combat terrorism have been prevalent. This is partially attributable to terrorists taking refuge within civilian populations and partly due to states or coalitions disproportionately deploying military force in their fight against terrorism. A state confronted with an internal armed rebellion is also legally authorized to employ force, albeit such action might invite both internal and external criticism for potential human rights infringements.

However, defining states as perpetrators of terrorism presents practical complications. States will invariably resist a definition of terrorism that labels them as perpetrators. This leaves us with the alternative option of delineating state terrorism within the parameters set by the UN Charter on state aggression. Gibbs (1989) suggests that it might be more appropriate to separately define state terrorism from a general definition, due to the difficulty in distinguishing between law enforcement activities and state violence.

State-sponsored terrorism generally refers to instances where a state deliberately employs terrorism or supports terrorist groups as an instrument of its foreign policy against another state. While instances of domestic repression or wartime civilian deaths by states can be addressed separately, it is possible to define state-sponsored terrorism as a government's direct or indirect support to official or nonofficial groups committing acts of violence in an adversary state with the intention of coercion and widespread intimidation designed to achieve a particular political or strategic objective.

The appeal of such a form of terrorism for some states is manifold. Modern warfare is prohibitively expensive and likely to provoke counterattack. State-sponsored terrorism is comparatively less risky (Richardson, 2007). Covert state sponsorship of terrorism allows the state to deny its aggressive role, avoid retaliation, and evade international accountability. Byman (2008) distinguishes between active and passive state sponsorship of terrorism. Active state sponsorship involves a regime deliberately deciding to provide critical support to a terrorist group, typically in the form of weapons, funds, propaganda, or a safe haven. Conversely, passive state sponsorship occurs when a regime's deliberate inaction facilitates the growth of terrorist groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The above discussion distills into several key insights. First, the problem of defining terrorism is a complex and multifaceted challenge that arises from the subjectivity of perception, political influences, and cultural variations. While no universally accepted definition exists, states and scholars generally converge on its four integral elements: violence, deliberateness, civilian targets, and the intention to

incite fear. The primary point of contention in these definitions is the identity of the perpetrator, with prevailing state and academic perspectives predominantly attributing terrorism to non-state actors, due to the state's monopoly over the use of force.

Second, while a consensus on the definition of terrorism may seem unattainable, it is crucial to continue engaging in dialogue and scholarly discourse to develop nuanced frameworks that capture the diverse realities and perspectives surrounding this phenomenon. For instance, the conditions propelling terrorism in contemporary South Asia may not echo those that spurred terrorist violence in Latin America or Western Europe in previous decades. Understanding the limitations and complexities involved in defining terrorism can facilitate more informed discussions, policies, and actions aimed at addressing the underlying causes of terrorism and reducing its lethal consequences.

Third, interpreting non-state terrorism as a form of political violence implies that terrorists, like states, are driven by certain rational choices. Terrorism is a means, rather than an end, and is frequently aimed at pragmatic political objectives. The psychological impact of terror, which distinguishes terrorism from other forms of political violence such as war and guerilla warfare, is derived from physical acts of terrorism designed to achieve broader goals. The aphorism "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" is fundamentally flawed, as it conflates the goal of freedom with the means of terrorism.

Fourth, like terrorism, religion is more often a means rather than an end in terrorism. A faith can only be directly linked with terrorism when the violence is enacted for a purely religious goal, such as in the case of doomsday cults. In the recent wave of terrorism, organizations like al-Qaeda have misinterpreted Islam to justify violence, aligning with the pattern of other forms of historical terrorism motivated by pragmatic political aims.

Finally, while only states possess the legitimate right to use force, the legitimacy of political violence against state security forces by non-state actors is dubious, particularly when unarmed civilians are simultaneously targeted. The unresolved nature of certain conflicts does not grant an individual or group the right to indiscriminately target civilians in response to specific policies practiced by their state. The difficulty in defining a state as a perpetrator of terrorism does not preclude the theoretical examination of state-sponsored terrorism. This form of terrorism can be characterized by a state's direct or indirect support to groups committing violence in adversarial states, intended to coerce and intimidate to achieve specific political or strategic objectives.

The above discussion of terrorism carries significant implications for counter-terrorism. Given terrorism's diversity and complexity, counter-terrorism strategies and policies cannot be simple or straightforward. International efforts to combat terrorism have relied heavily on the arbitrary use of military force and addressed only the symptoms of terrorism, rather than its root causes. It is widely recognized, however, that the exclusive use of military force is insufficient to combat terrorism. A protracted battle of ideas, coupled with profound political, economic, social, and cultural reformations of countries and regions plagued by terrorism, is necessary. Counter-terrorism, like terrorism, should be understood through specific contexts rather than broad generalizations.

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