

Threat to terrorism: reassessing terrorism as a moral category

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Thomas Jefferson, American Founding Father and principal author of the Declaration of Independence

In this article Meor Alif challenges the commonly held viewpoint that all terrorist acts, particularly those that are violent, are inherently morally vacuous with no place in a modern democracy. By reassessing the morality behind terrorist acts from a consequentialist perspective, a more nuanced role of terrorism in the political sphere emerges.

While this piece is not meant to be an absolute criticism of western democratic practices or the renunciation of it, the backbone that will hold this article together is a stern conviction that terrorism, specifically terrorism as a tactic has a place in politics despite the increasingly homogenised consensus that democracy should be incompatible with violence.

At this point, it would bode well with the tone that this piece seeks to set by noting from the outset, that this is not a call to arms encouraging the pernicious and irresponsible use of violence to forward every minute political cause (I acknowledge that the scale in

which to determine the seriousness of a cause is in itself a whole different debate altogether and often done arbitrarily). However, the message that should come across at the very end of this article is one that recognises the utility and the moral soundness of employing violence, if and when, certain circumstances call for it, circumstances that some commonly describes as having your 'back against the wall'.

Discounting and delegitimizing terrorism on the account that it is always categorically unacceptable is a false premise that should not be allowed to be further entrenched in our minds for it only breeds tyranny. Violence is utilitarian in nature and it can be very useful to a group in power or a group seeking it. But surely, when we talk about terrorism, there is very little moral high ground to defend an act so heinous and so often indiscriminately places the innocent lives of hundreds if not thousands at risk? – This piece intends to be objective and look through the injuries and account for the gains in evaluating the final conclusion.

Hence, this piece will proceed with two broad portions. The first portion will attempt to define terrorism and illustrate its relationship to the use of violence. This discussion will lead up to conclude that violence is not an irrational impulse, and the use of which, has always been and should continue to be acknowledged as a legitimate method of the use of securing an end. Secondly, this piece will then evaluate the element of targeting in terrorist acts and evaluate if the notion of innocence is enough to absolutely reject terrorism as an unacceptable means to further political considerations.

The final thing to remember is that Al Qaeda and every other Islamist terrorist organization out there in the present day is not the only type of terrorist organization that exists. We speak of them only because they are recent and groups like Al Qaeda with Islamic undertones have long been preceded in history by other types of terrorist organizations from all over the world with a quagmire of motives behind them, some nationalistic, others separatists and so on, but all essentially rather fundamentally similar in behaviour with regards to employing violence.

The Terrorist

As to not conflate the different terminologies like we so often do in the media, terrorism can by definition be roughly distinguished from its usual interchangeable synonyms namely guerrilla warfare and insurgency (Whittaker, 2007).

In his attempt, Whittaker draws out that; terrorism, guerrilla warfare and insurgency overlap with respect to some of the tactics they employ. These include tactics like assassinations, hit-and-run attacks and bombings of public gathering places. Moreover, Whittaker highlights that it is understandable that all three categories and are often clustered together and are considered as 'irregulars' seeing that all three groups often do not wear a uniform or an insignia that would distinguish them from non-combatants.

However, Whittaker suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the three, in that firstly, 'guerrillas' usually refers to a "numerically larger group of armed individuals that operate as a military unit, attack enemy military forces and seize and hold territory, while exercising some form of sovereignty or control over a defined geographical area and its population". On the other hand for Whittaker, insurgents mirror guerrillas in term of what they do similar to the above, but their "strategy and operations transcend hit-and-run attacks" and include further "coordinated informational and psychological warfare efforts designed to mobilize popular support in a struggle against an established national government, imperialist power, or foreign occupying force". The important part to note here is Whittaker's description of terrorists. For him, terrorists "do not function in the open as armed units, generally do not attempt to seize and hold territory, deliberately avoid engaging enemy military forces in combat, are constrained both numerically and logistically from undertaking concerted mass political mobilization efforts, and exercise no direct control or governance over a populace at either local or national level". On a side note, although it may be inaccurate to say this, an early examination of Whittaker's categorizations appears to describe and include certain tactics which one can imagine even 'special forces' units like the British SAS or even the CIA would themselves adopt in conducting special operations.

Whittaker's categorization which distinguishes the three groups should now be contrasted to the many definitions of what constitutes terrorism that exists in the public sphere so as to give a clearer picture of what this piece is dealing with.

Despite the diverse attempts of giving terrorism a functional definition, at its core, terrorism is often painted in broad strokes that thematically cover one core characteristic; that it is often an act targeted at an innocent civilian population meant to intimidate a third party. The emphasis on the type of target and the inclusion of this element as a constituting characteristic of terrorism is unequivocally constant in several hallmark definitional attempts. Michael Walzer defines terrorism as the 'deliberate killing of innocent people, at random, in order to spread fear through a whole population and force the hand of its political leaders'. Similarly, both the US State Department and Department of Defence in defining terrorism saw the need to express respectively that terrorism is the use of violence against 'societies' and against 'non-combatant groups'. Although the State Department definition appears to be broader than that of the Department of Defence, presumably to allow itself more diplomatic maneuverability, both definitions overlap on the element of targeting. In contrast, on the opposite side of the world, the Russians, at least on surface value, share identical appreciation for the element of targeting in terrorism as it defines the act as violence that is 'violating public security' and 'intimidating the population'. However, bearing in mind Moscow's political problems that it has traditionally had with its territories on their frontiers and the experiences they have had with attacks within Moscow itself, it is understandable that Russia's definition is equally expressed in broad terms. Unsurprisingly, the element of civilian targeting also appears to even transcend across to political Islam as the Islamic Conference on Combating International Terrorism saw it fit to include and mention 'terrorizing people or threatening to harm them or imperilling their lives, honour, freedoms, security or rights' as a defining feature of terrorism. It would be wise to note at this point that the United States uses a Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) list to designate groups it deems as terrorist groups. Traditionally this list can be enlarged or reduced according to less than convincing objective criterias and that the designation of these group usually take cues from America's overall national interest. Interestingly, the different lists used by the US, EU and Russia to identify terrorist organizations are overwhelmingly composed of Islamist groups, a fact that we can only hope is a result of a concise reflection of reality and nothing more beyond that. Either way, what is clear from the definitions above is that government definitions of terrorism seem to show a trend of being broad so as to make it easier to include a larger aggregate of acts, if and when it needs to, depending on the interpretation it is able to make.

Although defining terrorism is not the main contention of this article, it is however essential that these definitions are drawn out to illustrate the recurring emphasis on the nature of the targets, and how these targets are often framed as innocent bystanders that end up becoming casualty to what is presumed to be a bigger quarrel between these terrorist groups and a separate third party that they are fighting. In recent times however, the aggression against the civilian population is usually axiomatically followed by death on a large scale, unlike the usual IRA styled car bomb or pub bombings. With the supposed rise of 'Islamist terrorism', terrorist activities have now become more synonymous to attempts of 'suicide bombing' and the belief of martyrdom and its position in Islam in which the motivation for the act is born out of. The association of the two; terrorism and suicide bombing; makes objectively justifying and understanding any terrorist acts just that much harder, and makes the argument of 'innocent targets' more intuitively believable for it is now wrapped in a thicker coat of sympathy. The framing of civilian innocence is compounded by the perceived banality attached to 'suicide bombing'. We fail to understand why anyone would do such a thing and this thought process takes our emotional responses into overdrive.

Jefferson's rebellion

Before we go any further with the discussion, we have to consider at this point if violence is inherently unacceptable. The painful truth is that, it is not due to our inherent rejection of violence that we choose to deem terrorism as unacceptable, for we condone violence in specific contexts – we tolerate violence in war time, we use it as a means of punishment in maintaining law and order, we often celebrate it as an exercise of a valid and rational choice when it occurs on a smaller scale, like in sports, and rather unfortunately pre-emptive strikes and foreign intervention has always been a contentious yet acceptable diplomatic option in foreign affairs. This is all grounded in the understanding that violence is a tool and not itself an end. Hence, the debate is not about whether we should accept or reject violence, rather it is a debate of when and under what specific context can we accept violence?

There are times where employing violence is not just a unidirectional act of hurting or injuring someone for the sake of pain but often times in politics it is employed to achieve a myriad of objectives that would not have been achieved otherwise. Intuitively, employing any degree of violence to secure something is a very primitive but familiar urge that exists in all men which has been slowly socialized for us to leave behind. But in times of peril, we see this urge for violence very quickly manifesting itself when our risk calculus is reduced to 'fight or flight' when in danger. Hannah Arendt justifies violence as being "rational only to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end which must justify it" and goes on to qualify this claim by arguing that "since when we act we never know with any amount of certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing, violence can remain rational only if it pursues short term goals". What all of this seems to suggest is that violence in and of itself is not unacceptable and that our acceptance of it is relative to the circumstances that it is employed in.

From the discussion so far, it becomes increasingly clear that the biggest moral contention that makes terrorism so undesirable is not merely just the use of violence, but it also includes a second dimension of the unforgiving nature of the violence employed towards the value of the lives of innocent civilians. However, it would also be reckless to immediately assume that only terrorists are capable of making the calculated utilitarian sacrifice of harming the innocent few for the greater cause of the many. Democracies too, and even advanced ones, have at one point or another devalued the life of an innocent man for the pursuit of maintaining the wellbeing of another. From Iraq to Vietnam and going back to Japan and Germany, democracies like the United States and the United Kingdom have themselves seen fit to indiscriminately bomb villages and towns, and in the case of Japan, decimate Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in the name of fighting the Nazis, the Japanese militarists, the Communists, or recently, the extremist fundamentalists. This is not an exercise of passing judgement over what had happened, but rather, it is merely an illustration of what all men are capable of regardless of the institutions that bound them, for we are violent when we want to be, and violent when we have to be. Surely there were 'innocent' lives that were taken away when German cities were bombed? Surely not every Vietnamese was a Vietcong? – There would have been bystanders, who were innocent and uninvolved in the war. Yet, given the circumstances at the time, innocence took a back seat for something had to be done as the threat of communism loomed and our 'backs were against the wall' and as Churchill describes it, it was a 'supreme emergency' (Walzer, 2006). It appears from the above that in some

instances legitimate trade-offs that can be made between efficacy and morality in war and conflict, and the legitimacy of these trade-offs emanates from the fact that it was carried out by the state, however in terms of consequences there is very little to separate indiscriminate violence that is employed by terrorists, guerrillas or insurgents with that employed by the state.

Therefore, this article makes no distinction between violence employed by the state or by non-state actors because the result of both acts can entail the same kind of consequence, or in this case, destruction and deprivation. When a gun is fired or a punch is thrown, it matters not who is on the giving end, for on the receiving end there will always be someone who gets injured.

Supreme emergency or supreme excuse?

The distinction made between a guerrilla, an insurgent and a terrorist is only a distinction of tactics and not a distinction of the principle that governs the use of violence. Similarly, the same can be said for the distinction that is made between the three groups and any violence employed by a state. Objectively, a decision to go to war using a conventional army or a 'hit-and-run' airstrike on an installment is, in principle, similar to the violence employed by 'irregulars' in that both actions forwards a cause and both acts often aims to strike fear as much as it aims to hurt the enemy.

What does that therefore say about Churchill's supreme emergency? Can we normatively and objectively differentiate the Nazi threat to the western world and Al Qaeda's own conception of the far enemy? In terms of the state of mind of the agenda setters in both situations, they overlap as though both were thinking that "my enemy is mine, because I see them as enemies, and they would be yours too if you saw them the way I see them." I am not saying that the Nazi's should have won, or Al Qaeda should be supported, but the important point here is that both situations are governed by the same basic rule to the game – which is that the one who employs violence the wisest has the best chance of surviving. Hence, the act of using violence at the point in which it is employed should discount the question of fact of who is using it. But rather more fairly it should be accepted as a valid move regardless of the player. The comparison above should strengthen the claim that violence is utilitarian in nature and that even when it is employed by a terrorist, a guerrilla or an insurgent it should remain to be principally respected in that way. If this is not respected then we are left to live in an unforgiving world where the state becomes the only source of moral and legitimate political violence.

Innocence

Before us now lie an interesting question of whether there is such a thing as 'innocence' that is compelling enough for states to always be institutionally biased against terrorism? Terrorism is commonly condemned for its targeting of civilians, but should that distinction be maintained to illustrate the wrongness that is inherent in terrorism?

Firstly, the discussion of the innocence of civilians or 'non-combatants' is still contentiously unresolved in conventional warfare, assuming of course that combating terrorists is excluded from what constitutes conventional wars. But more importantly, the challenge here is to defend the extraction of the notion of 'innocence' that protects non-combatants in war and apply it as a threshold that should not be crossed by any terrorist acts either in peace time or in war time. This is easier said than done, as it is difficult to categorically define innocence and separate them from those who are truly involved in whatever the contentious issue that the terrorist group is upset about.

Consider for a moment the logical tension that resides in the combatant – non-combatant distinction which exists in conventional war; should a civilian who is a staunch supporter of the war efforts be any less innocent than a military officer who serves, but disagrees with the war efforts (Coates, 1997; Goodin, 2006)? In this situation, 'innocence' by definition considers the civilian as an untouchable target, while the officer is fair game for any attempts of attacks. Bear in mind that the civilian could be actively engaged in the assistance of the war efforts through the promotion or material support for the cause, yet his or her 'innocence' is maintained unequivocally. If anything the "distinction

between combatants and killing the innocent, has blinded the people to the fact that all war is killing and such is wrong” (Norman, 1995, pp. 161-162).

Furthermore, drawing lessons from the Allied bombings of German cities, many of the civilian population could have been considered as carrying a higher burden of guilt than the members of the German armed forces. There would have been civilians who would have helped bring the Nazi party to power and had supported the war efforts of the state while on the other hand, there would have also been young German conscripts born and raised while the war was already in progress and had very little grasp of what the war was about and how it began (Norman, 1995, p. 167). In this case, the distinction between the question of innocence continue to be shrouded in ambiguity as it is difficult to say that these young conscripts were more deserving of death than the civilian population.

To sum up, the logic goes as follows; not every civilian is innocent and not everyone who is innocent is a civilian. Therefore, by extension, it is possible that some civilian targets are legitimate, and not all attacks on combatant targets can be understood as acceptable. In terms of terrorism the attack on the Pentagon that caused death and injury to both civilian as well as military personnel would illustrate the dilemma. As it is difficult to say that every military personnel would have deserved the attack, and inversely, not every civilian working at the Pentagon would have been innocent, it would be a fairer assessment over the value of the lives lost or injury sustained on that day if the distinction is abandoned altogether. Similarly, the same moral tension exists in the Khobar Towers attack. It cannot be said with certainty that every single individual injured in the Khobar Towers attacks were ‘guilty’ and deserved what was coming to them. The injury sustained by the civilian population within the vicinity of the towers should not objectively be accepted as more meaningful than the injury or death of service members, for it should have been established by now that innocence cannot be generalizable to all civilians, and inversely combatants don’t automatically deserve to be hurt.

The logic that holds together the claim that non-combatant targets are off limits appears to be very thin. To put this further into context, if there is even such a thing as civilian immunity then certainly more restraint should have been exercised against the Vietnamese population during the Vietnamese war.

Even if innocence is construed as having “done nothing, and are doing nothing, that entails the loss of their rights” (Walzer, 1980), this does little favour to the moral soundness of the claim to innocence. This approach only limits the logic of who deserves to be attacked only to those individuals that are engaged in acts that harming others (Norman, 1995), whom can still either be civilians or combatants, and not just merely exclusive to one – think about those holding desk jobs at military bases or installations.

Now we should bring the above analysis full circle and reconsider the second dimension involved in describing the wrongness of terrorist activities, which was in this attacking ‘innocent’ civilian population. Having considered the understanding of innocence, can we still say that terrorism is categorically wrong because it primarily harms an innocent population? I am inclined to say that the answer is no, because innocence at best is arbitrary and that ambiguous innocence cannot be convincingly regarded as enough to justify the complete and absolute renunciation of terrorism.

The Future

It seems however fitting that the discussion of terrorism should end with a throwback to the past. This piece began with a Jeffersonian tone to it, and it will therefore end with it.

Thomas Jefferson is often attributed to two very famous quotes which nicely sums up the claims that I have made in this article, the first of which was expressed in his letter to James Madison dated the 30th of January 1787 as a reaction to the protests lead by Daniel Shay;

“I hold it, that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world

as storms in the physical. Unsuccessful rebellions, indeed, generally establish the encroachments on the rights of the people, which produced them. An observation of this truth should render honest republican governors so mild in their punishment of rebellions as not to discourage them too much. It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.”

More importantly and rather more relevant to the conclusion I am forwarding, Thomas Jefferson also had this to say in his letter to Monsieur D'Ivernois dated 6th of February 1795;

“It is unfortunate that the efforts of mankind to recover the freedom of which they have been so long deprived will be accompanied with violence, with errors, and even with crimes. But while we weep over the means, we must pray for the end.”

From the discussion of violence and the examination of innocence it would be disingenuous to continue to say that terrorism in every way or form is unacceptable. We have to always remember to be objective in analyzing each and every terrorist attack. Our evaluations should proceed with a genuine regard for the proper nuances and differentiations that must be made when talking about different terrorist groups or organizations. Frightening as it is, in the contemporary context, an objective observer must come to terms with the reality that despite their often misguided acts which sometimes become costly to society, the grievances of 'Islamic terrorists' are more often than not rooted in reality. The discourse that comes out from these organizations although wrapped very thickly in their own interpretation of Islamic history receives its true bite and resonates convincingly with a larger public due to its inclusion of real current social and economic problems in the Muslim world (Fandy, 2001). Their political grievances is only different from others in so far as it is expressed with reference to a religious worldview, in which other worldviews such as the Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism can equally perform a similar function (Burke, 2004). Hence, just because a lack of graduate employment, decent housing, social mobility, food, security and every other conceivable 'non-religious' need is explained by an individual through reference to a religion, it does not necessarily make those grievances a religious grievance (Burke, 2004). Either way, as mentioned before, these nuances must be seen and must be accounted for.

Furthermore, as was noted by Thomas Jefferson, rebellions should not be discouraged and as I have mentioned earlier, the principle of employing violence should be respected regardless of whether it is done by the state or by irregulars. Our failure to be honest about what violence means in politics and our apprehension against it and rather paradoxically our acceptance towards it when it is carried out by the state is a very slow but certain path towards tyranny. With our 'back against the wall', modern politics expects large groups of individuals to just sit idly and not fight back. Surely this is a little bit too much to ask of anyone?

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