

Deterring Terrorists and Deterring States: Fundamentally Different Tasks?

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SEBASTIANO SALI, FEB 19 2010

“One cannot deter terrorists in the way that one might deter states – particularly if the ultimate threat, death, is not perceived as a threat but rather welcomed by suicide terrorists”^[1]. Discuss this statement.

The quoted statement by Daase and Kessler leads directly into the core of their article. Starting from former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld’s speech^[2], they present a division of knowledge and non-knowledge into four different categories. The certain knowledge (“*known knowns*”), some knowledge about which we do not know (“*known unknowns*”), some knowledge about which we do not and cannot know^[3] (“*unknown unknowns*”) and “*finally, there are unknown knowns, the knowns we don’t want to know*”^[4]. The authors suggest that this speech shows how political and military decisions are taken not only on the basis of strong knowledge but also on non-knowledge. They argue that the modern counter-terrorism strategies are driven by the conceptualisation, assessment and management of knowledge and non-knowledge, especially after the end of the Cold War, *when old truths had lost their validity*^[5]. Assuming that uncertainty is the existential condition of human relations and ultimately inescapable^[6], and that the Cold War was a clash of certainties that generated uncertainties^[7], it can be recognised that knowledge and non-knowledge in International Relations (IR) exist in a mutual relation.

Nevertheless in this paper I will argue that the idea deriving from Daase and Kessler’s article, that there is *aNew Terrorism* which “*requires bold new strategies because of its shadowy character and its incalculable dangers*”^[8] and broadly supported by many scholars^[9], is contested by some part of the literature. Therefore, to avoid the possibility of non-knowledge being taken as an excuse to justify extreme counter-terrorism policies, as Rumsfeld’s speech shows, I will suggest that Daase and Kessler’s idea must be followed by the concept of uncertainty as the foundation for processes of trust-building. This is to critically approach the problem of terrorism, by refusing the existence of an “*empirical knowledge about the ‘things’ that could pose a danger to the security*”^[10], but rather assuming that security is “*is always and for someone and for some purpose*”^[11]. For, in addressing the problem of terrorism, it is important not to think that terrorists can all be put under the same label or framework and, at the same time, to avoid surrendering to the idea that it is impossible to deal with them except for deterrence.

Thus in the first part I will present how some of the major features of the so-called New Terrorism, suicide attacks, religion and structure, are not new at all. In the second part I will discuss how, from a critical perspective, the entire rationale of the New Terrorism can be read as functionally built up to avoid policy-makers’ accountability and justify certain counter-terrorism policies and why apply deterrence to terrorism still means ignoring the importance of non-knowledge and the assumption of the New Terrorism framework. Finally, I will suggest alternative systems which can be used to approach the problem of terrorism escaping from the logic of predefined frameworks as the *War on Terror* or the *Détente System*.

1. Welcome to Heaven

One of the major characteristics attributed to new terrorists is that of not being afraid of death. This idea is often related to the religious concept of martyrdom, that leads to new terrorists being more prepared to die because of the prospect of going to heaven^[12]. The recent suicide terrorist attacks seem to have stunned security experts: apparently

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in fact, these operations are considered successful only if followed by the death of their perpetrators. Many analysts have explained this switch from conventional terrorism to suicide bombings because of a series of advantages: the low-cost of the operations, the high number of casualties and massive damages, no one left alive to confess any information and a strong impact on public opinion^[13]. This has been generally presented as the ultimate weapon of New Terrorism.

Although the actuality of such kind of attacks cannot be denied, it must be noticed that examples of suicide terrorists are to be found throughout history. The group called Assassins living in Northern Persia in fact, for two centuries (1090-1275) prepared its members not to expect that they would survive their assaults. This idea was reinforced by its close relation to Islam's notion of martyrdom, as the voluntary acceptance of death^[14], and they were therefore considered as religious sacrifices; this would have allowed them the entry into paradise^[14]. In the same way some Muslim communities of India, Sumatra and Philippines, in the 18th century used suicide attacks to fight the European colonists^[15]. However it would be a mistake to relate suicides only to Islam. In fact it has been pointed out that the Tamil Tigers, a Hindu organisation, have over twenty years perpetrated more terrorist suicide attacks than all the other terrorist organisations taken together^[16].

Although at first sight could be clear how religion is important to the idea of suicide attacks, it has been noted that the mind-set of a suicide terrorist is similar to Tibetan self-immolators or, with an example that better undermines the concept of terrorist martyrdom, to the Irish nationalist prisoners who starved themselves to death^[17] as in the 1981 Hunger Strikes in the Maze Prison.

2. Religion or Ideology?

Religion is often said to be the leading characteristic of the New Terrorism, and not only because the aforementioned notion of martyrdom. It is in fact considered the driving principle of the New Terrorism, from which all the other new aspects derived^[18]: "*the religious imperative for terrorism is the most important characteristic activity of terrorist today*"^[19]. One of the major arguments of the New Terrorism theorists is that after the end of the Cold War religious terrorist groups increased because of the end of nationalism and radical leftist ideologies^[20].

However it can be said that, as it has partially been shown in the previous section, terrorist groups related to religion have already appeared in history. Examples other than the Assassins' suicide assailants can be given. The bloody Hindu group of the Thugs, probably identifiable with the stranglers of the Persian army in the 7th century, surely operated in the 13th century, intending "*their victims to experience terror [...] for the pleasure of Kali*"^[21]. Another case are the Zealots-Sicarii of Roman Judea: the "*nature of their messianic doctrines simultaneously suggested the object of terrors and permitted methods necessary to achieve it*"^[22]. Closer to our days, it must be noted that many modern terrorist groups have close links with religion and are, at least partly, driven by it. Examples of this are the Catholics of the IRA, the Protestant Ulster Freedom Fighters, the Algerian FLN, the Jewish Irgun and the EOKA in Cyprus^[23].

Nonetheless, notwithstanding the importance of the common religious matrix between the *old* terrorism and the *new* one, it is interesting to notice still the presence, in all the aforementioned cases, of a political agenda. The Old Terrorism desire for the expulsion of the non-Jewish from Judea and of the Protestants from Ulster, share some of the political and territorial claims made by New Terrorism: the spread of political Islam, the withdrawal of foreigners from holy places, the restoration of the Caliphate and the elimination of Israel^[24].

Thus it can be observed that yesterday as well as today, terrorist groups have tried to impose by violence a new model of the world or of society, closer to their own view, notwithstanding whether they were driven by religious or political ideas and models. In this sense it can be argued that they have both been driven by an ideology, even if these ideologies have different characteristics. The surpassing on politics, especially nationalism and radical leftism, by religion marked then the closing of a period and a return to the origins, for more than a departure into a new stream of terrorism.

3. Network or Hierarchy?

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Another important feature often associated with New Terrorism is its structure which is that of a network, rather than hierarchical or cellular^[25]. This leads to groups whose hierarchy and command chain becomes difficult to understand and analyse^[26]. It has been suggested that this shift was facilitated by the information revolution, which allows an escape from the pyramidal logic of hierarchy delegating functions to more or less autonomous entities^[27].

However it could be argued that, even recognising the enormous impact of modern communication technology, the distribution of terrorist advice and information has already occurred in history, as demonstrated by the Anarchist Cookbook of the 1960's^[28]. Neither the network structure seems to be not particularly new, as several historical examples show. The French and Russian Anarchist movement of the 19th century, known as Anarchist or Black International, which organised several attacks also against heads of state, was structured on scarcely organised, rather than hierarchical groups^[29]. The Iranian terrorist groups of the 1940s were generally characterised by network structures, and they are just one examples of the long tradition of such organisations in the Middle East, which probably finds its common source in the Sunni tradition^[30]. More recently, it should be noticed that even the Palestine Liberation Organisation could be defined as an umbrella organisation, even if lead by a majority faction, Al Fatah. On the same line Hezbollah can be considered as a label for the set of Shiite radical groups, whose relations do not follow strict rules^[31]. Again Tucker has suggests that even the leftist German Red Army Faction in its latest generations detached from the hierarchical structure leading to a network with similar goals^[32].

Also, on the other hand, it could be said that there is clear evidence of some sort of hierarchy in the New Terrorism. Considering the modern and best known Al Qaeda, a strong leadership as well as characterised units responsible for activities such as recruitment and finances are easily recognisable; moreover there is also a differentiation in the membership, which can go from a core professional full-time position to a merely external supporter^[33].

Thus, it can then be argued that the structure of terrorist organisations has been changing often through history, shifting from hierarchy to network and viceversa, regardless of time, place and ideology.

4. So for Who and for What Purposes?

What have just been described are only some of the characteristics attributed to New Terrorism. Because of a lack of space the issue of state-sponsorship, of weapons of mass destruction and of the increased number of casualties have been omitted. However the argument made above, seems to be enough to contest the existence of a break in the history of terrorism and then the legitimacy to talk about New Terrorism. The focus then can come back to Daase and Kessler's conceptualisation of knowledge and non-knowledge.

Their third category, the *unknown unknowns*, has been publicly taken by Rumsfeld as the justification of the counter-terrorism actions made by the Bush administration: that is, we live in times in which the necessary information to act is not achievable. In this category, threats are defined as disasters, like the New York 9-11 attacks. Against such a background, threats are perceived as impossible to foresee and then it becomes impossible to account for responsibilities and possible failures in preventing them^[34]. To this extent RAND has even elaborated the concept of *non-standard scenarios*, to justify the impossibility of prevision and the counter-reactions based not on real threats but on capability-based threats^[35].

Thus the construction of the narrative of New Terrorism represents the attempt to bring back terrorism under a knowable, actionable and controllable form. The idea of basing the concept of New Terrorism on the power of its knowable potential, indeed depicted as unlimited, rather than on its unknowable real threats, produces a universal label which can apply to any kind of terrorist group, providing in this way a new cohesive framework^[36]. In this sense, as well described in Beck's notion of *risk society*, the way in which "*the unknown is framed and conceptualised determines what kind of knowledge regime*" shapes decision-making processes^[37].

However putting together this idea with the evidence that modern terrorism is not a revolutionary, completely unknown concept, it can be then argued that Daase and Kessler's last category, the *unknowns knowns*, better explains the necessity of such new framework. They present the "*not-to-be-wanted-to-be-known knowledge*" as a central category of politics, whose main outcomes are the strategic use of the unsaid in order to provide rhetorical

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force. This means a manipulation of public opinion providing it with selected or wrong information, which could possibly lead to a lack of participation of people in the decision-making process^[38]. It can be claimed that such *ignorance*, as given by Daase and Kessler, describes the will not to let people know that the New Terrorism rationale is only a framework to justify precise people for precise responsibilities, namely of having neglected to adopt effective policies of prevention nor of counter-reaction.

Some authors even assert that such actions have indeed had the opposite effect of fostering terrorism. An endless War on Terror in fact spread the culture of suspicion, making everyone a possible terrorist^[39]; the 2002 Axis of Evil speech only reinforced Iran's suspicion towards the US^[40]; the ideologisation of terrorism detaches its roots from the historical, cultural and political links to Western world global politics, disguising the answer to question *why do they hate us?*^[41].

Consequently, the discourse of New Terrorism can be defined as an ideology which aims to convey the image of modern terrorism "as a force that cannot be bargained with" and that it is "a break from the past"; in this way then, it creates the necessity for a counterstrategy which justifies even the most extreme actions^[42].

5. Is it then Deterrence still Useful?

As said before, deterrence has been called a clash of uncertainties which produced certainty. To let deterrence work in fact, all the parts involved needed to know about the military potential of the opponents and what costs and benefits they could have from a tension escalation. In this way "security policy takes place in a predefined context" where, even if the payoff is not entirely known, this non-knowledge is *framed, tamed and made known insofar as associated uncertainties are well defined within a given context*^[43]. It becomes then easy to understand the similarity with the New Terrorism framework, which represent for terrorism what the old *Détente System* was for the Cold War. However, from a critical perspective, it must be noted that the *Détente System* has been a complex of norms and actions which emerged from a particular historical background, whose theoretical and practical suitability to the nowadays world is contested by a part of the literature^[44].

Nonetheless some scholars still support the usefulness of deterrence as an instrument to fight contemporary terrorism^[45]. In particular Trager and Zagorcheva suggest that terrorists are not irrational as they are described and can therefore be deterred; and doing that is possible at least for a couple of reasons. First, given that *terrorists-state relationships, are not often zero-sum game*" and secondly because "powerful states have the ability of influence their (terrorists) political aims"^[46]. However the instrument through which they provide their analysis, a framework based on terrorists goals and level of motivation, is still what can be contested from a critical perspective. Indeed, what it seems to be provided is a universal set of rules which can be applied to any threats around the world, avoiding the role of specific non-knowledge. Moreover, all the framework is built upon the New Terrorism narrative, which has been deconstruct in the previous sections. Nevertheless it would be wrong and highly dangerous convey the idea that nothing can be concretely done against terrorism.

6. Where to Go from Here?

Therefore a different approach would leave behind any framework given as universally working and critically address every terrorist threat on its specific conceptual, historical and political background.

Sprinzak for example focuses on the importance of the role of community in which terrorist organisations are rooted. He advocates that "political and economic sanctions [...] combined with effective coercive diplomacy", may lead the community to no longer support suicide bombings; in this sense he urges that there is no need to invent new counter-terrorism tactics, but rather "adapt and intensify" the ones already existing^[47].

Zartman instead suggests that, even if "officially the subjects does not exist", governments are engaged in several different kinds of negotiations with terrorists^[48]. After an introductory division between *absolute terrorists*, with whom is impossible to negotiate, and *instrumental* ones, where instead there is room for dialogue, he proposes a third category, which includes even suicide terrorists, available to negotiate. However, he argues that the problem is not

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their refusal to enter into dialogue, but how much of their demands the world considers acceptable^[49].

A different starting point, more critically detached from the traditional framework of sanctions, counter-terrorism tactics and negotiations in general, might be represented by the introductory statement that uncertainty is inescapable because it is an existential condition of human relations. On this basis, Kessler and Daase advocate that it becomes then imperative to try to put oneself into the other's shoes and "*engage in a dialogue*"^[50]; in other words, trying to settle the elements in order to build some form of trust. Thus it can be developed an alternative approach to the problem of terrorism, based on the ideas that trust and distrust are "*a constant feature of our social life*" and that trust becomes a necessary element in the decision-making process because without it "*both knowledge and action are insecure*"^[51]. Whereas the New Terrorism framework, as previously described, provides the certainty of the other's intention to harm, as well as the old *Détente System*, instead "*trust requires the negotiation of uncertainty*"^[52]. Against this background a non-violent strategy to address terrorism rests on the underlying presence of vulnerability and of the possibility of being harmed, but "*refusing to do harm in response*"^[53]. It has been suggested the importance of removing every kind of labels such as *terrorist, the Great Satan, Axis of Evil*, to create trust, through the deconstruction of the identification narrative of those groups with the certainty of harm^[54]. Then reconstructing every single identity into a new discourse which "*empathises with the fears and suspicions of adversaries*"^[55], is defined as the first step to take *to give trust a chance*, because it has been argued that the apparently inescapable assumption of harm and violence, can instead be avoided by actors which hold some sort of empathetic knowledge of each other^[56].

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show how the concept elaborated by Daase and Kessler, the importance of knowledge and non-knowledge in decision-making processes, if taken alone could be easily manipulated for crafting new knowable universal framework, instead of making "*theories and practices of IR increasingly [...] come to terms with their own non-knowledge*" and "*incorporate the contingency of its particular point of view*"^[57], as in the authors' intentions.

In the first part of the paper it has been described how the problem of knowledge and non-knowledge has led to the construction of an entire new narrative of New Terrorism. This idea has been deconstructed in the first three sections, explaining how modern terrorism reveals many features that have already appeared in the history of terrorism, leading to the conclusion that it constitutes the evolution of a notion rather than a breakthrough into its main assumptions.

In the second part has been explained how the New Terrorism narrative has served instrumentally to make more knowable contemporary terrorism and to hide political responsibilities and justify extreme counteractions, which fostered terrorism instead of weakening it. Indeed has been revealed how deterrence was the leading example of such narrative-building process and how even modern deterrence is framework incompatible with Daase and Kessler's ideas of non-knowledge.

In the light of these arguments, the last section suggests to put side by side the role of knowledge and non-knowledge and the concept of trust. In this way uncertainty is no longer an excuse for manipulation and unprejudiced policies, but rather the foundations for building trust. Deconstructing the universal frameworks which make the label of terrorist suitable for everyone and reconstructing it from a more critical perspective, aware of the importance of the historical, cultural and political background^[58], represents a proven way to escape the vortex of violence as the Northern Ireland case shows.

Finally it could be said that the modern challenge for every scholar working on this issue, is to avoid the temptation of using pre-existing and given frameworks universally applicable to all kind of terrorism, which can give easy but sometimes counterproductive answers, but rather to work critically with many different terrorisms with their own specific backgrounds.

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Date: 2009